

SPICY MYSTERY

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STORIES

for
JULY

**CORPSELESS
COFFIN** *by*

Carl Moore



Inside Front cover
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Read what happened



YES!

I'll take your training. That's what S. J. Ebert said. He is making good money and has found success in Radio.

to these
two men
when I said:



NO!

I'm not interested. That's what this fellow said. Today he would be ashamed if I gave you his real name.

I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

These two fellows had the same chance. Each clipped and sent me a coupon, like the one in this ad. They got my book on Radio's opportunities, S. J. Ebert, 104-B Quadrangle, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, saw that Radio offered him a real chance. He enrolled. The other fellow, whom we will call John Doe, wrote that he wasn't interested. He was just one of those fellows who wants a better job, better pay, but never does anything about it. One of the many who spend their lives in a low-pay, no-future job, because they haven't the ambition, the determination, the action it takes to succeed.

But read what S. J. Ebert wrote me and remember that John Doe had the same chance: "Upon graduation I accepted a job as serviceman and within three weeks was made Service Manager. This job paid me \$40 to \$50 a week compared with \$18 I earned in a shoe factory before. Eight months later I went with station KWCR as operator. From there I went to KTNT. Now I am Radio Engineer with WSUI. I certainly recommend the N. R. I. to all interested in the greatest field of all, Radio."

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Many Radio Experts Make
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J. E. Smith

neers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year—full time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full time or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men who have taken N. R. I. Training are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

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While Learning**

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**J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 7GX1 Washington, D. C.**

**MAIL
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FOR FREE BOOK OF FACTS ABOUT RADIO

**J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute,
Dept. 7GX1, Washington, D. C.**

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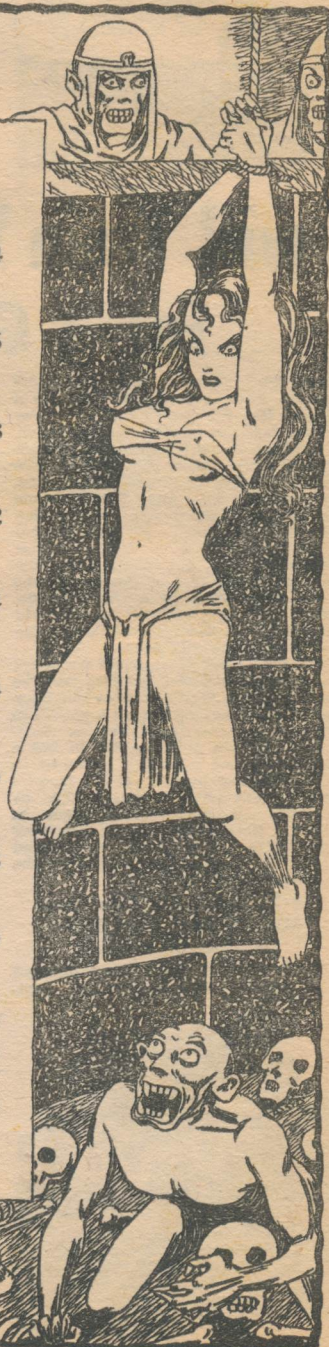
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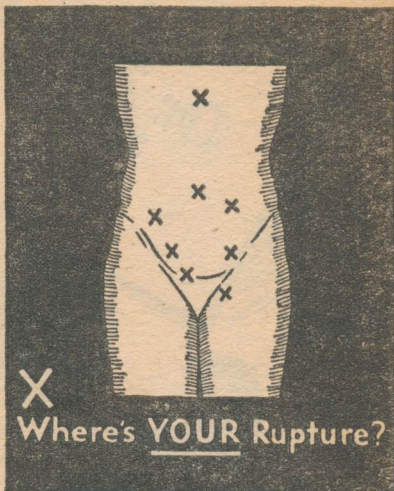
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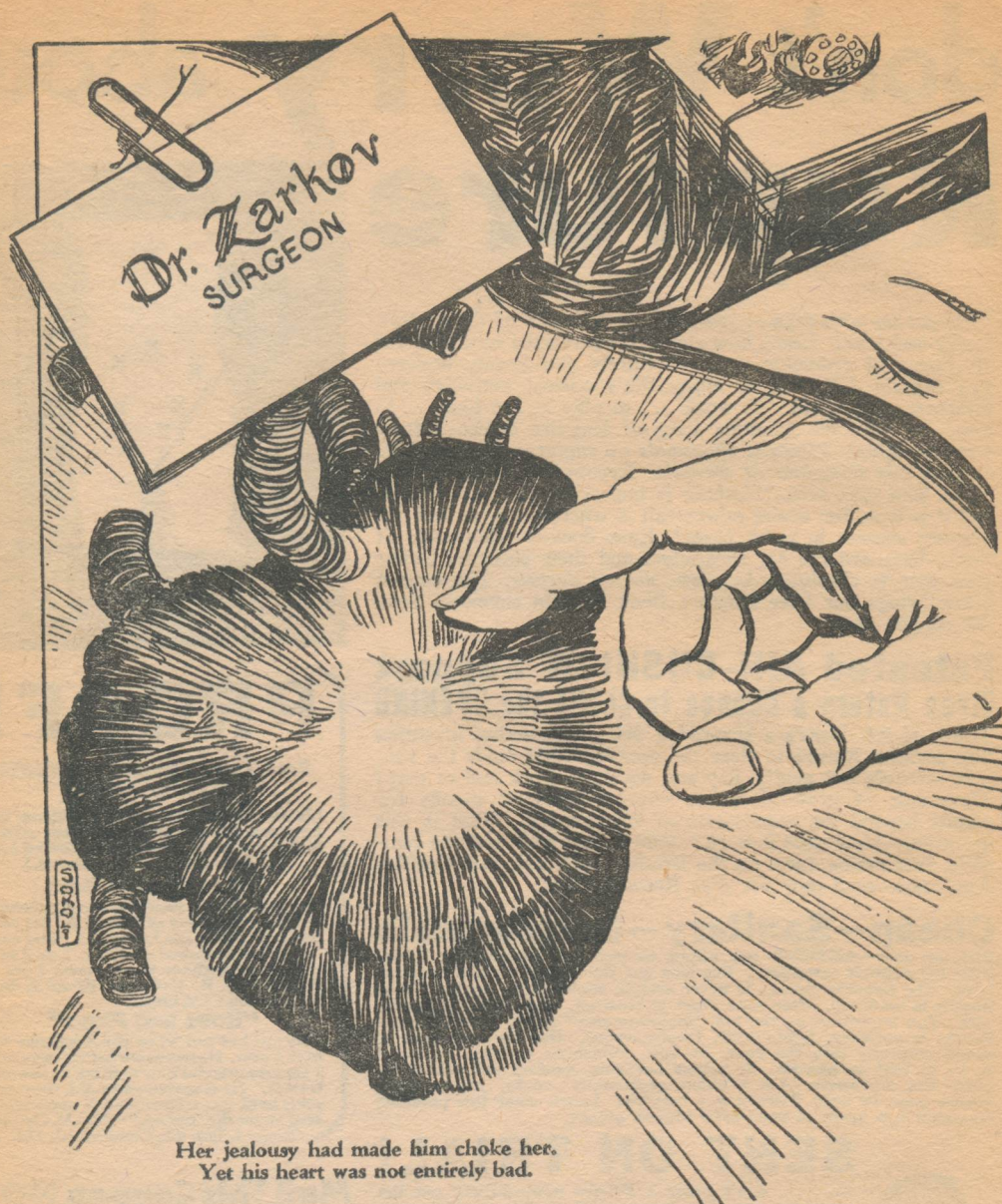
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*He had killed his wife
and now was about to
kill himself. Only the
Surgeon of Souls
could see the one
white spot that re-
mained on the black-
ness of his soul*

CLOTHED in darkness, Philip Haydon climbed grimly over the parapet; stood on the eight-inch ledge of concrete coping that surrounded the apartment-building's roof.

Twenty floors below him lay the black, deserted street. A sheer drop, with obliteration waiting for him at the bottom. He shuddered when he thought of the impact his hurtling body would undergo



30 SECONDS

By **ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM**

when he struck the paving. There would be a dull, squishy plop as his flesh exploded against unyielding asphalt. Perhaps there would be a single split-instant

of screaming agony. Then it would be over.

He hesitated, gathering his courage. He thought of Maizie, his wife, lying

dead in their flat on the fourteenth floor. He remembered the way her eyes had rolled up to reveal glassy whites as his fingers constricted around her fair throat. He remembered the convulsive drumming of her bare heels against the floor as he throttled her. He could still seem to feel the labored, agonized throbbing of her swelling breasts against him as she fought for air in her tortured lungs.

Dead. Maizie was dead. He had killed her. Already her sweet flesh was growing waxen and cold. Far below him, at the street-intersection, the lighted hands of a bank's clock pointed almost to the hour of eleven.

It was all so strange. A half-hour ago, he had not been a murderer. Maizie had still been alive. She'd still be alive except for her jealousy. Philip Haydon would not have killed her if she hadn't quarreled with him about . . . that other woman.

But that was all over now. Maizie was dead. And in another instant, Philip Haydon would be dead too. His crushed, mangled corpse would be strewn all over the paving, twenty floors below.

THAT bank-clock on the corner was beginning to strike out the hour. *Bong!* One. Like a funeral dirge. *Bong!* Two. Like the slow, measured strokes of a doom-metronome. *Bong!* Three. Like the tolling of a lament for the dead. Haydon tensed his muscles to launch himself outward into space—

A hand fell upon his shoulder from behind. He felt himself being yanked back, hauled over the parapet. He landed on the roof, swaying, staggering. "God Almighty!" he panted as he whirled around to face the one who had interfered.

Inexplicably, a cold slime of dread inched through his veins when he saw the little old man who stood there before him. The fellow was grey-haired, bearded; his expression was one of ineffable kindness. Yet there was something about the man's eyes that brought fear leaping into Philip Haydon's heart.

"What—what—?" he whispered through chattering teeth.

The old man smiled; handed him a card. Haydon accepted the rectangle of pasteboard; and although he was surrounded by solid darkness, he could read the card's lettering. It was almost as if the thing had been printed with some luminous weird ink:

DR. ZARKOV

Surgeon

From the cardboard, Haydon's eyes went back to the old man. "I don't understand!" he ground out. "How did you get here? Why did you pull me back? What right have you to meddle—?"

The greybeard smiled again. "I have been right here alongside you for a long time, Philip Haydon. In fact, I have been at your elbow all evening. I watched as you choked your wife."

"You—you—"

"And as to my meddling in your affairs," the old man went on, calmly, "I thought perhaps you might like . . . another chance."

Haydon's thoughts were a chaotic, blurred maelstrom. "You damned old fool!" he shouted hysterically. "It took me twenty minutes to get enough courage to jump. Now you've spoiled it! God, I—"

"One moment, my friend. I did not wish to see you die—that way. Not until you had time to think things over; to repent," the old man's voice was gentle.

"Repent?" Haydon laughed shrilly. "What kind of a doctor are you—a psalm-slinger? Get your hands off me! Let me alone! I want to die! *Die!* Do you understand?"

"I'm a peculiar sort of doctor, Philip Haydon. I am a Surgeon of Souls. And I am offering you a chance to undo the evil you have wrought tonight. To erase the past hour—wipe it out entirely, completely. Do you want that chance?"

There was a new timbre to the old man's tone now; a veiled resonance that struck a hidden chord of fear in Haydon's flesh. And the touch of Dr. Zarkov's hand on his arm made his blood run frigid; congealed the marrow in his bones. He tried to jerk free; but Zarkov's grip was like a steel vise.

AS IF from a great distance away, Haydon could hear the greybeard speaking again: "Listen to me, Philip Haydon. I have told you I am a Surgeon of Souls. Your soul interests me—because it is so wholly black. I would like to test my ability. I would like to see if I can wipe out that blackness. But it rests with you. You must help me. If I succeed in purging the darkness from your soul, you will live again—happily, for the normal span of your days."

Haydon was seized with spasm of trembling. "I—I don't understand you!" he choked harshly. "How do you know so much about me? My name—and that I murdered my wife a while ago—"

"I know many things," the soul-surgeon answered slowly. "I have watched you from a distance for many, many days. As I have already told you, your soul interests me because it is so completely dark. I know, for instance, of your love-affair with Nadine Blanding. I know how your wife accused you of

it, tonight. I saw the black rage welling up from your heart, and the murder-fury. Yes; you are a murderer, Philip Haydon. And yet, if you wish, I can save you."

"Save me from—punishment?"

"From everything you have done. But you must do my bidding, my friend. You must not question me."

Haydon grew steadier. "What—what would you have me do?" he whispered.

"First you will come with me to the home of Nadine Blanding. You must break with her—forever."

"And after that?"

"You will return to your wife. You will live with her in peace, as if this past hour had never been."

Philip Haydon stared. "You must be insane!" he ground out. "Maizie's dead. I . . . killed her with my own two hands."

"That remains to be seen," the soul-surgeon smiled. His eyes seemed to bore through the younger man's body. "Already I see a tiny patch of clean white upon your black, leprous soul. It convinces me that there is still hope for your salvation. Will you do my bidding, Philip Haydon—and save yourself from everlasting damnation?"

Without realizing why he did it, Hayden nodded. This weird old man was crazy, of course; yet there was something hypnotically convincing about him. Haydon could not quite understand his own passiveness, his submission to Zarkov's will. "I—I'll do whatever you say," he muttered dully.

"Then come. We must go to Nadine Blanding's house at once," the soul-surgeon said firmly.

The next few minutes were a confusion of movement. Haydon was not quite sure whether they took a taxi, or



"Phil, what brings you here?"

whether they walked. It was like a dream-sequence. It was as if he were standing still, while time and space rushed past him like a black liquid.

THEN he found himself ringing Nadine Blanding's doorbell; and when he looked around, Dr. Zarkov was not in sight. He wondered about that. Where had the old man gone? It was very queer. Strange, too, was the feeling Haydon now had; a sensation that the greybeard was very close to him, although invisibly so . . .

But that was bosh, he told himself. Zarkov was a madman; had mouthed a lot of insane gibberish, then wandered off into the night. And now that he was gone, Haydon began to readjust himself, mentally.

He had almost committed suicide. Now, looking back, he saw how utterly unnecessary that had been. Why should he die? Instead, he would go away to some other city; start life over again with a new name, a new identity. The police would never find him if he moved carefully, cautiously. He need never pay the penalty for having murdered his wife . . .

The door opened, and he saw Nadine Blanding standing there. She was clad in gossamer-thin sleeping pyjamas, and her auburn hair was a flaming cascade about her flawless throat and white seductive shoulders. Blatantly pretty, she was; and her body was symmetrical perfection. Through her tissue-chiffon jacket he could see the rising lilt of her breasts—two boldly firm mounds of creamy deliciousness. Her hips were sleek and slender, and her thighs gleamed white through the thin trousers.

"Phil!" she widened her eyes when she saw him. "What brings you here at this hour . . .?"

"Let me in!" he rasped. "I've got something to tell you." The sight of her had already inflamed his blood, as he was always inflamed when he was near her.

His whole being tingled and ached to take her into his arms; and his mouth was parched for the moist ardor of her kisses. He entered the house, kicking the door shut behind him.

She led him upstairs to her rose-tinted boudoir. "Phil—what's wrong? You're acting so strangely! And that man who was with you outside—the one you locked out when you slammed the door—"

He scowled. "There was nobody with me! Don't be a fool."

"But—but I thought I saw a little old bearded man—"

Haydon stiffened. That described Dr. Zarkov, Surgeon of Souls! But Nadine must be mistaken about seeing Zarkov. The old man had not been at Haydon's side. "Nonsense, baby!" he grunted swiftly. "Nobody was with me. I'm alone. *Plenty* alone, now."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not married any more. I'm free of Maizie."

Nadine's breasts rose and fell once, sharply, quickly. "Free of her—?"

"She's dead. I killed her. Choked her with my hands when she accused me of running around with you."

"You—you *murdered* her, Phil?"

He nodded.

"Oh, God—!" she whispered.

He leered at her. "So what? Lots of times you've told me you wished she was out of the way. Well, she's out of the way now. It's just you and me against the world from now on, sweetness. I've got to get out of town and hide, of course, until everything blows over. Well, you're coming with me. We'll go to some other town and settle down. How about it?"

Nadine looked into his eyes. Then her crimson lips parted in a smile of



"I've got something to tell you."

assent. "I'm willing, Phil. Kiss me—to seal the bargain."

He kissed her, brutally clamping his mouth down upon her parted, shinily

moist lips. His hands clawed into her shoulders in the first moment of that kiss; her pyjama jacket parted as he jerked her to him. She tore her mouth away with a moan from the savage pressure of his, and for a brief instant, breathing hoarsely he let his eyes lick over her quivering, half bare breasts . . . drop to the swelling roundness of her hips and the silken columnar delights of her thighs. Then he caught her to him again, bruising the throbbing whiteness of her throat with his mouth.

She writhed against the heedless strength of his arms—even though her own arms tightened spasmodically about him. As his kisses traversed her throat, she ran her fingers through his hair, closed them tightly. "Phil—darling—!" she gasped.

"God, you're beautiful!" he gritted savagely; his muscles locked her to him with fiendish strength, until her slender frame cracked and she cried out—

"Phil—you're hurting me . . .

HIS eyes blazed—he knew he was hurting her . . . But something was wrong. A hideous devil of memory was probing around at the recesses of his brain. He remembered another moment, just an hour ago. He remembered another woman's soft flesh—Maizie's. His fingers had wrapped themselves about Maizie's throat, and he had closed down on her windpipe—

His dead wife's glassy eyes seemed to be staring at him now, out of nothingness. Her face floated spectrally between him and this Nadine Blanding woman. Some of the bestiality went out of Philip Haydon's heart then; was replaced by a suppurating fear. He released her and stepped back.

She looked at him with puzzlement in

her glance. "What's wrong, Phil?" She held out her bare arms to him.

What was wrong? God, he didn't know! But he seemed to be hearing a voice at his ear: "Have you forgotten your promise to me, my friend? Have you forgotten that you gave me your word you would break with Nadine . . .?"

It was Zarkov's voice. Not audible in the room itself, but seeming to slither into Haydon's inner ear. Imagination! That's all it was! The insane old grey-beard wasn't anywhere in sight; therefore, how could his voice be here, disembodied?

Haydon plunged once more toward Nadine; gathered the auburn-haired woman again into his arms. And now his kisses and his caresses were more brutal even than before. His clawing hands dug deep bruises on her bare arms, her shoulders. He crushed his mouth again to her white throat, so that she gasped and squirmed in his embrace. Her heart thudded furiously against his, even through the crushed softness of her breasts. A red haze was flooding Haydon's soul now . . .

Then he heard the Voice again. "*That tiny white spot on your soul, Philip Haydon—it is turning dark again. You are plunging headlong into doom . . .!*"

Nadine's smouldering eyes had widened. She was staring up into Haydon's face. "Phil—someone spoke! I heard it! I heard somebody talking to you—"

He tried to hold her, but she fought free of him. She was frightened. Her face was pallid, waxen. It reminded him of another waxen-white face. Maizie's. His wife's face. The wife he had strangled . . .

In an abrupt, blinding instant of self-seen truth, he backed away from the red-haired girl. Gone was that shaking

emotion that had engulfed him a moment ago. That Voice—the voice of Dr. Zarkov! And Maizie's dead face floating ectoplasmically before his eyes—

He remembered the promise he had made to the soul-surgeon. He recalled that Zarkov had offered him another chance—if he obeyed orders implicitly. And he had a sudden frantic desire for another chance. Bitterly, desperately, he wanted it.

He grabbed up his coat. Cast one last look at Nadine Blanding. "I—I'm going!" he rasped at her. "You'll never see me again. We're through, you and I. Finished, understand? I'm going back . . . to Maizie . . ."

"But she's dead, Phil! You must be insane!"

HE WASN'T listening. He plunged out of her boudoir, out of her house. He went racing out into the cool night, and a clean dark wind brushed at his cheek, like the touch of an evanescent wing—or the contact of sensitive, unseen fingers—

Unseen fingers? But that was not true! It was the hand of Dr. Zarkov that touched Philip Haydon's forehead. The old man stood there by him, smiling gently.

Where had he come from? Had he been concealed in the shadows, waiting? Or had he materialized out of nothingness? Haydon could not know; but one thing he was certain: Zarkov was there by him, steadying him, speaking to him.

"You . . . !" Haydon panted.

"Yes. And I am pleased with you, my friend. For a moment, I thought I had lost my battle to purge your soul of blackness. But you reacted magnificently, after I spoke to you. That tiny white spot near your heart—it is

growing larger. The darkness is being driven off. I think I shall succeed with you, Philip Haydon. You are not beyond redemption, after all."

Queer, how the weird old man's voice could soothe and calm Haydon's overwrought nerves. Odd, how Zarkov's mere presence served to steady the younger man's trembling muscles. It was like a benign hypnosis; a healing necromancy.

And now, Haydon was no longer afraid of the soul-surgeon. Instead, he felt oddly uplifted; strengthened. He squared his shoulders. "Thank you, Dr. Zarkov," he said simply. "You have helped me over the hill."

Zarkov smiled again. "Yes. I am winning my battle. It is well, my friend. But you still have one more test to undergo. One more ordeal to face."

"A test? An ordeal?"

The soul-surgeon nodded. "The test is not one of my making. I would prefer it otherwise, for I have grave fears. Yet I cannot change things that are ordained to happen. Come, Philip Haydon. You are going home to your own apartment. To your wife."

"My . . . wife . . ." Haydon shuddered involuntarily as he visioned her lying on the bed, pallid in death. "Then that is the ordeal? I must spend some time with her . . . corpse . . . ?"

"We'll see," Zarkov answered gently. "Come along."

Again there came that odd, eerie sensation of standing rooted while time and space flowed swiftly by like a dark current. And then Haydon was once more alone. Zarkov had mysteriously vanished. And Haydon was at the door of his own apartment; fitting a key into the lock.

He frowned. The door was not latched. He walked in. His palms were

wet and clammy; his throat was tight as he strode toward Maizie's bedroom. A thrumming, taut nervousness was upon him as he approached the boudoir door. Maizie's corpse was in there waiting for him, he knew. And he knew that he must go in and stare upon the woman he had slain, because Zarkov had thus commanded.

He steeled himself for the ordeal. He went into the room.

A blasting wave of amazement flooded through him. "Maizie—" he cried out wildly.

SHE was seated at her dressing table, clad in a sheer negligee. She was smiling at him. *She was alive!*

"Darling!" she whispered. "I'm so glad you're home! I've had the worst possible experience . . ."

In numb incomprehension he looked at her. Drank in the wavy gold of her hair, the azure pools of her eyes, the sweet innocence of her mouth. He studied the shapely contours of her body: the firm, boyish little breasts and the slender waist and the graceful flare of hips and modeled thighs . . . "Maizie!" he whispered as he went toward her. "Maizie—!"

She was in his arms, clinging to him. "Phil!" she said. "I—I had the most terrifying thing happen to me! I must have fainted, a little while ago. It seemed that something was choking me, throttling me until I couldn't breathe. Everything roared in my ears. Everything got black before my eyes. I—I guess it must have been my heart acting up, after our quarrel. Oh, Phil—Phil, beloved—forgive me for accusing you of running around with other women! I'll never do it again! I swear it! I'll trust you—always—"

As he held her, Philip Haydon tried to orient his tangled chaotic thoughts. Maizie was alive! He hadn't killed her, an hour ago! And now she didn't even recall his having placed his fingers around her throat, choking her . . .

Now he knew what the weird Zarkov had meant by offering him another chance. The soul-surgeon must have known that Maizie wasn't dead. So the eerie old man had saved Haydon from suicide; talked him into breaking off with the red-haired Nadine Blanding. And now everything was peaceful, serene. Happiness lay ahead . . .

"My sweet little wife!" he heard himself whispering. "I'll always be true to you. I'll never look at another woman—"

Even as he said it, he heard a sound at the threshold of the boudoir. He turned, stared. His heart gave a great, painful leap within his chest.

A WOMAN stood there. A strange woman. In negligee. Dark, she was, and feline. Her black hair made her dead-white complexion seem even more white. Her mouth was a blood-scarlet splash of promising invitation . . .

She was smiling, so that her even, sharp white teeth were revealed, like twin pearl-rows. "I'm sorry!" she purred throatily. "I didn't realize—"

Maizie sprang from Haydon's arms; laughed awkwardly. "It's all right, Rosa. Come in. I want you to meet my husband." She turned to Haydon. "Phil, this is Mrs. Rosa Farrand from the next apartment. She heard me fall a while ago, when I fainted—after you had gone out. She came in and helped me. Put water on my head, and all that. She brought me to."

Haydon looked at the brunette woman. "Good of you," he murmured perfunc-

She tried to scream, tried to claw him. But his fingers only tightened, throttling her.



torily. But even that much speech was a sharp stabbing pain in his throat. Because never before, in all his life, had he seen a creature so exquisitely exciting—and so thoroughly, evilly pulse-stirring.

Through the laciness of her negligee he could catch a tinkling hint of her breasts—magnificent white mounds, pliantly undulant as she walked across the room toward him with hands extend-

ed. Her every movement was a symphony of grace. Her hips swayed, and under the parted lower portion of her negligee her bare legs flashed daringly.

Her skin was like faintly blue-veined marble, yet warm with a warmth that could be seen, sensed, as well as felt. "I'm very happy to know you, Mr. Haydon," she was saying in that throaty purr. "We shall be . . . very good friends, I hope."

He took her extended finger-tips; and the touch of her hand sent shivering waves of heat into his blood. No other woman had ever affected him this way. Not Maizie, certainly. Not even Nadine Blanding.

"So you played Good Samaritan to Mrs. Haydon, did you?" he smiled at her.

"It was nothing. I was just being a good neighbor. I happen to have a bit of medical training; so I knew exactly what to do. And—er—I have some medicine in my own apartment; a prescription that fits your wife's case perfectly. I'll give you the bottle, if you like. One never knows when one might have need of such a drug . . ."

Maizie was pushing at him; urging him forward. "Go with Mrs. Farrand, Phil. I might faint again. It would be nice to have some medicine—"

He hesitated; and there seemed to be a warning whisper in his ear. Was it Zarkov's disembodied voice? He could not be sure . . .

THEN the brunette Rosa Farrand was smiling at him again; her eyes seemed to be probing, boring into his brain. Telepathically she was inviting him, challenging him. Her hips were swaying a little. Lazily, almost imperceptibly. Her hands were against her

breasts, pressing them through the thin lace. "Coming?" she challenged.

For the split fraction of a second he weighed everything in his mind. He knew that somehow or other, the Farrand woman represented danger. Yet what sort of danger? What had he to fear? He wasn't a murderer; Maizie was alive. And he had kept his word with Zarkov by breaking off with Nadine Blanding. His obligation to the soul-surgeon had been discharged. He was free to do as he pleased.

And Rosa Farrand was unquestionably taunting him. He could tell that, from the way she was looking at him and smiling at him. He knew the excuse of loaning him a bottle of medicine was just a subterfuge. She wanted to be alone with him . . .

Well, why not pick up the gauntlet she had figuratively thrown at his feet? Maizie wouldn't know; wouldn't suspect anything wrong. Maizie had been completely taken in by the brunette woman's offer of the medicine. So what?

He forced a polite smile, although his blood was steaming. "Okay," he nodded. "I'll go with you to get the bottle. And thanks."

Without a backward glance toward his golden-haired wife, he followed Rosa Farrand from the apartment, down the corridor to her own quarters. And it almost seemed to him that he heard a faint, weary sigh very close to him. It seemed like the sigh of someone who has struggled against impossible odds—and lost.

Zarkov's sigh . . . ?

Haydon shrugged it off. He was in the Farrand woman's living-room now. She took his hand. "The medicine is in here," she whispered. She led him into her boudoir.

A single lamp glowed dimly by the sofa. Mrs. Farrand's body gleamed like polished ivory through her lace negligee, in the faint illumination. The room held a heady fragrance, a subtle perfume of intoxication; it mounted like brandy to Haydon's brain; made him oddly dizzy.

The woman was grinning at him. "Is anything wrong?"

"No. Nothing. Except—"

"You look pale. Come. Sit on the bed beside me for a moment. You're tired."

She settled herself; made a place for him. The negligee fell open to reveal the smooth whiteness of her legs, the dimpled perfection of her knees, a hint of her flawless ivory thighs. Her breasts trembled beneath the lace as she moved her shoulders impatiently.

He went to her. "Did anyone ever tell you how gorgeous you are?" he whispered.

She laughed redly. "Many men have said that to me. But you're the first who has ever . . . thrilled me when you said it."

He stared into her dark, enigmatic eyes. "Tell me something. Why did you invite me in here?"

"Because I wanted to. Because I wanted to . . . know you . . . better."

Her frankness ignited searing blasts of heat within his marrow. "You mean—"

"I mean I want you to kiss me!" she answered.

The inside of his mouth tasted coppery from the electrical impulses that were generated in his blood. His arm slid around her waist. He pulled her close. His lips traveled along her bared arm, from elbow to shoulder, slowly . . .

Up to her shoulder. Then her throat. And at last, his mouth clamping against

hers. Feeling the moist redness of them, their fervid response.

HE stiffened. He seemed to sense a Presence standing before him. He seemed to hear a whisper in his ear: "You must help me, Philip Haydon! *The white patch is turning grey . . . soon it will be solidly black . . .*"

The voice of Dr. Zarkov, Surgeon of Souls!

"To hell with you, you old crack-brain!" Haydon heard himself grating. "I've got nothing to fear now! To hell with my soul!"

And Rosa Farrand was smiling, purring in her throat. "To hell with your soul indeed, my lover. Kiss me again! Drink deep of my lips. Hold me close . . . close . . .!"

Engulfed in the black riptide of evil that defied Zarkov, Haydon strained her yielding form against his own hard body. Then suddenly—

"Phil! Philip—!"

Maizie's voice. From the doorway. Shocked; horrified; unbelieving. "Phil—you and this—this creature—!"

He sprang to his feet. His face darkened with abrupt spasmodic anger. "Maizie! Get out of here!" he snarled.

"Phil! You—you'd talk that way to me—your wife—"

"Get out, I say!"

And Rosa Farrand was laughing, deep in her purring throat. "Yes, yes! Send her away. You are mine now! Tell her to go!"

Maizie raced forward; clutched at Haydon's arm. "Phil! You—you beast! You vile, loathsome beast! I hate you! I—"

Some malign, external violation seemed to lay hold of his hands. His

(Continued on page 118)

*With her only weapon, her beauty, his wife fought for him against
the High Priestess of the African cult!*



RAIN in DAHOMY

RAIN beat against the tin roof rhythmically, incessantly. Something inside Dutton seemed to respond to it, echo it. His blood throbbed in unison with the dripping downpour. He sat in the shadow on the screened porch, a glass of whiskey at his elbow. *Harmattan*, that three-month

period of intense drought on the Dahomey Guinea Coast was over. The big rains were here again.

Dutton tried to arouse himself from his lethargy. He knew Lieutenant St. Clair was in the living room, no doubt making love to Lorna, Dutton's wife. And he knew Lorna was doing her share,

By CARL MOORE



"Oh, Takudonu, this is the man you promised me!" Egba intoned.

that she responded to the dapper little Frenchman who had come up the river from Whydah three days before with a

detachment of ten Senegalese soldiers. They had been headed originally for the Lama Swamp, where Guinea Coast rumor had placed the last survivors and newest converts of the Serpent Cult.

But St. Clair, after one look at Lorna Dutton, had decided the rains were too great to proceed at once. So he had lodged his Senegalese in a storage house outside Dutton's plantation and had stayed on to see more of Lorna.

Dutton didn't care. He was as sick of Lorna as he was of everything else! Even the thought of her white body in another man's arms didn't bother him. He felt no love for her, wanted nothing of her. Instead, stirring within him in a manner he could not fathom, was a yearning for Egba, the half-caste Portuguese girl from down the river, who worked about the plantation house.

He could close his eyes now and see the tawny liteness of her legs, the flaring enticement of full hips, tightly covered with her solitary garment whose top hardly obscured the pear-shaped beauty of breasts that trembled with her slightest movement.

But Dutton was afraid. If he let himself go—and from the way her slumbrous eyes had looked on him he knew the woman only waited on his first advance—if he let himself go, he was a lost man. Already Africa was stirring within him. He couldn't resist much longer.

He caught Egba's subtle, remembered fragrance before he heard the soft swish of her single garment about slim legs. Startled, he turned. Her teeth flashed whitely in the dusky oval of her face. He knew her mouth was a taunting red slash, knew her breasts were heaving beneath the thin material of her dress. And that every tempting line of her figure was a challenge.

He didn't speak. She refilled his glass, leaned closer to him, so that one soft breast curved its warm mould against his shoulder. For a moment he pulled away, but her low laughter made a beating red flame of the blood racing through him. His arm slid about her waist. The svelte curve of her flesh was silky and warm.

He was on his feet in a second, knocking over the table that held the whiskey bottle. It crashed to the floor in a shatter of broken glass. Then he was staring down into that triumphant smile, crushing her until that lissome, supple form was shaped against his own. Her lips parted to receive his kiss, when suddenly he pushed her aside, muttering, "No, damn it, I can't let myself go!" Then, coldly, "Clean up the mess, please."

As he walked away unsteadily, he heard her taunting laughter and flushed.

AT THE window he paused, looked inside the house. His flush deepened. Just as he had suspected, Lorna was in the Frenchman's arms. Dutton glared at the mad scene for a moment, his hands clinched into fists.

The two were seated on the rattan divan oblivious of all but each other. Round white arms pulled St. Clair's head down to Lorna's, a hot mouth was pressed passionately against the Lieutenant's. The straps of her gown had slipped down her shoulders, completely forgotten. The cleft between her crushed breasts was deep and shadowy. Her dress had crawled up about sleek thighs that gleamed whitely above her stocking tops.

Even as he watched, Lorna's hand shot out to turn the light completely off.

Dutton's anger faded to hopelessness. What did he care? To hell with her! He didn't care about Lorna now, damn it; it was that wench Egba!

Egba was walking demurely away with downcast eyes and her hips quivered a sinuous taunt. Once she looked over her shoulder. Dutton caught his breath as the light in the doorway illuminated the perfect contours of her body.

To hell with Lorna! Two could play at this game. Grimly, purposefully he set out after Egba. Straight down the hallway she went toward the wing of the house which sheltered her own room. Dutton stayed at her heels and his blood was a feverish flood.

Once Glegle, the Dahomeyan house-boy, stepped from a crossing corridor but he drew back quickly. Dutton didn't even see him; if Egba noticed him, she gave no sign. She raised the curtain that

covered the doorway of her room, entered. Dutton, breathing deeply, followed. The curtain fell behind him.

Steadily from black skies came the beat of the incessant rain on the tin roof. And steadily within Dutton the beat of his heart kept rhythm with that rain.

She lighted a lamp and turned to him. Her mouth was tremulous, her eyes half veiled. He groaned a little as he swept her against his chest, felt her breasts crush against him, felt the savage response in her indulgent form, in the arms wound tightly about his neck.

She whispered triumphantly, "Egba has waited long for this minute!"

DINNER was a silent meal, only the little Lieutenant talking with any persistence. Lorna watched her husband's burning face and fevered eyes in silence. As for Dutton, after all the indecision and pent-up emotion of the last few months, he was now happy. He watched his wife eat, remembered what he had seen through the porch window, and didn't care! He knew that beneath the table her knee was against that of the voluble little officer. And still he didn't care. He compared the half-revealed, milk-white breasts of the woman he had married with those of the bronze-skinned Egba.

Egba represented Africa, Lorna was the personification of England. And Dutton knew who had won.

His eyes kept following Egba about the room as she served the meal. Avidly, he watched the swinging of her hips, the quivering of partially exposed breasts. Let Lorna see the passion in his eyes! He had chosen! From now on it was Egba! If Africa was in his blood, so be it!

St. Clair said, "These damnable rains, this damnable jungle! Thank God, I am about through with them. Three more months and I go back to France."

Lorna said dreamily, "We have another year. It will seem good to see London again, to be among civilized people."

Dutton's eyes were feverish, bright. Again he heard the beat of the rain, thought of the baobab trees and the coconut palms, the rank undergrowth of the swamp country, the pungent smells! And Egba!

He said, "There's something about Dahomey and the jungle that gets into a man's blood. I think I will stay here the rest of my life."

Lorna gasped, the Lieutenant's mouth gaped open.

Behind Dutton's chair, he could sense Egba's presence. He could still smell her hair, could still feel the touch of bronze flesh. Africa! Of course he'd stay in Africa.

"Don't be absurd," gasped Lorna.

"I was never more serious in my life. You may return to your damned England any time you like. I shall stay here forever!" He gulped the liquor at his elbow.

SILENCE, then the startled Lieutenant quickly changed the subject. "I wish my present mission were finished," he said. "These ancient cults that revive every few years are often bloody messes to handle. I have it on good information that the latest, led by a man who calls himself King Takudonu, is very strong in numbers. He has revived the old custom of the Amazon warriors and the Serpent is being worshiped—"

At first Dutton scarcely heard the droning voice of the French soldier. He lay back in his chair with his eyes closed,

conscious of only two things. The steady beat of the rain on the tin roof of the porch like a million tiny drums. That and the presence of Egba in the room. He heard the soft sound of her feet behind him, felt her nearness when she removed dishes, even trembled at the touch of her thinly covered breast against his shoulder when she poured his drink. Then he became aware again of the reedy droning voice of the Frenchman.

"—rites three times a year in worship of the Python Danh-ghi. Often, even now, there are human sacrifices and sometimes cannibalism is practised. The Fons believe the python to be a symbol of fecundity, in fact the father and symbol of all life. These cults must hold their orgies in the swamps and hidden places, of course, and we take every means to break them up once we know they are under way."

The serpent, the symbol of life.

Dutton stirred in his chair. The thought flashed through his mind that the serpent in the Garden had been the symbol of wisdom. Why, the serpent was Africa itself, ages old in knowledge! Egba was a serpent! He remembered the sinuous movement of her lush hips, the undulations of rounded arms, the sleekness of full thighs. Even her hair was serpentine, a million curling, crawling little snakes.

He opened his eyes, found himself staring directly into those of the half-caste girl. *Her eyes were so black as to seem almost without pupils—like those of a snake.* Little reflections of light from the lamp leaped and flickered in them. He said only one phrase, "The serpent!" and reached for Egba, who smilingly eluded his grip and left the room sinuously.

Across the room Lorna gasped, leaped

to her feet, upsetting the wine before her. Her face was livid with rage. She said, "Charles, are you drunk? Have you gone insane?"

"Not insane! I am merely getting sane again. I would like to go back to the root of all things, to the Serpent!"

Lieutenant St. Clair arose quickly. "Pardon me, please, madame. I must see about my men." His boot heels clicked across the floor.

Slowly Dutton arose, walked toward his wife, eyes like those of a sleep walker. She read madness there and tried to get away from him. But his hand gripped her shoulder.

"A long while ago I loved you, now I do not." His voice was almost mocking, except for the dreamy note. "It is not that I care about the other men. That does not matter. It is I who have changed. Watch!"

He swept her voluptuous body into his arms, held her so tightly that she gasped for breath. In spite of herself her blood grew hotter in the fierce embrace, her own white arms slid around his neck as he bent to kiss her. Her eyes flew wide open at once, for his kiss was cool and chaste. When he released her she drew back; he merely smiled.

"Do you see? That does not mean a thing to me! I am through with that part of my life!"

His hand seized the front of her gown, ripped it from her shoulders. "Once, seeing you like this would have driven me mad... mad with love for you...! Now—"

The dress was torn the rest of the way from her body with one great jerk, which pulled her stumbling to her knees. He gazed down at the soft white contours of her body, the generous breasts, the flaring hips, the flat abdomen.

Slowly he shook his head, his eyes hot, angry. "Bah! You are merely a white, fat pig! And once I loved you! The Serpent, the Serpent, that is the thing! Sinuous, twisting, undulating. The Serpent, the symbol of life!"

HE WALKED slowly down the hallway to his own room, threw himself down on the bed. The woman he had left cowered in a corner and wept for

the beast that had once been her husband.

Outside, the rain continued, millions of heavy fingers beating a tattoo on the tin roof. The whole world had a wet damp smell, the smell of decaying vegetation, the smell of the Guinea Coast jungles during the big rains.

Dutton peered straight upward at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. The rain was forgotten. It was merely the boom-



Throughout the mad dance he was conscious only of Egba in his arms—always Egba.

ing of a gigantic drum in his brain now. His blood was at fever heat, his heart pumped madly. Presently he slept.

Dutton dreamed.

He dreamed that the curtain of his room was slowly pulled aside, that a pair of slotted black eyes without pupils peered in at him. A beautiful red tongue flashed out from between black lips. A spade-shaped head seemed to weave rhythmically in greeting, while coil after coil of glistening snake undulated into the room.

It slithered close to the bed, but Dutton was not afraid. It was beautiful. The snake's unadorned body gleamed and glistened in the lamp light as if anointed with oil. It was a sleek, slender, rippling wave of loveliness. Even when it coiled intimately beside him, he found its flesh warm and pleasant. When a gleaming coil spanned his body he was comforted. His fingers patted the sleek skin, caressed smooth flesh.

When the serpent wound its way from his embrace and slithered noiselessly from the room, Dutton too staggered after it, followed it down the hallway, out the back door into the relentlessly beating rain.

It was the same cool fingers of rain that finally brought him back to his senses. He was flat on his back in something that rocked and swayed from side to side like a suspended hammock. Overhead great fronds of jungle ferns waved fantastic fingers. The interlaced branches of swamp trees at times made an arc that shut off the rain. Over all was the smell of mud and decayed vegetation, the miasmic odor of swamp. Then he was conscious of movement, as if his body were being propelled forward.

Where was he? Name of God, what was he doing?

He sat up with a suddenness that nearly overturned the native boat. The water was ink, the darkness of the atmosphere impenetrable, yet he knew someone was in the stern of the boat propelling the thing along. He heard the suck of the pole as the mud beneath the shallow water released it, heard the eerie cry of swamp animals off to either side. Why was he here? He remembered dreaming of the python, remembered dreaming he had followed it from the house.

But what then? What now?

A tender voice said, "Sleep, Dutton, sleep and rest. I read in your eyes that you would seek the Serpent so I am taking you to him. You, a white, are to see the Father of all Wisdom, the Symbol of all Life."

Egba! With a groan he held his throbbing head in his hands. What was wrong with him? How could he be in the middle of a swamp with Egba, in a boat headed toward an unknown place?

Something was thrust into his hands. Her voice said, 'Drink, Dutton, it will ease your aching head. Soon we shall arrive.'

He gulped greedily at the liquor in the bottle. It was like fire but it eased his aching head as she had said it would. Presently he lay back down in the bottom of the boat and let the rain beat down on his unprotected face. And again he dreamed of the Serpent.

HOW long afterward it was that Egba aroused him, he did not know. He was only conscious of her arms about his neck, her red lips close to his, as she whispered, "Come, Dutton, it is time. We go, you and I."

Somehow he got to his feet, stepped on solid ground and went with the girl,

hand in hand down a long roofed passageway. His eyes were burning, his tongue was thick, but he went willingly. He was remembering his dream.

A black curtain at the end of the passageway was pulled aside; together they entered. Overcome with amazement Dutton paused, though Egba tried to pull him forward. He tried to shake the cobwebs from his head, but the scene was too fantastic. Lined up directly before them, barring their progress, were eight women, each with a rifle leveled at the newcomers.

They were clad only in loin cloths of white that contrasted startlingly with the blackness of their skins. Eight pairs of black breasts were motionless mounds of ebony as the women stood like so many statues, guns ready for use.

To Dutton's addled mind came the droning words of the Frenchman at the dinner table. The Swamp King, the head of the Serpent Cult, who had revived the old Amazonian warriors for his bodyguard! But Egba was speaking quickly in the Ewe dialect. A guttural voice answered from across the room. The rank of Amazons dropped their guns, moved quickly aside and Egba pulled Dutton forward.

The room was tremendous in size, lighted by flickering torches that cast weird reflections on the walls. Something was set in the walls at intervals, something white and grinning with great holes where eyes had been, great black slashes where once had been mouths.

Skulls! A palace room decorated with skulls! Fascinated, Dutton stared at them. It was only then that he became aware of a group against the opposite walls, a group of proudly defiant black men who held themselves apart from a similar group of black women. All

stared at the bedraggled white man with curious eyes but no other expression on their wooden faces. Then he heard Egba's voice.

"Oh, Takudonu, Friend of the Father of Wisdom, this is the man. I have done as you commanded in the past. This is the man I want, the man you promised me. Speak."

Dutton's bleary eyes stared directly into those of a towering Dahomeyan who sat cross-legged on a carved stone altar. Across his knees he held a gleaming knife. Now he peered from Dutton to the woman Egba and his eyes were those of an eagle. His voice rumbled in his thick black chest, seemed to come from far distances.

"Egba, Priestess of Python Danh-ghi, you have been promised the man you desire. If you have been worthy you shall have him—forever. You have done as I advised?"

"Yes, Father. I have given the potions."

"Then we shall see what Danh-ghi himself shall say." He clapped his hands, spoke in dialect to an attending Amazon, who promptly disappeared. When she returned, she bore a bowl of steaming liquid which she extended toward Dutton.

"Drink," commanded Takudonu, but Dutton drew back. Egba's soft arm was again about his shoulder, her satin skinned breast burned against his arm, her lips were close to his ear.

With a little moan he seized the bowl, drank deeply of the bitter-tasting stuff. Only Egba's rounded arm kept him from falling. For a moment he stood there limply, then it was as if he turned into a man of stone. He felt his muscles stiffen, grow rigid, felt his whole body harden. He saw Takudonu lay aside the

sword, saw two Amazons approach with a huge reed case.

The Dahomeyan leader opened the case, reached inside. The tremendous muscles of his back and shoulders rippled like black silk beneath his skin. Slowly, a little at a time, he lifted a tremendous python from the case. A sigh went up from the assemblage. Takudonu, wordlessly, lay the snake on the stone floor.

For a moment it lay inert, then slowly its great head lifted, it stared about for a single moment then began a slow undulation across the floor. Straight toward Dutton it came, and he was not afraid. Strangely enough he thought the glistening coils of its body were beautiful, wanted it to touch him. He was glad when a coil of the thick body shot out, the tail wound itself about Dutton's leg.

A roar went up from those against the far wall. Takudonu smiled, reached down and unwound the serpent with reverent hands. Slowly the rigidity passed from Dutton's legs and body. A wave of warmth took its place. He was conscious of the applauding crowd, conscious of the smiling King, and all too conscious of Egba in his arms, Egba, whose touch was an exotic flame devouring him.

THE rest was a spot of madness in Dutton's mind. There was the soft beat of tom-toms that finally worked its way into his veins. There were many more drinks of potent brew that fired him. And always there was Egba.

He saw a mad dance of whirling figures of half covered men and women who twisted and gyrated in the center of the huge hall. He saw each dancer lean into a basket and produce a snake. The snake was twisted and twirled, tossed about while the mad dance went

on. Egba leaped into the circle, her hips swaying, her breasts quivering and presently he too convoluted and whirled beside the woman of his choice with a living snake in his hand. A snake whose body was warm to touch, smooth as satin, soft as putty.

There were Amazons who entered with great baskets. From the first was produced a cat that yowled fearfully when its throat was cut at the altar. From another was produced a baby alligator, whose tail continued to lash long after its life's blood dripped from its severed neck. Fascinated Dutton watched, and it came to him that the spurting blood was like twisting, undulating snakes.

After each sacrifice the crowd grew wilder. The tom-toms beat more quickly, the dance whirled faster. Men and women disappeared and at last Dutton picked Egba up in his arms and bore her into a dark corner. Her hair was a thousand writhing living serpents when he buried his face in it. Her kiss was the quick darting kiss of a serpent. Even her body was serpentine as it pressed against him and he remembered his dream, the languorous python that coiled its length about him.

Two Amazons appeared with a larger basket which was opened near the altar. A trembling negro boy stepped out, dressed in a white calico shirt with red bindings, a splotch of red over his left breast. He seemed unable to control his body and was carried to the altar. The King's long knife flicked out. Again those red snakes of blood.

Again Dutton buried his face in Egba's hair and shuddered. Her lips were hot on his, her breasts crushed to him, her body restless. The coiling python . . .

IT WAS the sudden silence that brought him from Egba's arms. He was suddenly aware that all sound had died in the room, that the tom-toms had ceased their monotonous pounding, that the dancers had paused in their evolu-



"Choose!" she cried. "Choose whom you shall kill, this woman of paste or me!"

tions. He raised on an elbow, gazed toward the altar where Takudonu sat with his great knife.

Before him on the floor whimpered the cowering figure of Glegle, Dutton's own house boy. And grasped firmly by a pair of the ebony Amazons, Lorna Dutton,

disheveled and disarrayed, glared defiantly at the black king.

Somehow Dutton staggered to his feet, regardless of Egba's restraining hands. Somehow he staggered toward his wife, and she recoiled from his mad figure.

"How did you get here?" he panted. Her lips curled with scorn.

"Glegle saw you steal away with that woman. Did you think I would give you up to a half-caste wench without a struggle?"

Egba leaped into the circle of light like an enraged tigress. Her hands were like claws as she snatched at the defiant Lorna, who barely stepped to safety.

"Give him up! You fool, you can never get him back! He belongs to the Python, the Father of Wisdom. Only I, Egba, the High Priestess of the cult, can ever have him again!"

She called wildly to the tom-tom players. The drums broke into a majestic measure whose speed gradually increased.

With hanging head Dutton felt the music throbbing again in his blood, felt the pulse-beat of Africa pounding in his veins. The bronze body of Egba began to undulate sinuously.

"Choose," she screamed at Dutton, "choose between this woman of paste and Egba, High Priestess of the Serpent Cult."

She whirled toward the altar, snatched the knife from Takudonu's hand. Thrust the hilt into Dutton's grasp.

"See if you can kill me!" Her eyes were demented, her lips contorted. "See whose flesh receives the knife, mine or this woman's."

She jerked the single garment from her own breasts, swayed dramatically before Dutton. His eyes were heavy,

his breath came fast at sight of those palpitant mounds. He looked from the hypnotically weaving Egba to the agonized eyes of Lorna.

Slowly the knife came up, poised, the point between the swaying, quivering breasts of Egba. And suddenly it was as if the breasts were no longer there. Nothing but smooth flesh, sleek and oily black and spotted, gleaming in the light. She was the glistening snake with glittering beady eyes and a body that undulated in serpentine folds. The python of his dreams, whose glittering coils had encircled him, whose soft flesh he had caressed, whose warm body had held him close. Kill her? Give her up? Never!

With a hoarse cry he turned from her, advanced a step at a time toward the cowering figure of Lorna Dutton, the poised knife gleaming.

The sudden clatter of shots outside, an Amazon of ebony running breathlessly into the sacrificial hall. The clatter of a machine gun and the sudden surging and seething of many figures.

Something hit Dutton's shoulder, spun him about, toppled him over against the reed case that held the Python God. For a moment he lay there, then with a scream of horror saw a spade-shaped head peer over the top of the case, tongue lashing venomously, black beady eyes gleaming with hate. He slashed at it again and again, saw red blood spurt in rivulets, felt the lashing of tremendous coils as the wounded thing literally curled itself about him. He buried the knife again and again in yielding flesh. Then amidst gun shots, clatter and shouting his world went black.

IT WAS two months before Charles Dutton could even talk about the thing to his wife. They were safely in

England in sea-side cottage when he asked—and she explained.

"It was mad, utterly mad of both of us to do the things we did. It must have been Africa, the loneliness, the heat, the rains."

He nodded soberly.

She went on. "Egba wanted you. She joined the Serpent Cult to gain wisdom from the Serpent God. The King or High Priest was a master of poisons. She served you these cult poisons in your drinks until you lost your head. When you slipped away with her into the night, Glegle saw you and told me. I didn't want to tell Lieutenant St. Clair of our trouble; so I took Glegle and followed, hoping to catch up. We were captured. You know the rest, dear. The Lieutenant followed me, in turn, with his

soldiers, and it's well for us that he did. You would have killed me with that knife. You were mad, utterly mad."

He hid his face against the warm hollow of her shoulder while she put her arms about him. Paroxysms shook him, he trembled like a leaf.

"I'm afraid, I'm afraid," he shuddered. "There's something about those ancient cults that is binding. After all, I joined, I was initiated! Sometime in my life that woman Egba will leap up again to confront me!"

She held him a moment longer before answering gently, "I haven't told you before, dear, because you weren't strong enough to hear. But it wasn't a python you killed on the floor of that sacrificial chamber. It was . . . Egba!"

Next month Carl Moore takes you far from Dahomey to Caleb's Reef where, at an abandoned lighthouse, you will learn the meaning of

TERROR'S TATTOO!

T-5, H-4, G-3!!

*What do they mean? Be sure to read the August
Spicy Mystery Stories*

Prophecy



"I'm getting them again!" he groaned. "Stay here, honey. Don't leave me alone!"

Matson knew from experience that in delirium tremens he often saw visions of what actually would come true. And even the girl he turned to for aid couldn't save him from fate

To Kill



By
**COLBY
QUINN**

IN THE midst of kissing her, Peter Matson suddenly became conscious; and his immediate past—for how many hours? how many days? he wondered—was a vacant memory; rather, was no memory at all.

His lips slackened away from the intent pressure of hers; his arms loosened; he examined her blonde head, her face, a face that he couldn't remember.

An instant glance showed him they were standing in one corner of what looked like a hotel room. His knee touched a divan, and he saw that the girl was costumed in a flimsy, lace-paneled slip, pumps, and stockings that were now collapsed almost to her ankles, their distended tops flaring like the tops of silken swagger boots.

She watched his eyes a moment in puzzlement when he stopped kissing her; then she swayed to him once more, yielding the smoothness of her cheek to his unmoving lips. Her face was feverishly hot, and she was trembling; the rapid, obvious thudding of her heart caused her breasts to throb with rhythmic vibrations. Only the webwork of intricate lace, dipping deep at the throat of the slip, masked the exciting roundure of young, soft flesh.

His head jerked back. He could see that her lips were passing no sound; yet insidious, inarticulate murmurings were in his ears. Fright gripped him and he twisted away from her. His self-winding wrist watch pointed to nine-thirty.

"Where are we?" he asked harshly,

more fearful now, because he had staggered drunkenly.

The girl frowned, then laughed. "You tell me!"

He slapped her. "Where are we?" he grated.

The streak-reddened flesh of her cheek jerked in little *tics*. Her mouth shook loosely. "The Bu-buford Hotel—!" she managed in a breathless little wail. She started to cry, really afraid.

"What day is it?"

"Fri—" she whispered with a swallow—"Friday."

She edged away from him, but he caught her bare shoulder. "Tell me all about it," he commanded sternly, feeling himself sway. "What've we been doing? How long—?" Disembodied whispers in his ears. . . . His wife's voice murmuring. . . . soft moanings of terror. . . . louder now, more intelligible. . . .

The girl sobbed, dipped her shoulder to escape his grasp. But he held her.

"Tell me, damn it!" he swore, his voice a bit wild, exasperated, even pleading. "I'm tight—of course! Well, believe it or not, baby, I just came to, a minute ago. I don't remember a thing; I must've been walking around paralyzed on my feet. Now come on; tell me what's what; where we've been—and how long. Friday—ha! No, that must be wrong. . . ." Little voices, louder, inhabiting his ears, accusing, threatening. . . .

Her eyes gleamed her fear. Still shrinking from the clutch of his hand, knees bent, trying to back away, she gasped it out: ". . . yesterday morning—in the bar downstairs—you hired me—to stay with you—keep you from . . . doing foolish things—keep you from having—f-fits!"

She jerked away finally, but he only stared at her, his hands trembling. All

about the room, now: those whisperings, those murmurings. Yet he could have heard a pin drop.

"Fits!" he gasped. "D—don't leave me, baby! Stay, with me!" He reached for her. Cautiously, she allowed him to take her wrist. "Oh, God!" he almost sobbed. "They're conning now. I'm getting them . . ."

TWICE in his life, Peter Matson had experienced delirium tremens; both times since he had married Pauline, two years ago; before that he'd never indulged in prolonged alcoholic sprees. Twice! Unforgettable nightmares! And now—again, the dreaded symptoms: Painfully alert and awake, with violently sharpened senses, with hearing too sensitized to miss those whispers, those insidious murmurings gradually getting louder, louder, clearer, voicing hateful maledictions. The voice of Pauline, the voices of her sweethearts—cursing at him, laughing at him . . .

His grip tightened desperately about the girl's wrist. "I'm getting them again. . . . Stay with me, honey, don't leave me!"

For a minute the girl stood tense and watchful; all she saw was Peter crouching beside her, eyes shifting, but not on her. Then his voice cut in angrily. "Get her out of here!" he commanded. "Get her out—before I kill her!"

But immediately afterward, he forgot the girl at his side completely and dropped her arm; for his world now could hold one woman—the one apparently in front of him; Pauline. Her body had joined her voice; she was before him with all the vivid realness of delirium's hallucinosis.

". . . Again! But of course, again!" She was answering his unvoiced question. "I'll see him as often as I like; I've

told you before—my life's my own, even if I did marry you!"

Abjectly, suppliant in his shameful infatuation, Peter crept to her, stroked his fingers along her arms, his eyes worshipping her sensuous prettiness; his lips hungrily approaching the carmine mouth that still was lovely to him, despite its jeer of derision.

At first, she didn't move; suffered him silently. His fingers settled at the redhaired coil back of her head; his other arm slid to the *ensellure* curve above her hips. He tightened his arms, damning himself to the lowest hell. If she didn't love him, why did she let him caress her?

He hated her even for those quick ripples of maddening undulance that swept down her body, tantalizing him unbearably. Swiftly his mouth forced hers, demanded response. She gave it . . . but only for a moment. Then, with inhuman agility, she was out of his arms, backing away; her ringing, taunting laugh beat in his ears.

Peter said slowly: "I'll kill you now!" His throat congested with sudden rage and the accumulated poisons of humiliation. Suddenly the poisons seemed to burst, flooding his being with a frenzy of hate.

Even now, he could see, she didn't believe he was going to kill her. Not until he leaped at her.

And the instant he leaped, Peter realized anew that he was having the D.T.'s. Because he was standing to one side watching himself attack Pauline.

He watched himself—and that only made it the more horrible. His separate self, leaping and clutching her throat. those two figures as real, as real as life . . . as terrifying as some living dead figures. Peter moaned, watching them. He gibbered, writhed, finally cowered

back in the corner of the room sobbing and groaning, at the thing he saw himself doing.

For that terribly real figure was ripping the clothes from Pauline's unconscious body; was kneeling over her, choking her, pounding her face with frantic fists, scratching the pretty face, those lovely white shoulders, until his hands were covered with blood. . . .

A FEW minutes later, Peter opened his eyes, picked himself up from the floor and saw that the blonde girl had disappeared. Shivering—for he remembered every gruesome detail of that nightmarish hallucination—he stumbled to the bathroom and soaked his face in cold water. Within ten minutes he had decided that he must have himself locked up so that he couldn't kill his wife in fact as well as infernal fancy.

For Peter knew by now that his visions in delirium were really prophecies. Even as a child he had had vivid hallucinations; two days before his brother had been killed by a truck, Peter had seen the accident plainly, in broad daylight on the street, and had run crying to his mother; she had thought he was 'queer', until the accident actually happened. She didn't tell what she thought after that.

Twice in the D. T.'s: once Peter had seen himself fighting Pauline's lover; the second time he had watched his nightmarish self beat Pauline with a belt for her philanderings. And both prophecies had been fulfilled. *Now*, he had seen himself commit a manslaughter . . .

Letting himself quietly out of the hotel, Peter slunk along the street toward the precinct station; even then he couldn't trust that fate wouldn't grab him up by some trick and take him to

(Continued on page 120)

The Black

By STEWART GATES

*Always somebody disappeared
when the Black Thing came, and
only the women ever returned.
But they were never the same.
Perhaps it would have been better
if they, too, had remained lost!*



Thing Walks

I HAD hoped for a long time to hold Carol in my arms as I was holding her then. Her lovely, taut breasts flattened against my chest, almost bursting from the narrow ribbon of the halter strap tied behind her neck to hold up the trunks of her bathing suit. Her red lips, damp and warm, were quivering while they fitted themselves to mine in whispers of love that I had waited so long to hear.

With her words still singing in my ears I caught her up, cradling her luscious, pliant form close to me, and started toward the house that was a window-lit bulk a hundred yards from the river—the house of Emory Selwyn, whom both Carol and I were visiting.

Suddenly Carol screamed, her soft nestling body went rigid in my arms. She pointed across the beach toward the house.



While the machine tugged at her limbs, the whip lashed out. I writhed against my bonds, helplessly.

Both of us were dripping from our evening plunge into the river below Black Falls. The moisture of her satinsmooth skin, when I slid my hand over her bare back, stirred a madness in my veins, just as my caress sent a quiver from her breasts to her knees.

"The Black Thing! The Black Thing from the Falls. I saw it. It is trying to get into the house."

She slid to the ground and started to run away from me, but I caught and held her. I held her so fiercely that the bow of her halter strap untied and the rib-

bons that hid her breasts slid down, dangling. In that moment of terror she gave no heed that the two lovely mounds, shaking with her agitation, were nearly free to the night air and that her white body was bare from the low line of her trunks.

I tried to soothe her; made light of what she had seen. But inwardly, I raged at the hallucination that might spoil the rapture of our love. For I could put no credence in the tale told by the people of the plantation that spread away from Emory Selwyn's house. An ordered mind can't believe that a hideous monster came out from the waters of Black Falls, carried off beautiful women and sent them back with their bodies bruised and doomed to a living death.

But while I was shaking Carol so hard that her teeth clicked together she gave another shriek and when I looked up the beach *I saw it with my own eyes!*

A GROTESQUE shape that was blacker than the night slid across a moon shaft and slunk into a shadow. While I held Carol against me, her back to the house my fingers digging into her warm flesh so that she couldn't see the Thing she had discovered, the front door of the house suddenly opened. The hall within was only dimly lit by light escaping from some other room, but I was certain no one had come into that hall to open the door.

Then, a second later, the black shape was silhouetted in the doorway. Before the door closed behind it I made out that whatever the Thing was, it moved like a man or woman, and that it was completely shrouded in a long black robe and a cowl hood.

Carol still wanted to run away but I urged her toward the house. She clung

to me so tightly that her curved thigh from hip to knee trembled against mine. Her halter straps flew in the air and threatened to slide down to her waist at every step.

At least two people had heard her screams. Emory Selwyn, who was a noted artist, came running around from behind the building. Dr. Bryce, who lived close by but was visiting Selwyn, appeared at deep French windows of the living room and stepped out onto the veranda.

"The Black Thing!" I shouted. "We saw it. I saw it go into the the house."

I think both men thought I was out of my mind, but when Carol added her testimony to the sight, Selwyn said, "We'll soon corner it, then. Leave Carol with the Doctor out here in front to watch doors and windows. You, Cameron, go behind and watch the back and both sides. I'll search inside."

WHILE I watched, I could almost hear again the words I'd heard only that day from old "General" Lee, an ancient negro who had lived on the plantation all his life and had told me his wild yarn of "The Black Thing."

"Yes sah, Master Cameron," he'd said, as he had a dozen times before, "the Black Thing, hit comes out from de ribber, I reckons, cause when the black folks sees hit, always hit am wringin' wet. An' when hit comes, somebody hyarabouts, him or her, disappears an' hit am only the women who comes back, like Missy Selwyn an' that white girl who come back the same terrible way Missy Selwyn come back to Master Selwyn."

Old "General" Lee had rambled on, as he always did, and when I stopped him, shuffled off mumbling some voodoo incantation.

The horrible circumstance of the two women the negro had mentioned flashed across my brain again. One of them had been Cora Selwyn, Emory Selwyn's beautiful young wife. She had disappeared one night after a group of plantation people had sworn they saw The Black Thing creeping into the house. For a week the crazed husband had searched for her without finding a clue. Then, one night, he had seen her coming across the lawn from the river. She was stripped almost naked, water dripping from the cones of her breasts and shining like diamond drops on her white body.

White body save for a criss cross of horrifying purple welts spread up and down her back from the bend of her knees to her neck. When Emory Selwyn took her in his arms, he found no response from her lips or from her eyes. When he stared into her face, it was blank. She didn't know him, didn't recognize the arms that had so often clasped her before.

She cried out in a moan of agony, "Oh, don't! In God's name, let me go."

Cora Selwyn, who was Carol's sister, was in an upstairs room of the house now. She had never regained her memory, could never explain where she'd been, nor why she had been so cruelly tortured. And still she refused to wear clothes, except for a single garment around her hips and breasts. Her husband had to keep her locked in or she would come out of her room and walk about the lawn, oblivious of her near nakedness.

The night after Cora Selwyn returned in that terrible state, with those horrible bruises, the plantation people found another young woman, whose slim, tender little form was that of a girl hardly out of her teens; she was wandering on a

nearby road, with most of her clothes gone, like Cora Selwyn, also with her memory a blank. This girl now was in a New Orleans hospital, she too defying all efforts to make her stay fully dressed.

SELWYN came out of the house at last. He had found no one, no "Thing", he explained.

Dr. Bryce looked from Carol to me. "I don't like to say this," he said carefully, "but it must have been only a shadow you saw. It would have heard the door open and close."

Selwyn seemed abruptly to come out of a daze of thought. "A shadow?" he muttered, "Come inside, all of you."

Even Dr. Bryce gave an exclamation at the sight of a wide circle of water on the hall rug just inside the door sill! The circle was just as wide as would be the flare of the skirts of a black cloak!

Carol shuddered. And my own voice was full of awe. "It stood right there before the door closed on it!"

We heard the shuffling feet of old General Lee coming onto the porch. He stood there shaking and muttering.

"I done seen hit in de yard! I seen it go back into the ribber!"

We sent the negro off, decided to get The Black Thing off our minds if we could. And I wanted Carol to recapture that mood of her's when she had whispered love words into my lips through her kiss. I wanted the tender softness of her in my arms again, to feel those breasts, she had managed to hide again with her halter straps, crushed against my heart.

The nearness and sight of her, while those straps were hanging loose, had stirred my blood until I felt that, beside her, nothing else mattered. What was a legendary, incredible phantom compared

to this lovely creature of warm flesh and promising kisses?

But I couldn't bring her mood back. We lay side by side on the damp grass and on bent elbow I could look down upon the sweep of alabaster thighs, tapering down from the high circles of her trunks. It was like looking over a ravishing landscape, ending in two sets of perfectly formed toes from which tiny sandals had slipped. Carol made no move as I pressed my mouth to hers, even though her breath quickened the rise and fall of her bosom. But her lips were firm when I tried to repeat that kiss, and she slipped away from me in an instant.

"No, John. I—I can't think of love now," Her voice was taut, almost a whisper. "I shall lock myself in and fasten the window shutters tight. I know that the Black Thing is true. Maybe it wants me! I'm so afraid!"

I stood in the hall while Carol unlocked her sister's door and went in to look at her. It was to be near Cora Selwyn that Carol had come up from her own New Orleans. Dr. Bryce, who owned the house Emory Selwyn rented but who lived in a much larger one near by, wanted to keep Cora Selwyn surrounded by familiar people and familiar things. He wanted her kept even in the house itself. And he had suggested my own visit because my face was familiar to her. He hoped by these strategies eventually to bring back her memory so that she might tell us the terrible history of those welts on her back.

When I had once more pressed the warmth and smoothness of Carol against me, in a good-night embrace, I went into the yard. There was a plump little upstairs maid who would soon be coming home from a dance in the nearby village.

And Carol's kisses—or want of them!—had made me remember that little Lisette, a Spanish Creole, had a way of letting her short skirts creep up when she was near me. The challenging looks she had given me when she discovered me enjoying glimpses of her tawny round thighs under the edge of her skirt, would mean the same thing in all languages.

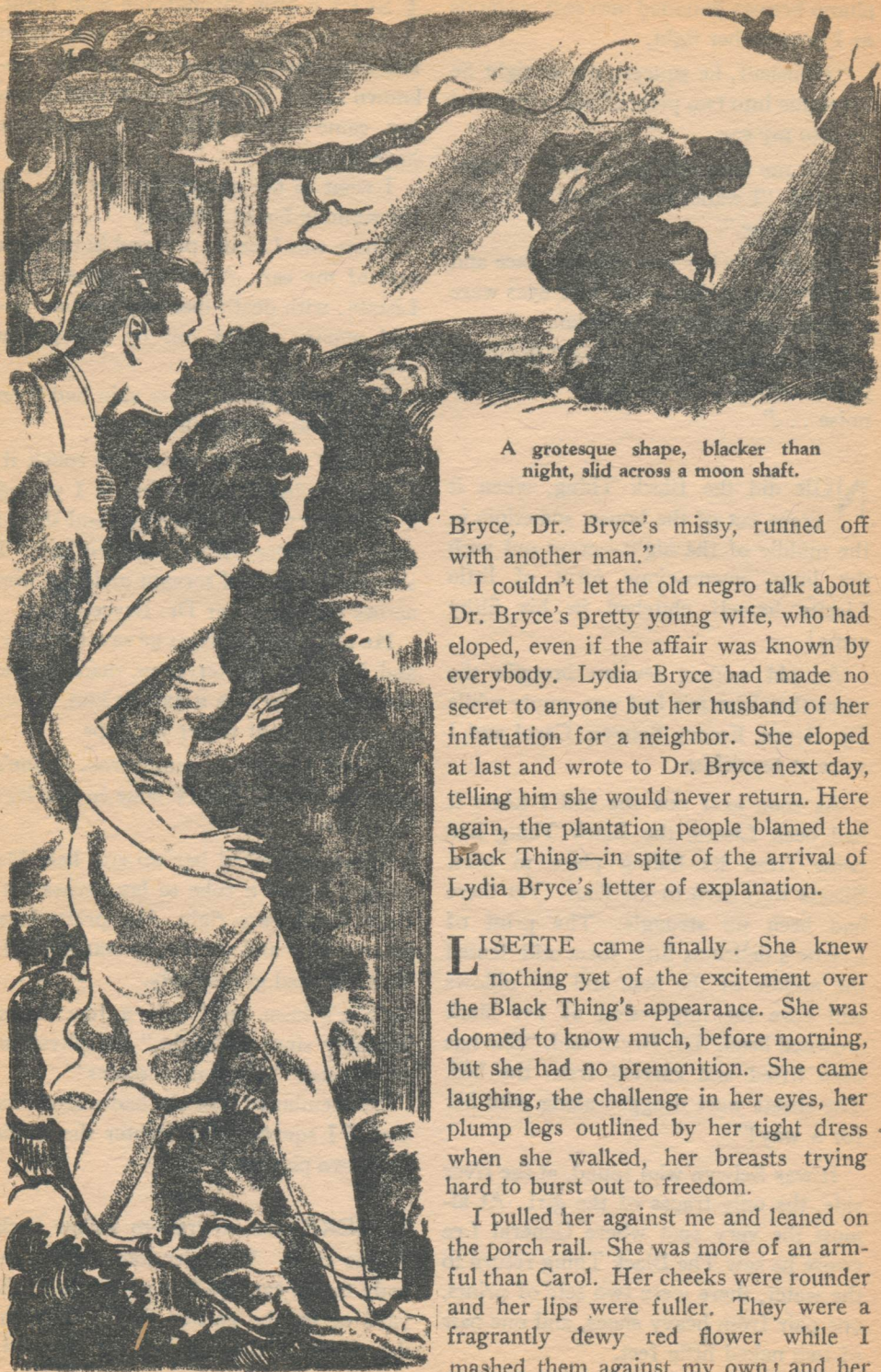
WHILE I waited in the yard for Lisette, old General Lee reappeared. "Somebody go this night," he mumbled. "If the Black Thing takes a woman, she come back same way Missy Selwyn come back. If hit takes a man, man doan come back nohow. Them two friends of Massa Selwyn, what the Black Thing took. They ain't never come back."

I started. The negro meant two artist friends of Selwyn who had come down to paint plantation scenes and had, to say the least, abruptly disappeared. That was before Cora Selwyn's experience. Cora was in New Orleans with her husband, having left the visiting artists, George Peters and Randal Crawford, at the house. When Cora and Selwyn returned they found they had left. But letters came back soon after, explaining that the pair had decided suddenly to take a tour of the Caribbean. But General Lee was never convinced but that the Black Thing was responsible for the disappearance.

"De plantation folks, massa, they seed the Black Thing that night!"

Lisette was late showing up. My mind was on her, but I asked the negro when the plantation folks first thought they saw the Black Thing.

"First time folks seed the Black Thing? Dat was pretty soon after Missy



A grotesque shape, blacker than night, slid across a moon shaft.

Bryce, Dr. Bryce's missy, runned off with another man."

I couldn't let the old negro talk about Dr. Bryce's pretty young wife, who had eloped, even if the affair was known by everybody. Lydia Bryce had made no secret to anyone but her husband of her infatuation for a neighbor. She eloped at last and wrote to Dr. Bryce next day, telling him she would never return. Here again, the plantation people blamed the Black Thing—in spite of the arrival of Lydia Bryce's letter of explanation.

LISETTE came finally. She knew nothing yet of the excitement over the Black Thing's appearance. She was doomed to know much, before morning, but she had no premonition. She came laughing, the challenge in her eyes, her plump legs outlined by her tight dress—when she walked, her breasts trying hard to burst out to freedom.

I pulled her against me and leaned on the porch rail. She was more of an armful than Carol. Her cheeks were rounder and her lips were fuller. They were a fragrantly dewy red flower while I mashed them against my own; and her

plump breasts flattened into soft cushions as I pressed her tight.

"Monsieur, he squeeze me so tight he break me into two pieces," she whispered up into my ear.

"Let me look into your eyes," I commanded. "I want to see what they've got to say to me."

She held up her rosy cheeked face and laid her long lashes back. Her eyes were a smoky, slumberous invitation.

"The house, it is quiet now," she whispered aloud. "We must make no noise . . ."

NOR did the Black Thing, when it crept out of the house, sometime in the middle of the night—crept out with the limp, unconscious form of little Lisette herself clutched in his filthy arms!

An old woman servant brought the news that Lisette's bed was empty while Dr. Bryce, Emory Selwyn, Carol and I were at breakfast.

As soon as I saw the bed I knew it had been Lisette the Black Thing had come from its hiding place to take. Sheets were torn to the floor. Yet there had been no struggle. The print of Lisette's delicious little form still dented the middle of the bed, and the pillows still bore the impression of her black crowned head. Dr. Bryce said, "She has been lifted and carried from the bed. The sheets were dragged along with her for a way!"

It was Selwyn who found, at the river side, the only traces of the girl. At almost the very spot where General Lee swore he saw The Black Thing return to the water, there were two sets of prints, one pair from heavy shoes, and one pair of two naked little feet.

I SLEPT little through the next night. My memory of Lisette's last warm kiss only intensified my horror at her unknown fate. Then, with the second morning, came such a thing as I could not have dreamed!

I went to the garage for my car. At the running board I froze.

There was Lisette, propped in the back seat of my car. A tender, almost nude Lisette; with death that had been an untold agony staring out of her glassy eyes!

That little figure whose skin had been so rosy, and so smooth!

I could not bring myself to touch it. I feared what I would find if I picked it up to carry it into the house and should catch a glimpse of her rounded back. I shouted for a yard servant and sent him across the lawns for Dr. Bryce.

He too recoiled, when he saw the body, and for more reason, even, than I. The position of the legs struck at him. They were oddly bent under her hips.

"Good God!" he murmured. "She's been on a rack. Every bone in her legs is broken."

When he picked her up and held her while I found a robe to lay across her, I saw that he was right. Her pretty legs, scarred now and welted, as was her soft back, dangled gruesomely.

"She's been dead only a few hours, probably since midnight," the physician announced. "Broken to pieces!"

I remembered how she had warned me that if I squeezed her tighter she would be in two pieces!

THERE was no trail to follow back, no clues. Whoever had carried the body to my car had left no prints in the yard or on the garage floor. Only the dampness in the car left by the body

shedding the river water that had drenched it.

A search for clues by the officials was as fruitless to them as our own had been. A day and night guard was posted at my insistence when Carol refused to go home and leave her sister. But the posting of guards was a futile gesture against the unknown Black Thing.

NEXT night, it was Carol's white bed that was emptied! Below her window a guard lay stretched out dead, a long-bladed knife deep in his shoulder. Old General Lee gave the alarm two hours after midnight. He had been prowling the yard and had seen the black shape.

"Hit was carrying young missy," the negro groaned. I seen hit take her into the water. Hit took her toward Black Falls."

No human being could carry any burden into that tumbling downpour of water; nevertheless I went into the water and tried to get near to the Falls, I could not get within fifty feet.

With flash beaming and pistol ready, I ran along the opposite shore looking for prints, and it was while I was flashing my light ray along the shores close to the Falls that I found myself staring with a sense of discovery. For a long time I didn't know what it was that was trying to impress itself in my brain. Then all at once it came to me.

On that side of the falls the shore was low. The other rim of the Falls was in plain view, as was the space between the water and the rocks behind.

I was staring at a ledge reaching out from the rocky wall. A ledge wide enough for a man to walk along and have the water pass over and beyond him. Some invisible hand seemed to pull me onto that ledge under the water, while

those words of General Lee still echoed—"Carried her to the Falls!"

My gun under my coat to protect it from the spray that was soaking me, I pushed along the ledge, my flash fingering the way. Suddenly I smothered a sharp cry.

There was a break in the rocky wall, a fissure wide enough for a man to push into. And there, shining in my ray, at the foot of the fissure, was a broken string of pearls which Carol Landis had always worn.

No thought came to me to go back for help. Selwyn would not want to leave Cora alone in the house, even with servants. The police could not have arrived. Dr. Bryce was not available.

And Carol was beyond that crevice.

Soon I understood! The fissure widened slowly until it gave into what apparently was a vast underground cave in the rocks, hung with stalactites that shed a million shining colors when my flash swept them. After what seemed an endless traversal of this outer cave, I found an opening that led into another, and still another, and still another.

And now voices were close—voices? No. God help me; the most terrifying screams of women I have ever heard, not of one woman but of more! Not from Carol Landis alone—for hers I recognized, but from at least one other.

I STUMBLED on through another long rock bound cavern. In this natural chamber I suddenly stopped dead in my tracks, despite those horrible shrieks of agony coming from so close at hand. I realized abruptly that in this chamber the stalactites had been sliced off the ceiling. There was even some sort of carpet or rug on the rock floor, oozing moisture as were the walls. And all around the sides of the chamber were

chairs, easy chairs, ranged in a circular row.

And before each chair, hung to the rock wall, was a painting, the life size painting of a woman's nude figure. The cries of torture burned my soul — "Oh stop! I can't stand any more! God have mercy on me!" But those paintings gripped my brain and held me spell bound, my flashlight searching out each one.

They were all of the same woman. A young woman whose beautiful form had been painted and tinted with exquisite artistry. Somehow, while I sent my light around the room and counted—eleven of these paintings—I dreaded to look at the face of that multiplied figure. Something told me I would have a shock.

I studied the body, admiring its pose, always the same, but each pose, each artist's grasp of the figure, singularly different. The legs were long and tapering, coming down in a beautiful sweep of sculptural rhythm from the gently expanding curves of slim hips. The feet were dainty, each toe beautifully perfect—like Carol Landis'. The breasts were full, round as twin oranges. The arms were raised. I was conscious of a peculiar impression about the position of those lifted arms. As I am an artist I had the feeling that the poise of the arms was somehow not quite natural. I could not help flashing my beam on each canvas in turn and finding that in each the artist had left the same impression—that the wrists of those arms had been fastened aloft, that the model had been bound to the wall or to the ceiling.

Now I steeled myself to look at the face—those eleven faces on the same body. I had to stop a cry with the back of my hand.

Never have I seen such pain, such terror, agony, soul-scorched horror as the artist had put into features that must

have been, in their repose, as beautifully expressed as the lovely contours of that ravishing body. Each face was contorted. In some the eyes blazed out their terror. On another canvas it was the mouth that seemed to be shrieking the model's untold suffering. And through all the faces ran that note of unnamed terror which is inspired by what is coming more than by what has happened.

Those faces! But they weren't different faces, no more than the bodies *were* different, despite the different paroxysms of pain expressed in each one. They all were the faces of —

"My God! Lydia Bryce. The wife of Doctor Bryce!" There were eleven duplications of her face, each with its separate contortions of misery!

And I saw another thing. I saw that there still was space on that cavern wall for *one more painting*. Already the frame was hanging in that waiting space!

I STAGGERED while I ran across the chamber at last. Glad I was indeed that Dr. Bryce had not been with me when I discovered the ledge behind the wall of water that flowed over Black Falls!

I was approaching now some extension of the series of caves that was flooded with a brilliant light. Through a narrow aperture I came suddenly into the dazzling fullness of that luminence. I cursed myself for the mistake of making that sudden entry into this chamber. For a full minute I was helpless, my eyes unable to make out whatever scene confronted me—though I knew that part of that scene was Carol Landis, moaning now, and another who still shrieked her agonies.

And I was aware of a smell of paints, and of some powerful, sweet-scented unguent—my brain even identified that un-

Silently, leaving no trace, the
Thing bore her off.



guent as a relief to be applied to tortured bodies when their torture was done!

I held my breath, blinking, not knowing at what second something might

spring upon me. I had not long to wait. There was a sudden blur, a black bulk loomed.

My name echoed through the chamber, screamed out in warning by Carol. I

struck out blindly with one fist and my gun barked. I missed my shot but I struck a body. My eyes cleared and I saw the cloaked and hooded Black Thing staggering backward.

I drew back for another shot but the monster was quicker than I. In its hands was the coil of a double-weighted riata such as the pampas riders use in South America to throw a steer or flick out the life of an enemy with its leaded tip. The riata whistled thorough the air, coiled about me, pinioning my arms. Another shape bore down upon me and jerked my wrists behind me. Despite my struggles I was helplessly trussed.

I was dragged to an upright oblong of heavy timber. A strap was thrown around it and I was deftly strapped and buckled to the heavy boards.

Then a third figure shuffled close. I gave a cry and a curse. Before me grinned the toothless black face of old General Lee! Grinning through his empty gums at my discovery that he, who had so constantly mumbled his terror of the Black Thing, was that monster's helper!

I LOOKED around the chamber for the first time and, because I was so helpless, I wished I could have been blind!

Strapped to an old Spanish stretching machine, one of the dread torturing devices of the Spanish Inquisition, was Carol's lovely figure. She was nude save for a brief white cloth held only by a plain string tied around her waist. The stretcher stood upright, as did the rack against which I was bound. Four iron arms reached out from a circular iron hub from which a winch protruded behind. The four forks of this inhuman device were slender, so fashioned that when the victim's arms were bound to the forks that reached upward, and her

feet fastened to the base of the lower forks, her body was exposed on all sides, except for the slender columns of the forks along the upraised arms and downward tapering legs.

The fiendish riata in the Black Thing's hands could lay its hideous welts across Carol's smooth, tender back, while the winch was being turned and her body stretched until its joints were ready to come apart!

All this I saw in a single flash; even to the water-matted condition of Carol's golden hair, and a fresh welt across that creamy flesh of hers, and to the tautness of her arms and legs signifying that already her young body had been stretched.

And then I saw Lydia Bryce!

The black thing had found her, wherever she had gone with the man who had eloped with her, and had brought her into this hellish scene. She, too, was scantily clothed. The voluptuous model which figured in the eleven paintings in the next chamber was now as exposed as on the canvases; and she, too, was bound. Only Lydia was stretched against the wall, her feet on the floor, her hands over her head, wrists and ankles fastened to rings fixed in the wall by heavy chain links.

In her face was indescribable horror and pain, but I had the curious impression that its lines of terror and suffering were not as deeply etched, not as starkly mad, as the artists had depicted in the eleven faces outside—no single human face could contort itself at one time into all those lines of suffering.

There were two more figures in the room. One was close to me. The other a little way off. I had been sensible of them, but those two white and pain-wracked bodies had held me. I gazed at

the other two now and this time my cry was of unbelief.

Peters and Crawford—the artists who had been friends of mine as well as of Emory Selwyn, and who had so abruptly and strangely disappeared from Selwyn's house sending back the information that they'd suddenly decided on a trip to the Caribbean!

I CALLED out their names. Their faces, I thought, were almost dead. They stared at me silently. And then I saw that they, like Lydia Bryce, were chained, only with them it was only their feet that were chained, from welded iron shackles to rings imbedded in the stone floor.

Before them were easels and in their hands their palettes. On the easels were canvases, on each the unfinished lines of a woman's body, its face just taking horrible shape—a beautiful face, the face of Lydia Bryce, but twisted into expressions of agony similar to those expressions outside.

My brain telegraphed me its intuitive interpretation of those canvases. These two great artists, chained to the floor, were painting into Lydia Bryce's face all the terror and agonies it held on its own account; adding to those, without changing the portraiture of Lydia, the varied expressions of pain and terror that stretching machine and the riata in the hands of the Black Thing were bringing to the features of Carrol Landis. Each of those pictures outside had shown more suffering than any one human could endure. My friends were being compelled to paint into still more canvases, one of them destined for that blank space outside, still a new composite of torture! The agonies in Carol's face would be used to make more sickening the agonies in the face of Lydia Bryce!

What hellish purpose could the Black Thing have for such a fiendish desire?

The Black Thing stood before me for a moment. I cursed at him again and still futilely. His eyes peered out at me through two narrow slits in his hood, and those slits were covered by a tinted cellophane that hid the color of those eyes. He moved away without a word and disappeared in some other chamber of the cave.

Carol continued to groan out my name, calling on me to save her, but Lydia Bryce seemed to have become partly injured to her torture. In pain-strung voice she called over to me. "I knew you were coming. He wanted still another artist—another brush to copy our faces—I knew when he persuaded Emory to send for you so he could bring you here—you'll do well—he thinks—with Carol being tortured before—"

She could say no more, nor tell me who "he" might be. The Black Thing returned carrying chains similar to those that held Peters and Crawford. He dropped them at my feet and General Lee came over to attach the shackles but the Black Thing called him away. His voice was muffled deep in his hood and I knew that whoever or whatever he was, he changed it.

"Give the winch a turn," he commanded the old negro. "I must have these canvases completed before this girl has a chance to die like Lisette did. If she lives, our new friend shall work on her tomorrow. He shall watch tonight while his friends put the tortures of this one into the face of Lydia."

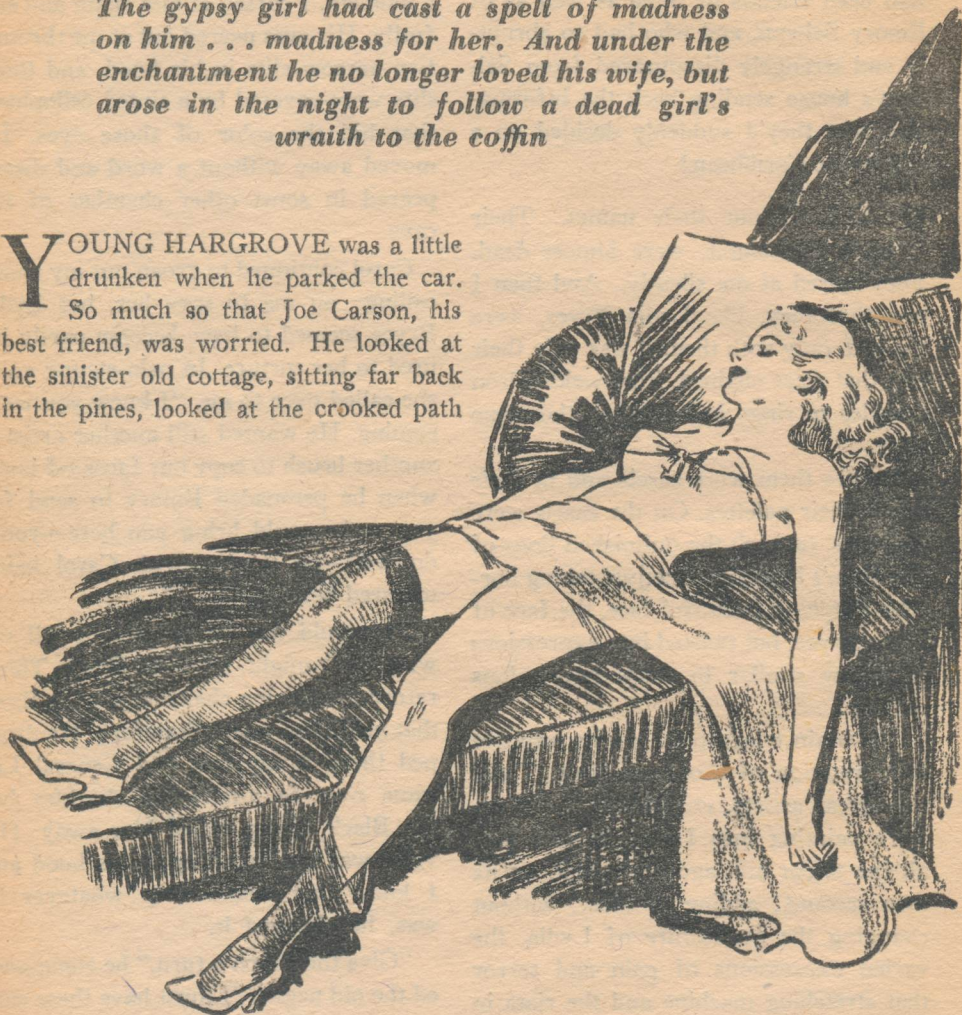
I writhed against my bonds when Carol's shriek filled the chamber as the negro, standing behind her, gave that cruel wheel a turn. I could almost feel

(Continued on page 102)

CORPSELESS

The gypsy girl had cast a spell of madness on him . . . madness for her. And under the enchantment he no longer loved his wife, but arose in the night to follow a dead girl's wraith to the coffin

YOUNG HARGROVE was a little drunken when he parked the car. So much so that Joe Carson, his best friend, was worried. He looked at the sinister old cottage, sitting far back in the pines, looked at the crooked path



winding to the ramshackle door, and wondered if Hargrove could make it. Hargrove took another pull at the bottle, said a trifle unsteadily, "I won't be long, Joe. But I'm a little shaky."

Joe answered sympathetically, "I don't blame you! I'd hate to face the little wildcat myself."

Hargrove grunted. "Somebody has to tell her and it's up to me. Guess I should never have gotten mixed up with her,

but there's something about her that—" He was gone up the pathway.

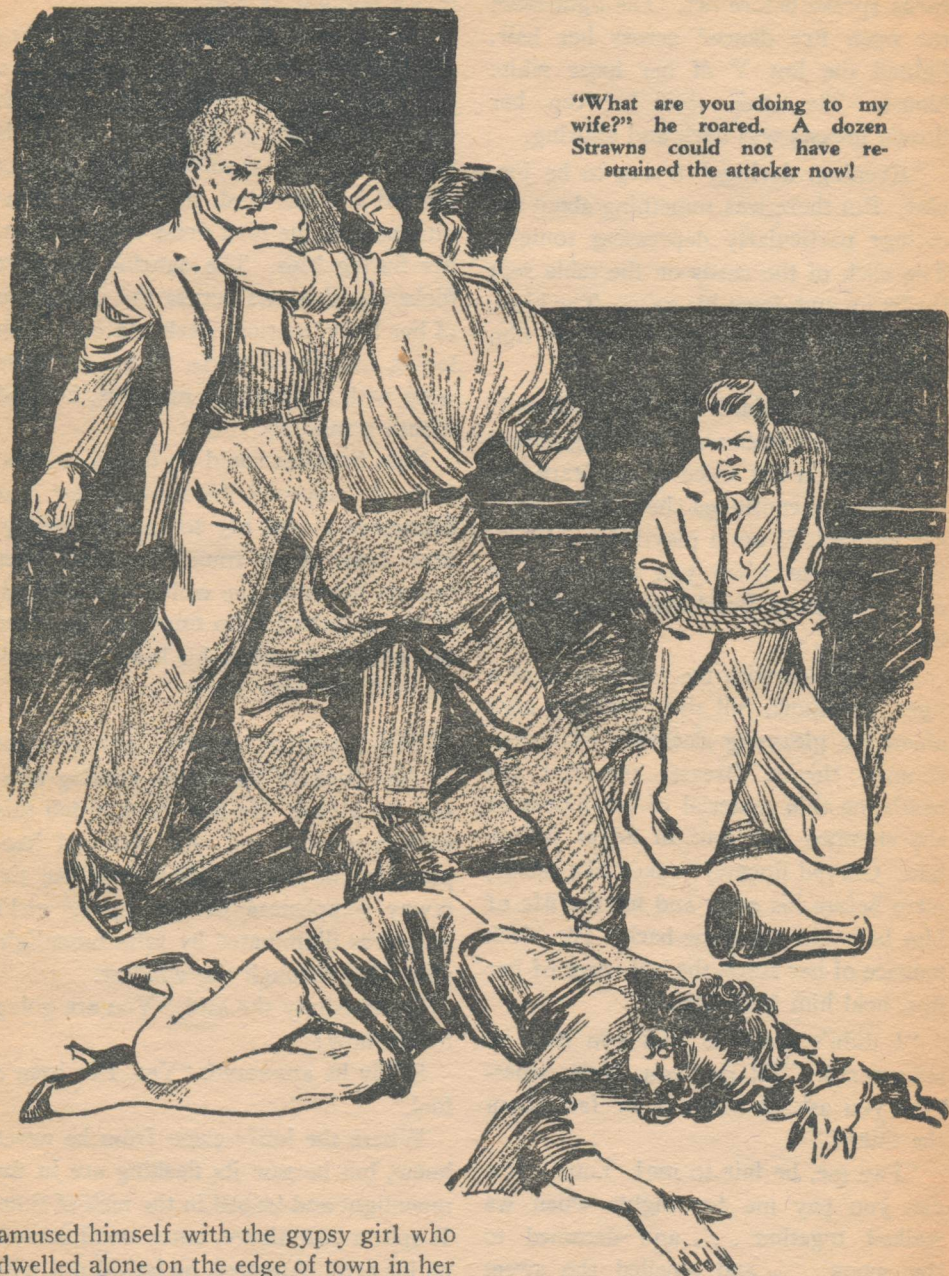
There was undoubtedly something about Nola Sanchez that attracted men, that set male blood afire. Young Hargrove's blood, at least.

She wasn't beautiful. Her nose was too proudly arched, her mouth too wide, her eyes too inscrutable. But her supple body had the lithe tawniness of a jungle beast. For three long months he had

COFFIN

By CLINT
MORGAN

"What are you doing to my wife?" he roared. A dozen Strawns could not have restrained the attacker now!



amused himself with the gypsy girl who dwelled alone on the edge of town in her sinister cottage, even though he knew that the date of his wedding to Marge Thomas was approaching. Now the time had come to tell Nola, and Hargrove

found himself fearing her anger. He had seen her wild rages before.

Outside the door he whistled, but the door did not open as it usually did. He

tapped. No answer. He pushed it open. Nola leaned over a low table, a deck of cards spread before her. The light from the open fire danced across her hair, lighted the low V of her loose white blouse. The deep cleft between her brown breasts was dark and alluring.

"Evening, darling," trying to be jocular. But there was something about the cottage particularly depressing tonight. The click of the cards on the table sent thrills up and down his spine. The bleak coldness of the stare she turned on him chilled his blood.

She spat, "Liar! Traitor! Cheat!" Hargrove found himself recoiling before the venom in her voice as she leaped to her feet and continued the tirade. "So," she sneered, "I am a plaything, a toy to be cast aside when you are ready to marry the pasty-faced fool on top of the hill!"

She swirled with the suddenness of a tiger, her short, full skirt whirling high about the gleaming sleekness of honey-skinned thighs. Breasts trembled beneath the thin material of her blouse as she stamped her foot in anger before him. Curved fingers, hooked like talons, were before his eyes, and for the life of him he could not draw back. The black menace of her stare, the red sneer of her lips, held him fascinated.

"I didn't mean to lead you on," he stammered. "I'll pay you, Nola, whatever you ask. I mean to be fair about the thing!"

"Pay me, be fair to me! You! How can you pay me for nights when we walked together . . . and dreamed to the moon . . . and smelled the sweet grasses . . . and—oh! You say *pay me!* Give me back my kisses, give me back my love! No! You cannot pay me, Jim Hargrove, but the cards say I shall

be paid and the woman you love now will be the price." Suddenly she broke into a tempest of tears.

"Damn her," she screamed, "what has she that I haven't? What can she give you that I can't?" Wild fingers tore at the white bodice of her dress, ripped it from her brown shoulders. Her breasts swayed and quivered, rose and fell tumultuously as the torn dress dripped from her flaring hips. The dancing fire sent flickering shadows across the perfection of her body, marked sleek contours with loving fingers of flame. Her eyes were wide with a frenzy of madness, her red mouth tremulous.

Nola Sanchez could do things to men. How it happened, he never knew, but Hargrove swept her to him feverishly. Her arms were round his neck, her breasts flattened, the whole warm length of her undulant form touching his. Her lips parted to receive his kiss, her mouth an avid, writhing flame . . .

THE sound of an auto horn brought him back to his senses, cursing himself for a fool. He had come to tell this woman goodby and now this had happened! The fire had died away but the tawny suppleness of the gypsy girl's body was illuminated by faint moonlight streaming through the window.

Quite calmly she said, "You are going to her now?"

Stiffly he answered, "Yes, I've been a fool."

Where the knife came from he never knew, but he saw its flashing arc in the moonlight and leaped in the nick of time. It split a coat sleeve, cut a small scratch on his arm. Angered, he lashed out with a fist, felt it hit soft flesh, saw her fall on the moonlit patch of floor in a bevy of trembling curves. A trickle of blood came from the corner of her mouth. An-

grily, blindly, he turned for the door. Her voice followed him, clear as a bell.

"Whether I live or whether I die, Jim Hargrove, I will have you. Not only you, but the body of the woman you love!"

As he stumbled down the pathway toward the car, the words seemed to follow him.

Joe Carson said, "I hated to blow but we're late for dinner. What happened?"

Hargrove couldn't answer. He simply whirled the car and turned toward his own home where his fiancée awaited. He managed to get into the house, to change his clothes without seeing Marge. He knew Doctor Strawn, who lived across the street, was entertaining her in the library.

AND at the same time he changed his clothes, Dr. Strawn was trying his best to persuade Marge Wilson to change her mind about marrying Jim Hargrove. Angrily she jerked a shoulder strap over a white shoulder from which his clumsy caress had displaced it. With red cheeks she faced the little man whose breathing was still hoarse with emotion.

"All right," she raged, "he drinks, he runs after other women, he's a waster. So what? I love him and that's all that's necessary!"

Strawn held his anger. "I promise you," he said stiffly, grimly, "that he will never have you. You've teased me and tantalized me for years. You are rightfully mine."

Joe Carson, young Hargrove's friend was an unwilling eavesdropper to these words.

BUT Doctor Strawn was wrong. Two weeks later Hargrove married Marge Wilson. If Hargrove acted a

little strangely during the ceremony it was because a messenger had just delivered an innocent looking telegram, which, on opening, sent premonitions of dangers through him. It read:

"Whether I live or whether I die, I will have you. Not only you, but the body of the woman you love."

And when they left the church a pair of bleak, black eyes was in the crowd that watched, a pair of taunting red lips were twisted in a sneer.

The first night of their marriage was spent in the huge mansion Jim had inherited from his father. When he entered their room, Marge had donned a white, semi-sheer nightgown whose caressing folds clung delectably to the dainty, firm breasts and the soft, slender hips. She smiled half shyly, and touched his cheek with warm fingers. Happy in this moment, Jim marveled that all this loveliness was his. He leaned to kiss her lips, paused halfway with her white arm creeping about his neck.

From below, floating through the open window like the notes of a bird, came a shrill whistle. The whistle he and Nola had always used as a signal.

He sprang quickly away, hair prickling at the nape of his neck, strange fear beating in his veins. Was she to haunt him and taunt him forever? From the window he could see nothing. None of the servants spent the night in the house. He listened at the hall door, thought he heard a voice below. Torch in hand, he descended the steps in spite of Marge's protests. Footsteps seemed to precede him, seemed to follow him. He heard the mocking taunt of laughter, but search as he might he could find no trace of his nocturnal visitor. He gulped an enormous drink in the library, started upstairs.

A scream. He made the stairs three at a time. Marge was huddled in the corner of the bed, the bedclothes pulled around her. She was moaning in terror, breasts heaving, eyes wide with fright. "She was here! That woman! The gypsy!"

Jim's eyes had already found the note attached to his pillow by a thin knife. He knew without reading it what it said. "*Whether I live or whether I die, I will have you. You and the body of the woman you love.*"

The police? And be the laughing stock of the town? Because a jealous woman invaded his privacy, a demented woman, unbalanced, driven by hate? Instead, he locked the door, put a chair against it and went to sleep with his bride pressed tightly in his arms. Once he awakened thinking he heard footsteps in the hallway. Again the knob of the locked door creaked. And again he heard the eerie whistle coming from out in the moonlight.

HE HIRED a night watchman to watch the place, persuaded one of the servants to spend the night in. Neither these two or Marge ever heard the noises again. But Jim Hargrove did. Over and over in the silent fastnesses of the night he heard the whistle, heard the echo of a wild and passionate song. Even when he kissed his wife, inevitably at the first caress he heard the shrill bird note; and when, frightened, he drew away, taunting laughter seemed to fill the stifling summer air.

He grew thin, he drank too much. In desperation he went to Dr. Strawn, and was given a sleeping potion. Nevertheless his jangled nerves raged far into each night. He was constantly on edge. Always in the back of his brain as he

gazed down at the woman he loved he heard the gypsy curse. So Joe Carson, good Joe Carson, was sent to see Nola.

Jim met him in the library on his return. Joe shook his head, whispered, "She says if you'll see her once more she'll never bother you alive again."

THAT night Hargrove left the house in the dark of night, walked to Nola's little cottage. At first he thought she wasn't there, but her exotic scent filled the room. The air was redolent with her presence. He sat down in a chair to wait, found a bottle of wine on the table and drank deeply. And suddenly she was there beside him, her fingers in his hair, her eyes glowing and her red mouth parted.

"Nola," was all he could say. Then her arms about his neck, her mouth on his, her breasts pulsing madly against his chest. He tried to think of Marge, tried to think of home, but the woman was in his blood, was part of his heartbeat. Her fingers flitted to the white blouse. It slid from bronze shoulders, slopes of bare and honey-hued skin and again the moonlight bathed her with caressing fingers. Groaning he reached for the wine bottle, drank long and deeply. . . .

WHEN he finally reeled to the doorway, her voice followed him, softly. "Do you remember what I told you, Jim Hargrove? *Whether I live or whether I die, I will have you. You and the body of the woman you love.* And now you dare to go back to her?"

"You promised," he panted hoarsely, "you promised Joe if I saw you once more—"

"That I would never see you alive again," she finished. "Goodby, Jim."

He reeled out into the moonlight. At

home, hating himself, he couldn't go upstairs but lay down on a davenport in the hallway. Marge found him there, awakened him.

Together they heard the taunting laughter from the front porch, heard the dull thud. Together they found the almost naked body of Nola Sanchez sprawled before the screen door, the haft of a dagger protruding from the hollow between her arrogant breasts. The bronze of her body was a welter of blood.

Dr. Strawn came on the run in answer to the frantic phone call. But he could do nothing for her. Joe Carson arrived and thought of the scandal, thought of the talk of the town. And it was in Joe Carson's car that they

She had promised she would never see him alive again! Could she have killed herself?



carried Nola, still faintly breathing, to her own cottage among the pines.

Joe Carson, Jim and Marge stayed outside until the doctor called them. The body of the gypsy girl was covered by a sheet from head to foot. Unable to resist, Hargrove drew the sheet partially down. The red lips smiled up at him, the black eyes gazed directly into his. But there was no tremor of life in the body. Quickly he drew the sheet back into place.

Strawn said softly, "There'll be no

trouble, no scandal. I'll write the death certificate and Bradley, the mortician, will bury her from his place. The girl had no family—no friends."

After they were gone Jim Hargrove trembled in his wife's consoling arms. She whispered, "Don't, dear. It's better this way. Now she can't bother you anymore."

MORNING, after a sleepless night. Weak and shaken Hargrove wobbled to Dr. Strawn's house. Hoarsely,

eyes red from liquor and sleeplessness, he said, "I've got to see her, doctor. Will you take me to see her? All night long her footsteps padded down my hallway, her whistle shrilled beneath my window. I've got to see her once again, she's calling, calling."

Strawn loaded him into the car, drove to the opposite edge of town and took him into Bradley's gloomy, ill-smelling mortuary. The darkened rooms and hallways were sepulchral.

Bradley himself fit into the picture. He was tall and somber with a yellow skin that matched his yellow teeth. He led them below into a basement room where the atmosphere was colder. Hargrove shuddered at the slab in the middle of the room, shuddered again at the sheet-covered body in spite of the chill, perspiration dribbled off his forehead. His hand trembled as he pulled the sheet from the head of the corpse. The eyes had been closed but the mouth was still twisted in that taunting sneer. It was as if he could still hear her laughter, hear her words.

Joe Carson came that afternoon, kept him from getting too drunken. Marge tried to console him to no avail. With the coming of nightfall he grew more and more restless. Through his brain rang her words, "*Whether I live or whether I die, I will have you. You and the body of the woman you love!*"

MIDNIGHT. He still paced the floor of his solitary room. Long ago he had quit sleeping with his wife.

She heard his footsteps in the next room and wept for him, longed to crush him to her breast, to soothe his fears. Fully clothed, she, too, waited and listened for she knew not what. And she, too, heard the melodious whistle from outside the window, saw the dim figure

of the gypsy girl in the moonlight.

More, she saw her husband leap through his own window, run toward the girl to throw himself at her feet. She saw him kiss her inanimate hands, her arms, saw the blouse slide from her shapely shoulders. Marge lifted her hand to her mouth in horror as she saw him press the corpse to his breast. But the gypsy woman made no response, uttered no sound.

Marge heard her husband say, "Forgive me, forgive me. Now I will take you home."

Hand in hand the man and the corpse walked across the lawn in the moonlight. Marge seized a light coat, threw it about her shoulders and went after them. But she made no sound, nor did the two who walked ahead. Through side streets, through black alleys. Nearing the mortuary, Jim glanced wildly back over his shoulder. His eyes were demented, his face contorted.

"Jim," shrieked Marge. Instead of halting, the pair in the lead took to their heels. Marge plunged after them, tripped on a loose rock and fell full length. When she turned the corner, she saw Jim Hargrove and Jim alone beating on the door of the mortuary. She seized his arm.

"Leave me alone," he snarled, shaking her off. "I've got to take her in!"

A light appeared inside, Bradley himself opened the door, long face wreathed in surprise.

"I've got to see her again," muttered Hargrove. And pushed past the man. He plunged into the first room, Marge following. *There in a casket before which burned seven tapers lay the inanimate body of the girl, Nola Sanchez.* Jim Hargrove screamed and fell to the floor.

"That gypsy woman was here!" she cried. And Jim knew without reading it what that note said!



THEY buried her the next day. Hargrove didn't go to the funeral. He was raving drunk and kept to his bed, shrieking the words of the gypsy's curse. But his friend, Joe Carson, went. He saw the open casket, saw the smile on the woman's face just before the lid was put on. He heard the story of the night before and frowned.

If it had been Jim alone who saw the woman walking! But Marge, too. He even talked to Dr. Strawn about it. Strawn made little comment. "Hallucinations are to be expected in Hargrove's case," he said. "But I am wor-

ried about Marge. Living with a madman is hell!"

BUT Marge stuck. She lived with a madman for the next three years in spite of all Dr. Strawn's frantic proposals. During the winter months and fall months Jim Hargrove was restless, had to be confined in a back room whose windows were fitted with steel nettings. During the summer months he slept peacefully as a baby through the daytime and apparently the night time, and was released from his prison room.

Marge he did not know. At times he

called her Nola, pressed her fragrant body close to his emaciated frame, but the look of madness on his face always frightened her. She could not stand his caresses. Joe Carson was the only one he could talk to and know to whom he spoke.

Gravely Joe would ask how Nola was. And Jim would always reply, "More beautiful than ever, more lovely. What would I do without her, Joe. At night she whistles beneath my window and I go to her arms, and we walk the woods together. There is no other but Nola."

Joe would shake his head sadly and talk to Dr. Strawn about the impossibility of the case. Long ago Joe had given his friend up. But to his growing horror he saw Marge, faithful Marge, begin to give the little doctor a place in her heart. Evidently she, too, was despairing of Jim's return to normalcy.

Once he caught them embracing in the library when they were not aware of his presence. After all, he told himself, Marge is still young, and she yearns for love, the same as other women. But he decided that some great effort must be made to restore his friend to normalcy.

WITH the first snow the insane man grew more and more disconsolate. "It's the winters, Joe," he told Carson, "when I can't see her so often. Oh, sometimes she comes to my grating and lets me out and we go to her cottage. There's always a fire, and it's warm and cozy with her in my arms. You think she's a dead woman, Joe, but—she isn't cold. Her flesh is warm and firm, her breasts tremble and glow. But I can't stand being away from her much longer! I'll have to go and get her. I'll bring her *here*! Why, think of her going back to that cold, cold casket in the

colder ground, sleeping there waiting, waiting for her lover's arms."

Carson's phone rang near midnight the next night. Marge's frantic voice came over the wire. "It's Jim, Joe, he's gone from his room. Some way he's pried the fastenings from the screen. You'll have to help me get him back before he injures himself or someone else."

Carson's car hit eighty on the way to Hargrove's house. One look at the window showed him the steel screen had been tampered with. Was there something to this ghostly business? Did the dead woman come to whistle beneath a demented man's window, to let him out and into her arms? He followed the tracks in the wet snow. They led, not as he expected, to the cottage of the corpse, but to the cemetery.

The air was crystalline, the stars were bright overhead. Straight through the arched gate he went, a feeling of eerie horror constantly mounting. As he approached the grave of Nola Sanchez his skin prickled, his lips were hot and dry. At first all he could make out was a fresh mound of heaped earth. Stumbling forward he saw the coatless figure of Jim Hargrove clasping a woman in his arms.

"Jim," gasped Carson. A dark figure pulled away from the demented man, fled through the shadows of the vaults and tombs. Hargrove started after her but Carson caught his arm, nearly jerked him into the yawning grave.

"She's going to stay, she's going to stay," gibbered Hargrove. "Look, Joe, I dug her up! I let her out and held her in my arms. All I have to do is get her another woman to put back in the casket. But I got her out, Joe!"

Icy perspiration stood on Joe Carson's brow. The coffin, still apparently

intact, lay near the heap of earth. He was afraid to look inside it. He was afraid it might be empty, afraid that the fleeing form was the corpse he had seen buried three years before. For Joe Carson had seen with his own eyes the voluptuous figure of the gypsy girl within that coffin at that time. Still perspiring, doubting his own sanity, he pushed the coffin into the gaping hole, heaped back the earth and started for home with Hargrove.

ALL the next day the dead gypsy's prophecy kept running through his brain. "*Whether I live or whether I die, I will have you. You and the body of the woman you love.*" Gibberish? Had he too been having hallucinations, like Jim? Had he seen a woman's body in Jim's arms? And had the coffin been empty?

Nevertheless he determined to spend the next night at Hargrove's. Dinner was a sad affair to him, for Dr. Strawn seemed to gloat over Marge; more than ever, to gloat openly as if assured he would soon possess all her charms. Carson lay down in the guest room with a heavy heart and dropped to troubled slumber before he realized it.

It was a faint whistle that awakened him. For a long time he lay there in the darkness, his addled brain refusing to admit the whistle, to admit the faint scream coming from below. Suddenly he realized he was not at home in his own bed, that he was at Marge's. Down the steps, fully clothed, ready for action. He beat on her door. No response. He opened it, flipped the lights.

The bed was empty. And on the pillow was a single splotch of red blood! He leaped to Jim's room. It, too, was empty and the back window was raised,

the steel screen swung aside. Fear was gnawing at his heart as he leaped through into the soft snow. The tracks led toward the graveyard.

But there was no one at the grave. A mark in the snow showed where a body had been laid. Whose body? Suddenly off among the grotesque tombstones he heard Jim's pleading voice. "I've done it, darling, I've brought a body to take your place! Now you can come to the house with me, to be warm, to stay with me forever!"

Carson sprang around the stone. Again a dark figure broke from the arms of Hargrove, dashed madly away into the shadows. Hargrove would have followed but again Carson had him, shaking him like a terrier shakes a rat, slapping his face, striking out with a fist.

"For God's sake," he panted, "where's Marge? If you brought her here, where is she now?"

"The grave," said Jim foolishly. "I'm going to put her in the coffin, so Nola can—"

But Carson was off, tugging at his arm, following the fresh footprints in the light snow. Straight back the way they had come, Hargrove gibbering and panting with exertion. Carson gasped as he realized where those tracks led. He thumbed the bell desperately.

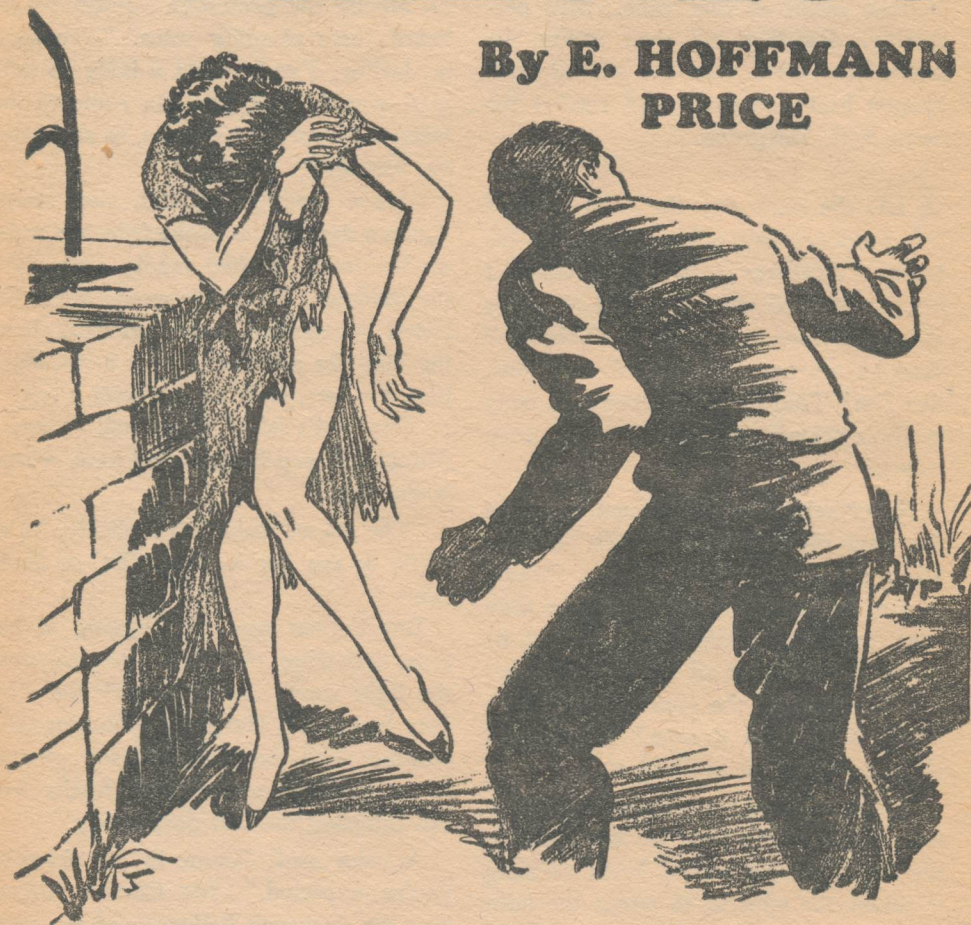
A voice said, "Come in, my friends, you're expected." Joe Carson rushed into the darkened hallway and the ceiling fell on his head.

THE sound of a gloating voice brought him back to consciousness. Horrified he gazed at a mad scene, found he was powerless to move. He was tied and dropped against the wall. Strawn leaned over a still white figure cower-

(Continued on page 122)

MOJAVE MADNESS

By E. HOFFMANN
PRICE



To Ray and Linda, it all sounded like a trick to keep them from getting married. But you can't reason with a madman . . . and at the things they found in the desert with him, they almost believed they were mad' too!

THE dark haired girl stirred languorously in Ray Patton's arms, pressing her chiffon clad loveliness closer to him. She was high breast-

ed and supple; and her sleek legs were glorified by frail hosiery—all of which tempted Patton to delay the immediate packing of Linda's half filled suitcase.

As she lifted the gun again, a streak of light flashed at her breast—Joseph's hurled blade.



"Do you still think I'm worth the loss of a fortune?" she murmured, catching her breath after a kiss that left her dreamy-eyed.

"What's a million!" scoffed Patton. They had decided to defy crusty old Uncle David, drive to Yuma, and be thoroughly married. "Disinheriting me because he hated your father is crazy—crazy as his notion of living out in the Mojave Desert!"

Patton, fascinated by the cream-tinted

curves that smiled seductively through the wisp of lace and Nile-green chiffon that covered Linda from brassiere to just a bit below her shapely hips, found it easy to make his decision: "To hell with stalling, waiting for him to croak. He may live another twenty years, even with his bum heart!"

There was genuine love. Linda's appreciative sigh lifted a pair of firm, sweetly rounded curves that made Patton eager to postpone the trip for an

hour or so . . . but before he could quite kiss her to the dizzy and gasping stage, she slipped from his arms, and turned toward the suitcase.

The packing, however, was interrupted by the doorbell. A Western Union messenger handed Patton a telegram. A quick glance at the signature sufficed, and he tossed the boy a coin.

"No answer! Beat it!" Then he took time to read the wire. He blinked incredulously, reread it. "I'll be damned! Last minute change of heart—listen, darling! Uncle Dave wants us to drive out so he can give us his blessing."

But Linda shook her head. Her gray-green eyes were sombre as she slowly said, "I can't believe it. Until dad died, your uncle hated him. And that grudge extends to me. He must suspect we're going to defy him, and this. . ." She shivered. "Sounds like a trick to separate us in some way or other. Anyway, there's something ghoulish about waiting for an old man to die. . ."

But finally Patton persuaded her from her qualms.

THEY drove north from San Bernardino, emerging from the mountains and into the vast silence of the Mojave Desert. The narrow highway unwound into an expanse of silver-gray and dun and gold—illusive colors that shifted and changed before their eyes. And far ahead, and on either side, towered sullen, iron black peaks. As the sun sank, infernal reds and purples smouldered in those eerie strongholds of illusion.

Then, as night fell, the air became a thin blade of chill. Joshua trees loomed like black spectres guarding the road to a frozen hell, and the uplifted arms of giant sahuaros menaced their advance.

Linda shuddered, snuggled closer to him.

"Cold?" He slipped a reassuring arm about her.

"No. . . afraid. I can feel live things slinking stealthily. They have to slink . . . the desert hates life. Just as your uncle hated my father. And those colors—they didn't belong to this earth. Neither does anything that exists out here. It's a waste of madness."

Patton forced a tolerant laugh, and denied his own qualms. They drove on, and shortly after moonrise, a thin gray ribbon branched from the highway: the fork that led to Uncle Dave's corner of inferno.

Far to the left, the salt bed of a dry lake glistened icily, the ghost of dead waters. From somewhere in that eerie glamour came a long drawn, quavering wail that shivered between anguish and mockery. But Patton convinced Linda that it was only a coyote.

Presently the narrow road was swallowed by the blackness of an oasis fed by a deep artesian well. Half shadowed by it was a cubical white bulk whose face was broken only by a dark doorway, and two small windows that pierced the forty inch thickness of *adobe* wall. It was like a tomb masquerading as a fortress.

Patton helped Linda to the crunching gravel. Their footfalls mingled with the almost animate protest of dead palm fronds stirring in the breeze; but before they could knock, a door opened, and the inner light revealed a stocky, red faced man at the threshold.

Uncle Dave; and despite the fullness of his face, it seemed grim and tortured as the hell spawned crags at sunset. Yet his welcome was cordial, and in a moment he was leading them down a dimly

lighted corridor that skirted the spacious central patio.

"Got my own power plant," he explained, turning toward a living room in the left wing. "And a short wave radio set takes the place of a phone. That's how I wired you this afternoon. I bet it surprised you."

"In more ways than one," smiled Linda, whose spirits had risen when she saw that Uncle Dave was not a shrivelled, half-crazed desert rat; yet that moment of brightness passed when the housekeeper appeared and served beer and cold cuts.

Her hands were slim and shapely as her arms, and the mellow light gave Patton gilded glimpses of plump, firm breasts that peeped from the yoke of a cotton blouse; but her face was uncanny. He studiously avoided looking at her, and instead watched his uncle fumbling with the dial of a wall safe. That one glance, however, had chilled him.

Her face was frozen, corpse-like, set in an immobile mask that made every lithe movement of her body seem like the slinking of something from a grave. And her voice, as she acknowledged the master's orders, was hollow, toneless, macabre. Patton sighed his relief when she finally vanished in the corridor.

"You'll get used to Maruca," observed Uncle Dave. His eyes were haggard, strangely gleaming. He regarded Linda for a moment, then added, "She's an outcast from an Indian reservation. I'd have gone mad out here, but for Maruca."

"Mad?" groped Patton.

"Your father," continued Uncle Dave, still addressing Linda, "has been coming back, talking to me. I'll tell you. I've got to. I robbed your father of the Wolf Springs mine that's made me rich. So I hated him. We usually hate anyone

we wrong. But I couldn't stand it any longer. He's coming back, cursing me at night!"

THEY did not know what to say in the presence of that unbared, tortured soul. It is hard to talk to a madman. So they watched him spread out the new will which he had taken from the safe.

"Say something!" he croaked. "Don't stare that way! Do you think I'm crazy?"

Before either could answer, a long drawn, ghoulish wail lanced in from without, echoing in the room; a curse and a laugh, at once a sneer and a moan of intolerable agony. Uncle Dave leaped to his feet. Linda cried out, and Patton, catching her in his arms, quavered, "Another coyote—"

"Coyote, hell!" groaned Uncle Dave, gesturing toward the barred Spanish window. "That's Bert Whitman—Linda's father—tell him I'm doing the right thing—speak up!"

They looked, they saw, and their hearts stopped. A tall, thin faced presence that gleamed with the strange glow of fireflies was undulating from the palm grove. It approached the window, gestured, then intoned, "They needn't tell me, David Thorne. The dead know all. I am here once more, to warn you against any change of heart. Do as I commanded, and win peace."

Linda screamed, clung shuddering to Patton. The brightness thinned, faded, vanished; and as a fearsome farewell moan stabbed them, she found words: "Ray—that was father! Just like that picture. The only thing mother left me to remember him by."

"It's a fake!" Patton protested, voice shaking. "I'll look for footprints. Give me a flashlight."

But Linda clung to him, and Uncle Dave cut in, "That's what I thought, until I failed to find any footprints out among the palm trees, except my own. But now he knows that when you two are married, his daughter will have her share of the Wolf Spring claim."

The spectre and the old man's confession had left them numb and dazed; and Patton was beginning to feel the strain of the evening, and the long drive in an open car in the desert glare. Illusion and sun devils still danced before his eyes. He drained his half emptied glass of beer, and found it flat and bitter. And as he arose, he reeled slightly, until he controlled the strange half-numbness of his legs.

The old man gestured toward the hallway. "Maruca's put your baggage in your rooms."

Patton wondered at the anxious, speculative glance Linda flashed at him. As they followed Uncle Dave, he caught her hand and whispered, "Better not walk in your sleep tonight, darling. He may have old fashioned ideas. And the ghost doesn't come into the house, I gather."

"If it's dad's spirit, I'm not afraid," she solemnly assured him.

He could hardly wait to see Linda to her room. Then he retraced his steps down the corridor to his own, and for a moment heard a far off droning in his ears. Uncle Dave was bidding him good night. Damn that treacherous Mojave sun!

Somehow, he found his bed, though he could not be sure whether his feet trod hard tiles or billowing mists. It was tilting, not only sidewise, but end for end. . . now it was upside down, but strangely, he did not fall. . .

PATTON lost all sense of time. There was a surging and rumbling in his ears. And strangely, he could now see all that lay beyond the four foot thickness of adobe wall. The desert was smiling like a beautiful pale woman who beckons from a tomb, inviting the living. . . .

He was lost in a swirling maze of illusion where in substance and recollection were hopelessly confounded. Thus when a woman approached his side, he was neither startled, nor frightened at her unearthly beauty.

She was luminous as though the ghosts of countless fireflies had been infused into her skin, and to see the loveliness of the body that mocked her tenuous gown was like listening to exalting music. The sway of her hips was a slow, sensuous ripple. She moved effortlessly, yet her ripe breasts quivered as in harmony with her supple waist. Her tapering legs, and the rounded flare of her thighs completed the wonder that had come out of the ancient desert.

Then, still wordless, she was in his arms, and he could neither question nor repel her. The unearthly chill of her body cooled the fever that raged in his throbbing temples, and those cold lips drew the sun-blight from his whirling brain.

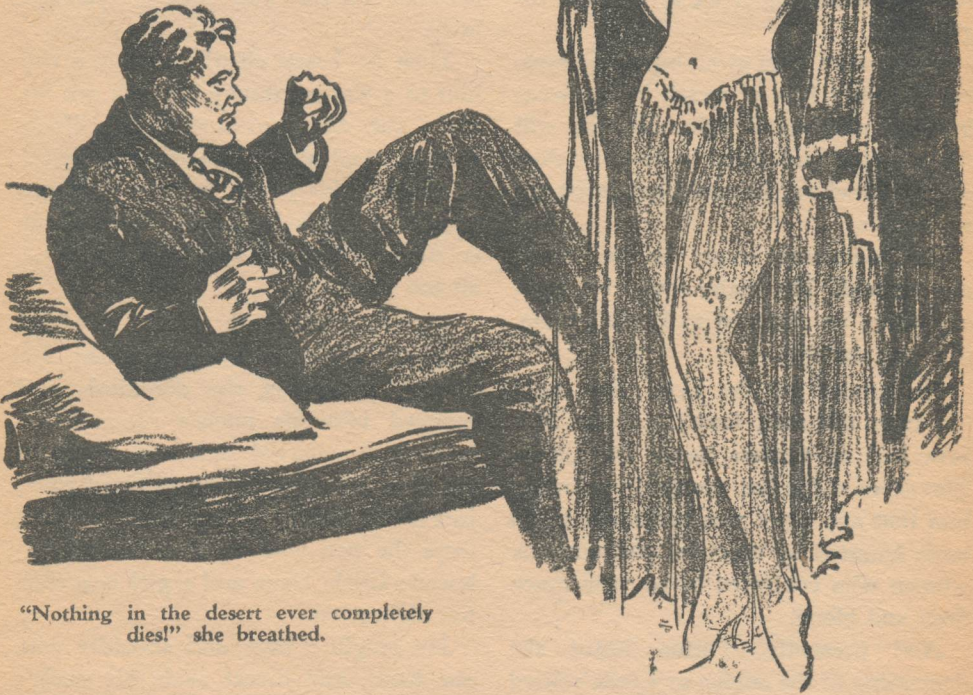
"Nothing in this desert ever completely dies," she breathed, slim arms holding him now like suave, cold serpents. "And sometimes we accept newcomers into our shadow life."

She was right. He was already part of her life, and nothing ever did completely die. Not even Linda's defrauded father. And then her cold kisses robbed him of all understanding save the ancient wisdom of the senses. Patton was like one of the shadow creatures that

live on the further side of a mirror, and Linda was now something from an alien world. . .

A sudden blaze of light smote him like a physical blow. Then as from incalculable distance a woman cried out in wordless amazement. The shock had him on his feet before he realized he had moved. For an instant, the shadow world and the one he had forsaken were dismayingly blended. Then he saw that Linda was at the threshold.

Her face was drawn and white.



"Nothing in the desert ever completely dies!" she breathed.

Through her filmy gown he could see the throb of her breasts as she gasped for breath, finally shaping her indignant outburst: "I couldn't help hearing you two—so I came to tell you that your uncle's trick to separate us is working perfectly!"

Before he could break in or glance about, she snapped the lights out, and hurried down the corridor. He bounded

after her. He was dazed, trembling, stumbling drunkenly; and before he could overtake her, she was in her room, hastily packing her suitcase.

"Linda, listen!" he stuttered. "I tell you—I didn't—"

"Please don't bother, Ray," she said, voice now level and passionless. "I understand your uncle's sudden qualms of conscience, and why that ghost didn't

drive him out of here. Go back and play with the lady he used to trick you. He invited us here to humiliate me!"

"I tell you, it was uncanny—like a dream—she wasn't a flesh and blood woman—search the house—try to find her!"

But Linda pityingly regarded him, then finally said, "Desert glamour has its limits, Ray. And please give me your keys. I'll drive home and send someone back with your car, if you ever want to leave. Don't you see, it would be terribly embarrassing if we drove back together?"

There were tears gleaming in her eyes, but the utter lack of wrath in her voice left him nothing to fight. He was still too bemused and dazed to do other than obey. Somehow, he could not resist the suggestion.

His room was empty as the desert, and as cold. He finally found his keys, and when he returned to Linda's room, she was dressed.

He handed her the keys. She could not miss the road back; and the Mojave had no further terror for Linda. She silenced his last protest by assuring him that any place was preferable to an oasis haunted by spectres, and uncanny women who contrived to be very much flesh and blood.

And presently, Patton heard the drumming of the engine as Linda roused it from the night's chill. His head ached, and his lips were parched and thick. He snatched a carafe beside his bed and gulped half its contents. Damn that brackish water. Rotten, like everything in that accursed Mojave Desert.

PATTON tumbled into bed. His troubled half sleep was a feverish confusion. Voices whispered and mocked and muttered, and at times he started,

sweat drenched and heart pounding, sensing that he had not been alone during those moments when he must have dozed. No need to hunt the apparition; she'd return!

His face felt clammy, half paralyzed, as though it were a mask instead of flesh. And finally, Linda's voice was dominating the nightmare, whispering as if actually at his side. Wildly hoping that she had relented and returned, he roused himself, reached into the darkness; but there was only emptiness, not luscious curves and supple, yielding body. . .

Then he heard clearly, and it drove him to a slaying frenzy. It was not his name she was murmuring, but Uncle Dave's. And after a silence, she sighed as though kissed to ecstasy. Patton staggered to his feet, reeled toward the corridor. Her voice was plainer now. . . all too plain.

Patton, drunk with wrath, stumbled down the hall. His ears guided him. He lunged, wrenching the doorknob, and plunged into his uncle's room. The moon cast a barred square of silver on the tiles, and beyond that patch of glow, just perceptible in the spacious darkness, were the two whose voices he had followed: Uncle Dave and a girl in a chiffon nightgown.

He caught a bare, soft shoulder with one hand, and thrust aside his uncle's blow with the other. Then, impartially damming them both: "Clever work, side tracking me and getting at this old fool! You damned idiot, do you think she cares any more for you than she does for me?"

Impelled by Patton's thrust, she landed in a sprawl in the moonlight, her frail gown a misty tangle about her hips, her lovely legs flailing wildly as she screamed and instinctively tried to regain her

footing. Her gown had torn at the yoke, half exposing palpitant breasts. Linda, face pale and frozen, stared up at him during that instant when his eyes followed her crash to the floor.

Uncle David snarled and swung a hard fist. As the blow connected, he panted, "You jackass, that's Maruca—now get out, or—"

He groped in the darkness, cursing and fuming. There was a dull gleam of blued steel: a pistol barrel. Patton struck his arm aside, yelling, "Drop that gun!"

A switch clicked, and a floor lamp glowed dully. But before they could grapple, before the hot-headed old man could make an effort to shift his pistol or the nephew pluck it from his hand, Patton's rage was overwhelmed by the sudden change in his uncle's expression.

His eyes had become white discs; he recoiled, and his mouth worked, making gurgling noises. His mad stare was divided between Patton and the woman who lay groveling on the tiles. After an endless moment, he groaned, "My God—I didn't know—it was your daughter—Whitman—I didn't—I swear I didn't—"

He was calling his nephew Whitman, *Linda's father!* He reiterated his frenzied protest, shrinking as from horror beyond reckoning. His face became plum colored, then a ghastly purple. He made a defensive gesture, the other hand clutching his throat. And Patton was for an instant too shocked even to try to dodge, or strike aside the rising pistol.

Then the peril in those blazing eyes stabbed into his lethargy. He hurled himself forward; but as he moved, a crackling blast seemed to lift the top of his head. Nitrous flame blazed in his eyes, and a hammer blow smote him.

There was no pain; just an extinction of all senses. . .

WHEN Patton's wits returned, his head was a splitting agony, and the concentrated light of a floor lamp blinded him. Even before his eyes drew into focus, he recognized Maruca's frozen mask, bending over him. Then he clambered to his knees and saw Uncle Dave lying in a huddle not far from him.

The round, purplish face glared up, mouth gaping, eyes glazed but mirroring horror beyond expression. A dark, circular spot stared accusingly from his forehead, and beyond him was a welter of blood and brain.

"You shot him. As you quarrel," said Maruca. Her voice heavily accented, was hollow as a tomb echo. Face averted, she shrank back into the shadows, and went on, "He mus' have hit you, an' you take the gun and shoot him. But I do not blame you. I heard the quarrel about the girl. Only, I do not find her. She ees go away."

Patton knew that he might in a moment of peril as he faced his crazed uncle, have done just as Maruca said. He ran through the house, calling Linda, but there was no answer. Neither could he find a trace of her or the car out in the oasis. And a chill breeze was blotting out all tracks. He could be sure of nothing except that his uncle had mistaken him for the spirit of Linda's father; and that Linda, or some diabolical creature of night had tricked them both. Vague recollections of the legendary *lamia* who whispered madness into men's minds made the oasis a vortex of horror from which he could not escape.

The radio telephone, however, was a salvation. To notify the authorities and face whatever charges suspicion could

bring against him would be a refuge, even though his story would more likely lead him to the madhouse than to prison.

Patton stepped to the transmitter, and while his knowledge of radio was confined to having watched several operators at work, he was not entirely at a loss. He closed a switch, heard the whirring of the little rotary converter. Then another switch—but as he cleared his dry throat to address the microphone, he smelled the reek of hot insulation.

He reached for the master switch, but choking fumes poured from the set, and a red glow blazed from the interstices of the bakelite panel. He was too late. The wiring had burned out.

"God. . ." he muttered. "I'm here, from now on. Can't cross the damn desert on foot. . ."

He rubbed the lump on his aching head. Linda might have snatched the pistol, fired in panic, and killed Uncle Dave by mistake. But however that was, he could not hope that she would attempt to clear him.

His uncle had no car. Supplies came from Barstow, by truck. If he did not starve before some friendly tradesman came out to inquire about Uncle Dave, he would go mad, or he and Maruca would kill each other. . .

The fumes of smouldering insulation drove him from the room, just as Maruca approached the threshold. She caught his hand, saying, "This place she is crazy. Before I come here, your uncle was in love with a woman-spirit who walks by moonlight, looking for men to kiss. Then I come, and he likes me because I am not dead in daylight. . ."

That stolid, frozen-faced creature's remarks confirmed his weird suspicions. Uncle Dave's spirit mistress, jealous,

had taken shapes best designed to accomplish her vengeance.

"First," concluded Maruca, after listening to his stammered queries, "she make love to you, and frighten this Linda who come weeth you. Then she take Linda's face and go to your uncle. When he see her in the light, and see you also, he goes crazy, and you keel him, and she fades, like that. The vengeance, it is complete."

Maruca went on, "I am the only witness. Some day some wan will miss your uncle, and you will be suspected. But that ees nothing. You marry me, and the law is that the wife cannot be a witness against you, no?"

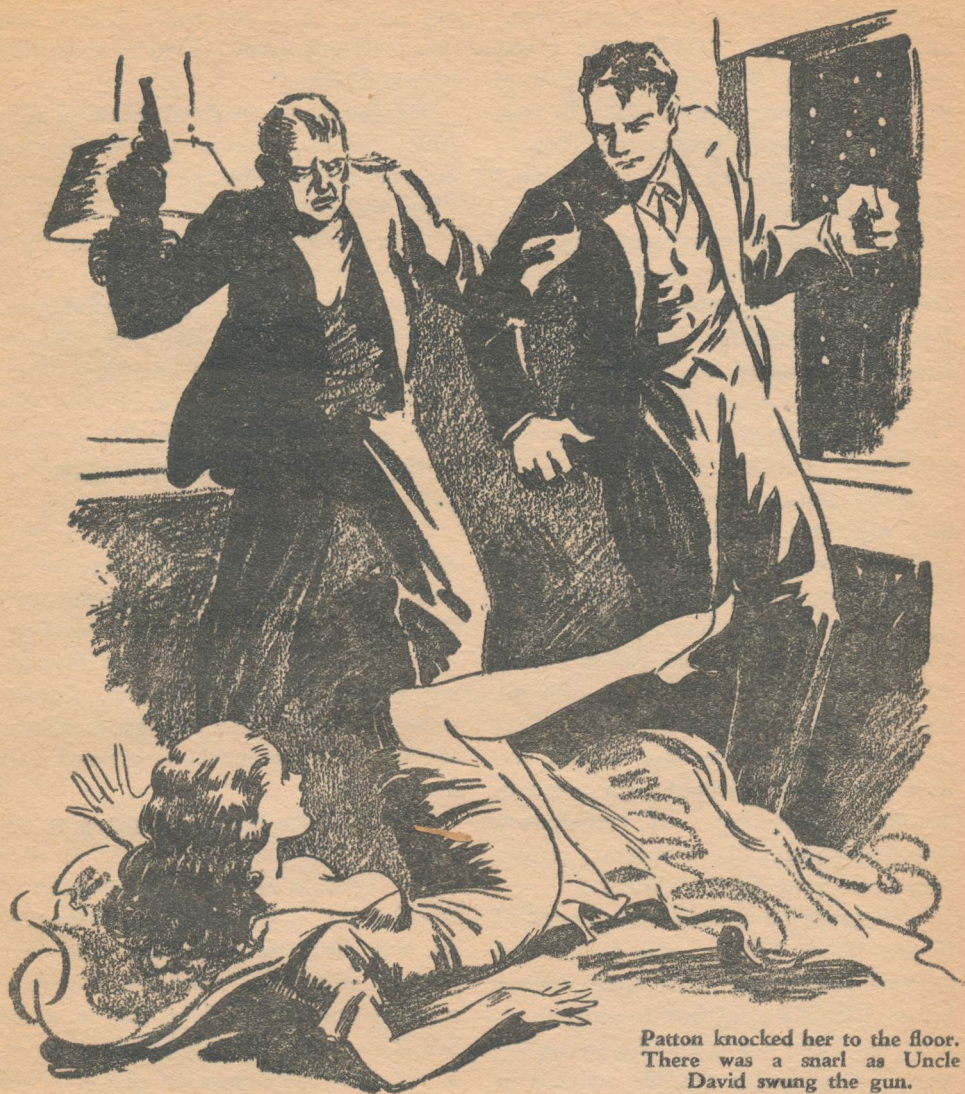
He recoiled, growled wrathfully; but as anger gleamed in his eyes, Maruca laughed and warned, "If I am dead, you weel be suspect of *two* murders. But if I live, I can protec' you, no?"

He had to hang on, humor her whim; anything at all until he could think it out by daylight, find some fragrant of sanity. He closed his eyes, trying to blink the phantoms from his tortured brain. And then Maruca came nearer. Her arms twined about him, breasts flattened against him as she murmured and clung tighter. He wrenched his head aside as she tried to tiptoe and kiss him, but he could not evade that amorous embrace. Yet every quivering curve tantalized him, arousing emotions that made him hate himself and shudder. . .

BUT they recoiled from each other at the sound of an approaching car. He froze, nerved himself for the ensuing encounter. Then there was a tapping at the door.

He followed Maruca. As she snapped on the patio lights, he saw a tall, thin faced man wearing clerical garb.

"This is Dr. Joseph, the missionary,"



Patton knocked her to the floor.
There was a snarl as Uncle
David swung the gun.

said Maruca. "Maybe you weel receive him instead of awakening your uncle, no?"

Patton for an instant eyed the sharp eyed, swarthy man with the prominent cheek bones; but before he could answer, Dr. Joseph affably began, "Don't disturb your uncle—and so you're Mr. Patton? He's often spoke of you. Though I'm sure he never mentioned me to you."

"No, I seldom saw Uncle Dave," groped Patton.

"Little wonder," smiled Joseph, closing the door behind him. "But I've spent years out in the desert, trying to dispense spiritual benefits to those who live out here." His face became grave, and he added, glancing sharply about, "Too much solitude is bad for the soul. A trial, even for the saints who fasted in the wilderness.

"I wouldn't disturb you at this hour," apologized Joseph, "except that I was delayed at my last stop, so I had to press on to your uncle's place to rest. I have business in Fresno tomorrow."

"Better let Maruca fix you a room," suggested Patton.

If he booted the missionary out of the house, that would later be incriminating. He tried to hurry him down the corridor to the room Linda had occupied; but as they passed Uncle Dave's door, the missionary seized the knob, saying, "He'd never forgive me for not greeting him."

Before Patton could check him, the door was open, and Joseph and the purplefaced corpse stared at each other. He whirled, crying out in horror; but that was cut short when Patton lunged.

The missionary ducked Patton's frenzied rush. He was awkward with his fists, yet he was agile and solid. Patton's hard fist drove him against the wall, but before he could plant a square knockout, the cornered missionary launched himself like a wildcat, sinewy fingers catching Patton's throat.

They grappled fiercely as they crashed to the floor, kicking and scrambling athwart the corpse. Red spots danced before Patton's eyes, but despite his efforts, he could not break the strangling grip. There was a terrible roaring in his ears, and he seemed to be plunging through a dark abyss; and then, exerting a final savage effort, he drew up his knee, catching Joseph in the stomach, catapulting him against the wall.

Patton, recovering, staggered forward. And then Maruca, who had been crouched in a corner, flashed forward, Uncle Dave's automatic ready.

"Don't, you idiot!" yelled Patton as a blast shook the room. He lunged, knocking her in a heap, pistol clattering from

her hand. "He's out cold! Killing him won't do any good! They're expecting him in Fresno."

He dashed to the front, Maruca after him. As he bounded to the running board of the missionary's car, she panted, "But we must kill him—he will tell—"

"I'm going to report everything, right now!" declared Patton.

She paused, face averted, hand gripping his arm. Then she said, "Maybe that is right. They will miss him. They will hunt him, and he is a witness. But if we go across the Nevada line tonight, to the justice of the peace, in Las Vegas—"

In Nevada, only a little over a hundred miles away, he could marry her at once, and counteract the missionary's testimony. In California, however, where they had to waste three days filing notice of their intention, Patton would be in jail, and Maruca a witness against him. She had him cornered, and he knew it.

"Get in," he muttered, stepping on the starter.

For Linda's sake, he had offered to sacrifice his inheritance, but now that he was heir to a million, she was through with him. And this grotesque creature who was forcing him to make her the mistress of that *adobe* fortress in the heart of desolation probably did not even realize that Uncle Dave had been wealthy, as there was little about the house that would have betrayed that fact.

Patton, corroded by the hideous irony, laughed at the desert night. A coyote ghoulishly echoed it. . .

THEY drove southeast toward the road to Las Vegas. At last he caught the far off spectral gleam of a dry lake. Beyond it was the paved high-

way at whose end was his damnation. Wrath made him reckless. He tramped on the gas; and desert illusion tricked him.

He swerved, jammed on the brakes to avoid plunging headlong into what seemed to be deep water filling a dip in the road, the result of one of those rare local rainstorms that for a few hours flood the bed of some dry stream. The car skidded in deep dust, plunged crazily, caromed off a boulder. Glass tinkled, metal crunched; tires screeched, then gritted as Patton fought the wheel.

It was over in split seconds. And then he saw that there was no water, only a deceptive crust of salt. Maruca, moaning and half conscious, was huddled on the floorboards. The impact against the windshield had stunned her, and the fragments had slashed her throat and breast. Though he loathed this grotesque bride of hate, his first humane impulse was to keep her from bleeding to death. Flinging the door open, he dragged her from the car.

Her skirt, sodden and disarrayed, exposed bronze-hued legs whose lovely curves made that frozen mask of a face seem an outrage. Then he stared, wondering at the white flesh beyond her knees. *White* flesh! But he did not understand until, tearing a strip from her skirt, he fashioned a bandage, to compress the artery at her temple and check the blood that poured from a slash in her face. Though cut in half a dozen places, only one spot was bleeding; and the reason was simple. She was wearing a mask of plastic composition. He stripped it off, despite the suction that held it in place.

Maruca's face was white, and through rents in her blouse, he saw that the under curves of her breast were white. And the blood trickling down her throat

had removed some of the stain that discolored her skin. Maruca was the spectral creature whose uncanny beauty had come between him and Linda! Uncle Dave's housekeeper had played a strange part that night.

He bundled his still unconscious companion into the car and headed back toward the oasis, first to look over the scene of mystery by day, and in the light of his discovery, then to drive to Bakersfield to report everything to the authorities. To hell with Las Vegas! Face the music; fight to a finish.

That grotesque mask which had concealed Maruca's face suggested more than Patton's weary brain could at the moment fathom; but now there was hope.

Dawn became gray, then a sullen red before the cluster of palms rose from the wastelands. Maruca, swathed in bandages, seemed not to realize their destination. Shock and the loss of blood had drained her vitality.

And then, braking to a halt, Patton wondered when nightmares would cease. His own car was parked in the grove, and from within the *adobe* house came a woman's voice, high pitched from sudden terror.

The door was just ajar. Leaping to the threshold, he raced into the shadowy patio. The woman was Linda, desperately struggling with a tall, lean man—Dr. Joseph, whose swarthy face was raked and bleeding from her nails. She slipped, and her assailant, toppling off balance, crashed with her into an angle of the wall.

For a moment there was a dazzling tangle of silk clad legs, and flashes of her bare torso gleaming through what remained of the upper portion of her dress. But Patton for once had no eye

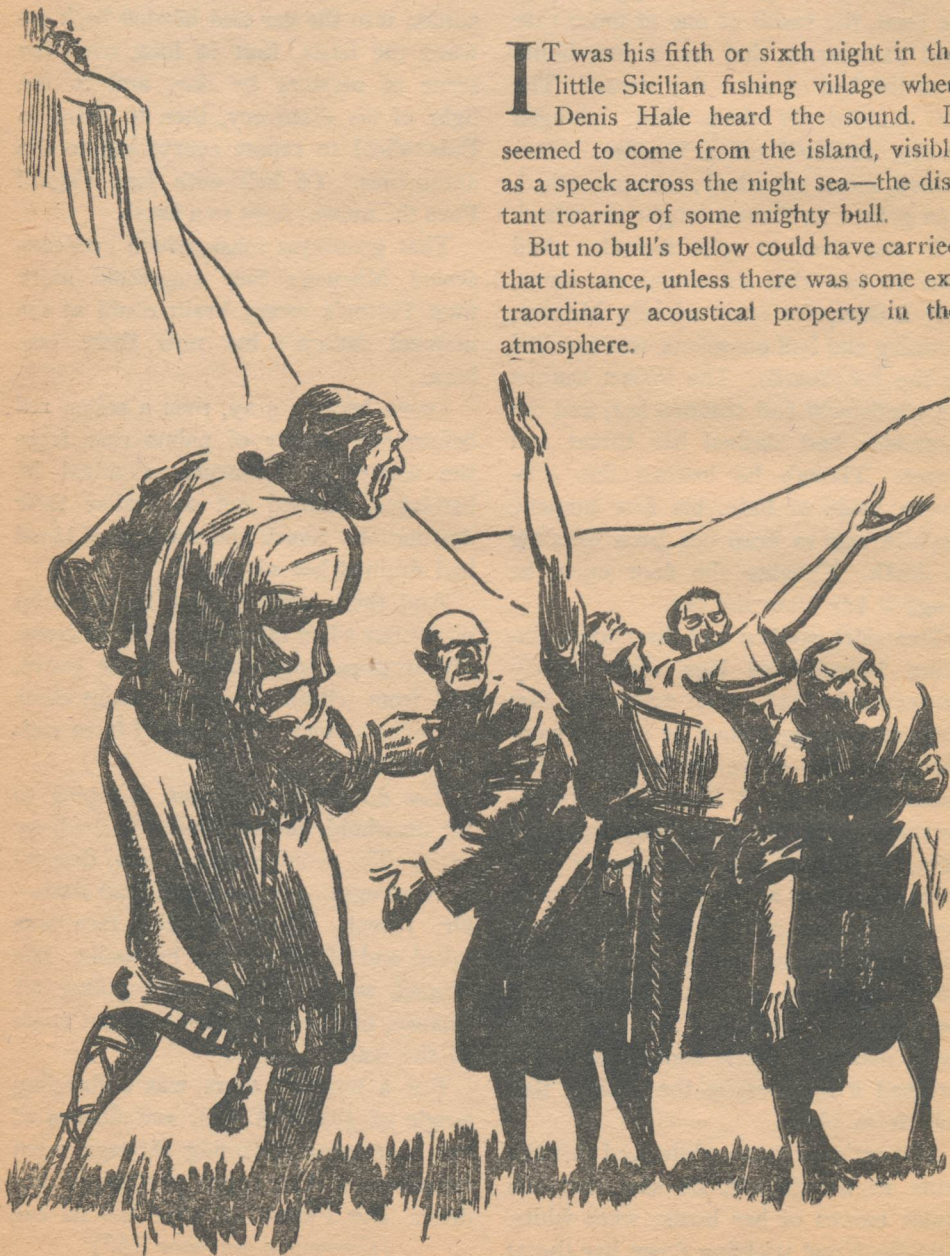
(Continued on page 109)

THE BRAZEN

Hale was welcomed to Sicily by a weirdly lovely girl who haunted him by night, and the Count who invited him to investigate the mysteries of bull worship

IT was his fifth or sixth night in the little Sicilian fishing village when Denis Hale heard the sound. It seemed to come from the island, visible as a speck across the night sea—the distant roaring of some mighty bull.

But no bull's bellow could have carried that distance, unless there was some extraordinary acoustical property in the atmosphere.



BULL

By
CLIVE TRENT

It rose and fell, that sound, in long, eerie notes, rending the silence like some brazen voice from the skies. And simultaneously Denis heard a commotion downstairs in the tiny inn, a woman sobbing, a man cursing. And all up and down the village street, cries, sobs, and

As Denis menaced them they prayed feverishly: "You will not shoot us, Signore? We are guiltless!"



oaths, from behind the shuttered windows.

Denis sat up in bed. The sound *was* incomprehensible to him. He wondered whether it was the rumbling of some volcano. Could it be Etna, miles away, preparing to go on the rampage again?

He listened. It came again, the bellow of a bull in agony. He shuddered as those gruesome notes rose high, and once more died away into silence. And now there was silence everywhere about him. Silence in the inn, and in the village.

The mad thought came to him that heaven was lamenting his own sorrow and stupefaction. For before he sailed for Sicily, to study the archeology of that ancient island, with the five thousand dollar scholarship he had won from the Beddington Foundation, Elise had promised to come to him as soon as her teaching year was ended.

That morning Denis had received an inexplicable cable from her, from Boston. She hadn't sailed, and couldn't come. "All plans are off," the message said.

Denis had thereupon proceeded to get as drunk as he could on Sicilian wine. The bitterness of the betrayal had cracked his morale completely, for he was only twenty-five, and Elise and he had loved each other madly.

He had vowed to enlist with the new battalions forming for service in the Ethiopian War. He would go to Syracuse and offer his services next day. But in the end, he had just gone to bed drunk, and decided nothing.

Once more, now seeming infinitely far away, that faint sound rose and fell.

And then Denis saw the face of the woman pressed against the glass of the French window of his room, on the ground floor, and, as he looked, stupe-

fied, a white hand rose and beckoned to him.

HE got up, swaying a little from the wine that still befuddled his brain. He stared at her through the glass. A girl of wild, unearthly beauty, nude save for some wispy, filmy stuff draped about her from breast to hips. White limbs and shoulders, and long strands of raven hair falling almost to her waist. Twin breasts so sweetly molded that Denis drew in a shuddering breath as he looked at her.

The racing of his blood began to impart its heat to his skin, scorching his throat and face and temples with a tingling flush. So he had loved Elise, had he? Elise!—who had never appeared before him like this . . . whose coolness of nature, even in the fervor of their love, had restrained their caresses to kisses and decorous embraces.

Fool that he had been! For Elise's sake, for two years past Denis had never known the sight or warmth or sweetness of another woman.

He looked at the girl on the other side of the glass, saw her beckon to him peremptorily, and softly slid back the bolt.

She stepped inside, came up to him, stood there looking into his face fixedly. Little feet planted on the rug, the insteps arched like bows. Splendor of tapering limbs, white legs meeting each other as softly as lovers' lips. Wide curving hips, only half obscured by those wispy filaments. And a fever-inspiring challenge blazingly somberly out of those great black eyes.

Denis felt under a hypnotic spell. Race memories seemed to stir in him, faint, dim echoes of ancestral faiths. He parted the long strands of hair hanging over the gossamer sheathed, white purity of her boldly lifted breasts. He buried his

face in the pulsing warmth of her throat and felt her white arms tighten about his neck.

Shudders ran through her, moans came from her lips, to be stifled by their clinging suction upon his own. Suddenly she was crushed savagely to him, every warm, lithe curve of her undulant form shaped to his. Her breasts, pushed sidewise, were resilient against his ribs. Denis's hands moved over the satin smoothness of her back, caressing through the silken, rustling drapery, the warm sweetness of her skin. Then all consciousness went out in a destroying, torturing, ecstatic madness . . .

"WHAT was that noise I heard last night, like a bull roaring?" Denis asked old Maddalena the next morning.

He had awakened this morning to find her gone, his mysterious, lovely visitor of the night. But for the unbolted window, he might have thought her a dream, brought about by the heady Sicilian wine—but for that and a languorous happiness, a sense of destiny fulfilled.

Poor, treacherous Elise already was only a memory to him. He knew he would find her again, this other woman whose love had been a consecration.

"I do not understand, signore," the old woman answered, eyes averted and lips compressed. "One hears strange sounds from the sea at night. They say," she whispered, "that last night the witch-woman walked, she whose appearance means death."

Suddenly she shot him a slumberous, accusing glance. Denis was sure, then, that she knew. Her next words confirmed this belief.

"The signore should take his departure," she faltered. "There are strange

things happening in Sicily today. They say that the spirits of the old dead have risen to guide our nation in its war against the treacherous Ethiopians."

She came up to him. "*He* of the island has come to Sicily in his motor-boat," she whispered. "He, Count Annibale Silami, the accursed one, with the evil eye. Signor, death stalks abroad. Be wise. Go! Ah!"

That last exclamation was a suppressed scream, as a very modern-looking man, wearing a suit of white flannel, appeared at the open window.

A man of about forty years, handsome and dignified, with a short, trim mustache, and an air of obvious breeding.

"Mr. Denis Hale?" he asked, in excellent English. "You will forgive the informality, but the front door of the inn appears to be locked and bolted." He smiled. "Mr. Hale, I am Count Annibale Silami, of Sireni Island, and I came over to my motor-boat last night especially to bid you welcome to Sicily.

"I have heard that you are here to study archeology. Believe me, I can show you more wonders on Sireni Island than you will find in Sicily itself in a lifetime. I have come to ask that you will be my guest."

"MR. Hale, my daughter, Europa."

There was no recognition in the girl's eyes, though Denis's pulses beat fiercely as he bowed to her on the deck of the little craft. She was wearing a simple frock that revealed her lovely contours. Only, as the Count turned aside to give orders to the mechanic, did there come a sudden convulsive grip of hands, a glance that told Denis that what was past was not to be the last of their love.

A VOYAGE of an hour brought them to Sireni Island, which looked no more than a square mile in extent. High on a plateau Denis saw Count Annibale's abode, an extensive, modern-looking house, not very differently from the residence of a Long Island millionaire.

A motor-car, with a liveried chauffeur at the wheel, conveyed the three up to the entrance, ascending incredible grades with ease.

Then Denis saw that the rear of the house faced on a steep declivity, beyond which there was a massive wall of rock. And in between the two acclivities was a little, stony valley, where not a blade of grass grew.

In the middle of it, standing out stark among the stones, was the monstrous, brazen effigy of a bull.

Five times as large as any bull that ever lived, three times as large as the aurochs, the wild bull of Europe, it stood, with lowered head and paws seeming to scrape the ground. The perfect workmanship, and the patina of ages that covered it, showed Denis that this was the master piece of some pre-historic moulder.

Not of the classic age of Greece. Earlier than Greece, earlier than recorded history, perhaps a relic of Cretan or Mycenaean art.

Denis saw Count Annibale looking at him with a quizzical smile. "The bull, Mr. Hale?" he asked softly. "Ah, I was reserving that for you. I thought I should awaken your interest with the bull.

"My daughter will show you to your room, and then we shall have lunch together, and a pleasant talk about antiquities. I have some house guests, but they will not appear till dinner. But first, of course, a cocktail."

DENIS was drunk. Was it the cocktail, or those mad moments with Europa in the sumptuously furnished room to which she had showed him?

For, the instant that she closed the door, she had become wild, ungovernable. With a sweep of her hands, she had torn the frock from her, revealing herself in wispy underthings, and they had rushed into each other's arms, like long separated lovers.

IN the midst of that frenzy of her locked arms, moistly warm lips, and quivering breasts. Denis was trying to conquer the madness that swept him . . . was trying to recall his reeling senses, while Europa slipped away from him with a little laugh, and blew him a kiss.

"My father waits for you," she whispered. "If he guessed, he would kill me. He is old-fashioned, and so — so I must deceive him."

"I'm going to tell him I want to marry you," mumbled Denis. "We'll be together all our lives, won't we?"

The look she gave him was incomprehensible. She bowed her head as if in affirmation, and left the room. Denis wondered. But he was drunk with love as he went down the marble stairway, to find Count Annibale pacing the hall.

The Count locked his arm in his. "Well, I hope you are hungry, my friend," he said. "A cocktail first, then lunch. And then I shall tell you about the bull."

Two Maltese boys served the meal, which would have done justice to a royal chef. The only wine was champagne. The two men drank steadily. Count Annibale was growing as drunk as Denis.

"The bull," he laughed, as they sat back in their chairs, smoking their cigars. "I thought that bull would captivate you, my friend."

Dazed, he stared at the girl on the other side of the glass, saw her beckon to him.



"You are aware, of course, that the bull mythology is wide-spread through the Mediterranean. It was introduced by the Atlantens, when they invaded

Europe thousands of years before recorded history begins, fleeing from their own sinking continent.

"You have the story of the Minotaur, the bull monster of ancient Crete, and the young men and maidens who were sent from Athens every year to be sacrificed to it. You have the cult of the bullfight in modern Spain.

"We Sicilians, Mr. Hale, are a people of immemorial antiquity. We are not Italians. We are Arab and Saracen, Carthaginian and Atlantean, and we preserve dark traditions that are supposed to have been lost in the mists of time.

"What is my name, for instance, but that of Hannibal, the Carthaginian hero? And my surname, Islami, a follower of Islam, of which my grandfather transposed the two first letters, so as not to give offense to the church. My daughter I named Europa, because of the classic legend of Europa and the bull.

"That bull you saw was fashioned by some unknown artist in the days when the bull-worship was supreme. It was used by the tyrant, Dionysius of Syracuse, four centuries before the Christian era, for sacrificial rites. It was flung up from the depths by an earthquake some years ago, on this island, which appears to have been a religious center once. And I set it up.

"There is an ingenious trick mechanism concealed in it whereby it can be made to roar, due to the rush of air through the inner pipes. And, I admit, I have used this device to strike terror into the superstitious folk of the mainland, who might otherwise object to our worship."

"Your worship?" queried Denis, through the haze of alcohol. "You mean you—you believe in it?"

Count Annibale leaned forward and

patted him on the shoulder. "My dear friend, my dear lad," he answered, "the old bull worship still survives in Italy. And, with our country struggling for victory over Ethiopia—well, when you see some of my guests tonight, you may recognize them—though their names will be unrevealed. You may realize then that some of the greatest men in Italy have come here to pay worship to the bull, rather than offend the old Black Gods who still have charge of the destinies of Italy.

"No, that is enough for now," he added, smiling. "You shall be privileged tonight to witness these ancient ceremonies, that have come down to us from the remotest period."

IT was night. It had been day, and it was now night, but how the hours had passed, Denis was hardly aware. He had a dim memory of Count Annibale laughingly guiding him to his room, and, later of his appearing to escort him to the dinner-table.

There were four guests, men in middle life, and the sight of them brought Denis back to himself with a shock of incredulity. For two, at least, of these men, were of the highest rank in the land, whose faces had looked out at him many times from the pages of illustrated papers in America.

They were dressed informally; they laughed and drank and sang and jested. Europa was not present. It was strictly a stag affair, and the illustrious personages condescended to much affability toward Denis.

He didn't know what he ate, or how much he drank. In a dream he found himself upon his feet, with Count Annibale's arm linked through his.

"Our friend, *signori*, who is so much

interested in antiquities, must certainly see the passages of the labyrinth," said Annibale. "They are beneath my bouse, Mr. Hale, originally a maze, patterned after that of Crete, and above the ground. The ages, which have buried them beneath the soil, have preserved them almost perfectly."

"Yes, he must certainly see the labyrinth," said a sardonic, grim-faced man. "Can you walk steadily, my friend?"

"I certainly can," said Denis, with drunken dignity.

"Good, let us go, then!" said Count Annibale.

They passed down three flights of steps, the last wet with the moisture that dripped from the walls. At the bottom, an infinite maze of passages ran here and there, divided by walls of unmortared stone, from ten to twelve feet high. For long minutes Denis threaded this maze, with the Count at his side, and the guests behind.

There was something a little eerie in this pilgrimage. They seemed to be going round and round in a kind of spiral, with no set purpose in view. Denis had the uncanny feeling that the purpose was to perplex him, and certainly he had not the faintest sense of direction.

Nothing but those endless passages, in the dim light which filtered in from crevices in the containing walls of the building, winding round and round, crossing and recrossing one another.

Then, just when he was about to protest, the journey ended. In front of him Denis saw an oblong building of stone, with two entrances, one barred by a heavy wooden door, the other with a similar door swinging open.

He peered inside, but could see nothing. The stone roof cut off what little light there was in the labyrinth outside.

"The end," said Count Annibale. "Once, my dear young friend, this building was above ground. The legendary Minotaur, probably a bull of monstrous size, really inhabited it. One of these entrances was for the Athenian youths, the other for the maidens. The worship of the bull, as you are aware, required that the girls offered to him should be maidens. Consequently the two sexes were separated by a wall of stone."

The most illustrious of the guests uttered a short laugh. Denis grew suddenly wary.

"The bull, of course, roamed his labyrinth and destroyed men and maidens impartially. But at least they were victims of State. They were all gloriously intoxicated before they met their death, probably drugged too."

"Very interesting," said Denis.

"Very," agreed the Count. "But you, my young friend, do not seem allergic to the drugs that have been so liberally administered to you. And so—"

Suddenly, swiftly something hard dropped upon Denis's head. The dim light faded out. He heard himself shouting, and it seemed to him that it was Elise's voice that answered him. That was the last he knew for a long time.

"DENIS! Denis! Denis! Denis!"

That was Elise's voice crying to him, muffled and distant, but unmistakably hers. And that was what recalled Denis from the depths of blank unconsciousness.

"Elise!" Her name burst from his lips. He sat up, got on his knees, heard her sobbing somewhere, moved toward the place from which her voice came, and felt wall of stone.

"Elise, where are you?"

"Here! Here! Behind the wall. There are openings in it, but too small to pass

through. Oh God, how did you come here, Denis?"

"Elise, how did you get here? That cable dispatch —"

"What cable? What cable? I never sent you one. I wired you from Naples, and again from Syracuse. I hired a motor-boat there, and I was brought here, drugged, imprisoned—how long ago? I don't know how long ago!"

A dim light, perhaps of the moon, was beginning to filter into the stone structure through an opening in the roof. Denis saw three or four spaces, a few inches wide, in the wall that separated him from Elise. He laid his forehead against one of them. And he could see her.

He saw her faintly, as she crouched on the stone floor. She had been stripped, and only a brief, revealing cloth had been tied about her. Its inadequate folds had almost allowed the plump little contours of her breasts to escape. He could see her face through her short, tousled yellow hair, the lips that he had kissed, the face that he had loved; and he groaned as he remembered that witch, Europa.

"Elise!" he called.

She rose, and a beam of moonlight played upon her, caressing in gleams and shadows the soft breasts that trembled as she moved, the chiseled curves of flaring hips and sleek thighs. She whispered his name and laid her face against the crevice.

"Oh Denis, they told me I should see you before I died, but—but—"

"What is it?" Denis almost screamed. "The Count is a madman, but those men—why, I know them—"

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you, Denis. He explained it to me when I was drugged and helpless. They want a man and a

maiden to sacrifice to that hideous bull. They think the sacrifice will win them the Ethiopian War. They're pagans, all of them. That man"—she whispered a name—"came from Rome to take part in the hideous rites.

"They were afraid to sacrifice another girl from Sicily, because the country-folks threatened a revolt. So they got me—and you—darling, my own Denis!"

He tried to stretch his arm through the crevice, but could not reach her.

SUDDENLY the hideous roaring of the brazen bull broke forth immediately above them. A frightful noise as loud as the discharge of fifty heavy guns, but infinitely prolonged, rising and falling like the cries of some fiend in torture. It beat upon Denis's ear-drums, as if it would crack them, and he plugged them with his fingers, in the effort to shut out that sound.

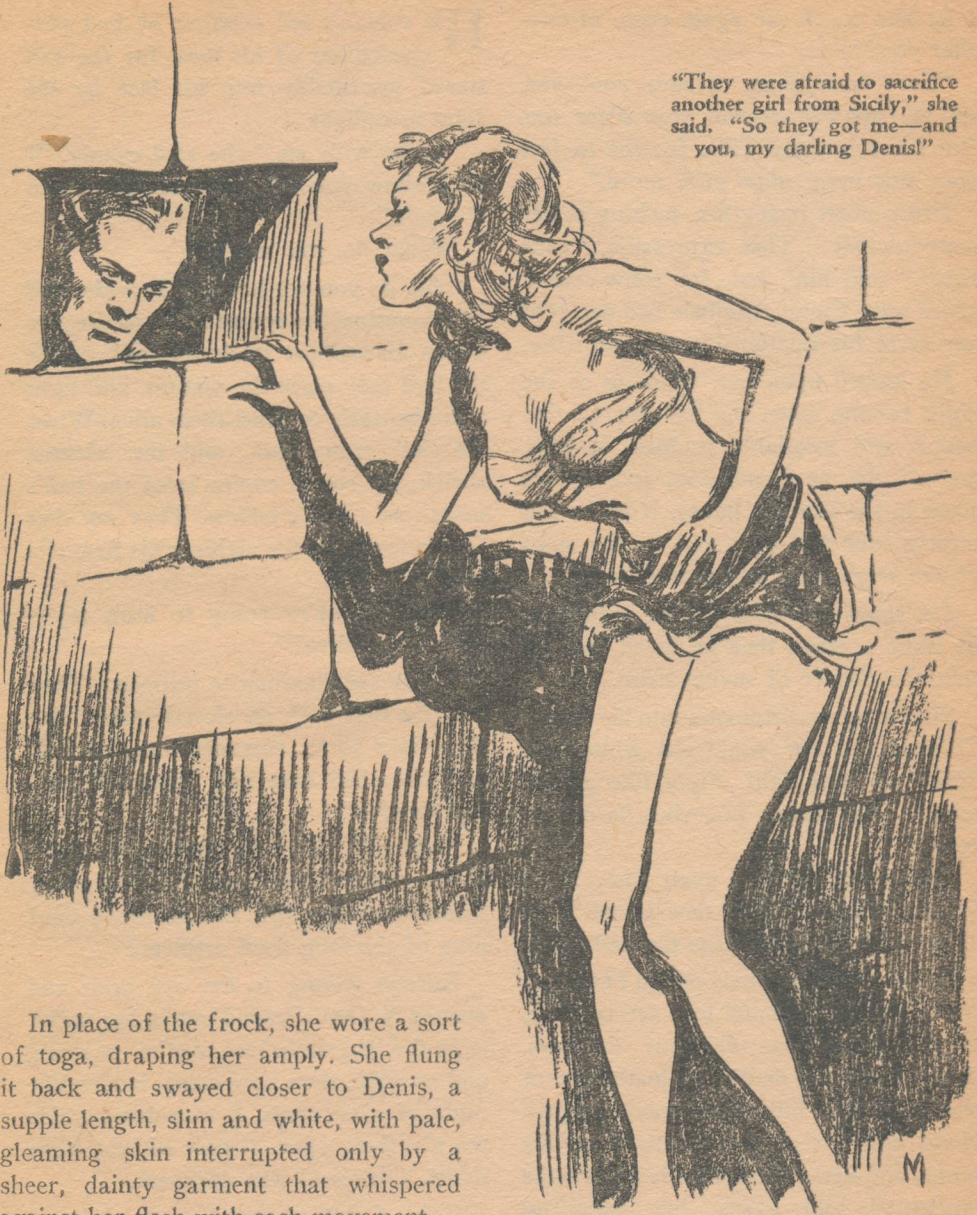
Yet he could still hear it, rolling and reverberating, rising into a high, shrill, agonizing shriek, and dropping to the deep bass of a bull's bellow. Endlessly, on and on . . . then Elise's scream, as it died away, and the sound of her cell door being opened.

Denis heard the Count's voice, and he went mad. Hurling curses at him through the crevice, flung himself uselessly against his door. Beat on it with his fists, hearing Elise's screams, and knowing that she was going to her death, and that he must follow her. And he was not even allowed to share that death with her.

At last he dropped back, exhausted; and, when the door of his cell opened, he looked up vacantly, ready—eager for the death that would reunite him to the woman he loved.

But it was Europa who came gliding in.

"They were afraid to sacrifice another girl from Sicily," she said. "So they got me—and you, my darling Denis!"



In place of the frock, she wore a sort of toga, draping her amply. She flung it back and swayed closer to Denis, a supple length, slim and white, with pale, gleaming skin interrupted only by a sheer, dainty garment that whispered against her flesh with each movement.

Denis looked at her in terror. "You devil!" he whispered hoarsely.

"No devil, my love," she answered, and put her hand and closed the door.

"What do you want?"

"You know the truth now?"

"I know you and your father are fiends out of hell. So that is your job,

enticing men to this island, to become victims of your accursed rites?"

"*Si, si, caro mio.* But Count Annibale is not my father. He brought me here when I was a child. He made me play that part. And always I said, when I met the man I loved, I should kill Count Annibale. *Dio.*" she whispered, "how can

I let him touch me again ever, after—after you?”

“So I have come to save you—yes, and perhaps that woman, your sister, too. But there is time. Time for me to feel your lips upon mine once more.”

Denis stood facing her, looking at her incredulously. That expression, “your sister,” told him that, for some reason of his own, Count Annibale had deceived her as to his relationship toward Elise.

He looked upon her, thinking of the night before, when she had stirred that hellish and insatiable madness in him, and of the past morning, too, in his room in the Count’s house. Now he felt utterly cold and unstirred by the sight of her sleek body and plump breasts.

He hated her—and yet he knew that he must pretend that he loved her, on the faint chance of saving Elise.

She thrust an automatic into his hands. “I stole this for you,” she whispered. “Hide it. And fight. Fight like a man to save your sister. But—but do not go yet!”

She flung herself upon him, in a fresh frenzy of her new-found love. “Kiss me! Hold me! she pleaded.

Cold-bloodedly Denis pulled her close. And, because hate and love are so alike, he felt anew that delirious madness, drawn from the depths of loathing that she inspired in him. Her strangling grip about him forced the breath from his lungs, and her own sharp-drawn breaths quickened into gasps, her quivering breasts were crushed savagely against him; and he hated her, hated her.

“You love me no more, she moaned. “I can tell . . .”

“But I do! I do!” Denis assured her, but it was with horror and loathing. His kisses became more demanding, his embraces more compelling.

HE couldn’t tell whether he had persuaded her of his love, for she still stared inscrutably into his face by the faint moonlight.

“Come with me,” she said calmly. “I shall show you the other entrance into the bull.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah, do you not know?” It is the bull of Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, for whom an artificer made the bull. Inside the bull they place the victims, and light a fire beneath, to roast them alive. When the bull grows hot, and the victims shriek, the sound comes from the bull’s mouth as a bull’s bellow. They say that Dionysius made the artificer his first victim.”

“God! They’re going to burn my—my sister—alive?”

“They are planning to burn her. They heat the bull with an electric cable. But there is a secret entrance into the bull, and you shall save her. Then kill him, that devil—”

Suddenly, hideously raucous, the bull’s bellow sounded overhead. Elise’s shrieks, transmuted through the accursed cunning of the long dead artificer!

Europa sprang to the cell door and opened it. Denis leaped out in her wake. — In the labyrinth, into another passage, and another, then up a steep, ladder-like flight of stone steps. A trap-door, which the girl flung open. A gust of heat came down. Overhead was darkness.

Then a slab of metal dropped, grazing Denis’s face. The bull bellowed again, but now the bellow was mingled with a human scream. Dimly Denis could see the monstrous belly of the bull as he scrambled inside.

The metal was growing hot. A glare of heat enveloped him in the pitch darkness of the bull’s interior. He trod on

ashes and bones. He shouted, and again the shouts were transmuted into that hideous bellow that seemed to shake the earth and heaven. He plunged on through the calcined ash, shrieking Elise's name, found her, grasped her to him, half-conscious.

She wailed, and the high-pitched note reverberated in a hideous roar. Denis turned, and Europa plunged against him.

"Not that way! This way!" she screamed, and another roar from the infernal mechanism answered her.

She turned a handle in the flank of the bull. Denis, with Elise in his arms, stumbled down, slipped, went sprawling on the ground.

He leaped to his feet. Bright moonlight played all about him. In front of him he saw Count Annibale and the four guests, robed in the togas of antiquity, arms raised to the heavens in invocation of the Black Gods of ancient Greece.

The four illustrious ones, whose photographs daily adorned many newspapers throughout the world, shouted, and sprang backward. Count Annibale retained more presence of mind. For an instant he stood, staring, unable to realize just what had happened.

Then he understood, quick-witted Italian that he was, and he drew a revolver from beneath his robes and sprang.

Denis's finger pressed the trigger a moment earlier. Once, twice, three times, and Count Annibale, his revolver belching flame, came on.

He staggered, stopped in front of Denis. The weapon dropped from his hand.

"The—Black Gods—are dead," he whispered. He tottered and swayed; he dropped upon his knees, and a bloody foam surged up about his lips. "But she

—she whom I trusted—"

Count Annibale rolled upon his side, quivered, and died. The heat from the brazen bull was growing insufferable. Denis picked up Elise's unconscious body, and carried her a few feet away.

HIS automatic menaced the four fear-paralyzed men in front of him. He stepped forward and frisked them quickly. None of them was armed. And the biggest shot of the four was trembling, quaking in terror.

"Signore, you will not shoot us? We are guiltless of all this. It was a local superstition—you understand. We did not know, when we came, that an American would be involved. Bah, I never believed in it!

"It will pay you not to believe in it," said Denis. "Get out! You are free, do you understand!" he shouted violently. "I was never one of those who believed that modern civilization had anything on that of the classic age. Go your way. Massacre the Ethiopians. But don't let me see your faces again, or I'll blow them in!"

They vanished with extraordinary alacrity. Denis turned to pick up Elise. And then he saw Europa.

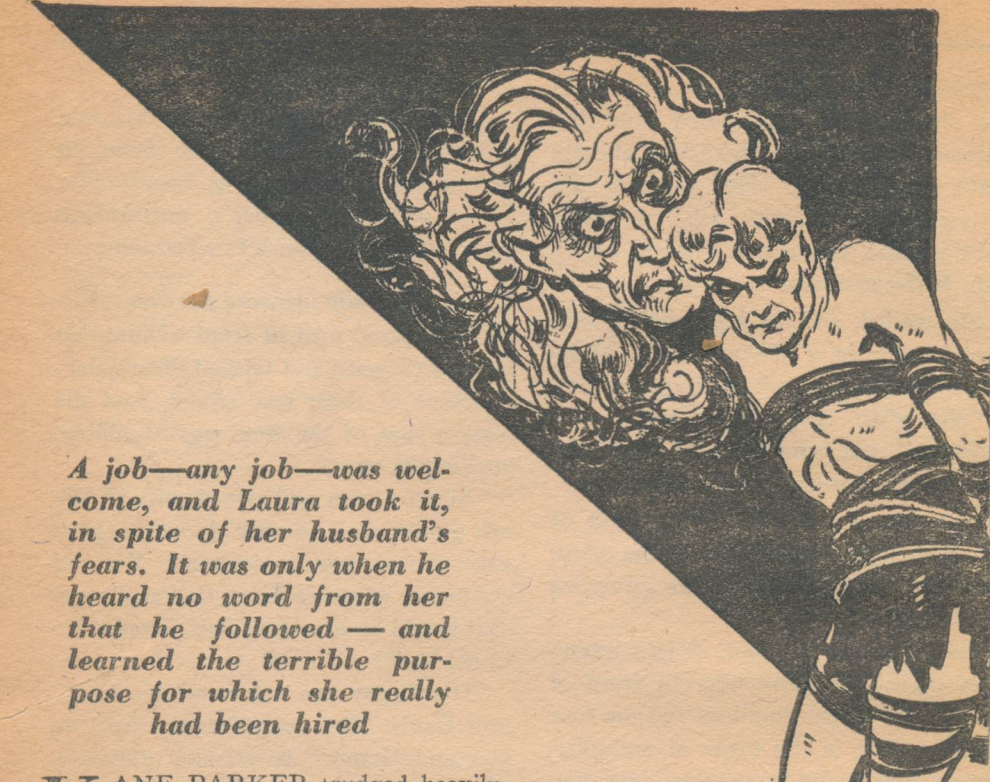
She was lying upon the ground beside the body of Count Annibale, and blood was oozing from her lips, and there was a red, widening stain upon her toga. Denis went to her side.

"I die," she gasped. "I am glad that I die, since he is dead also. My love—if I had lived, you would have made me your wife, and we should have gone far away together. Is it not so?"

"Yes," lied Denis.

"Now I have freed her, that little sister of yours. You will return to your own country. But it may be that, in the

(Continued on page 117)



A job—any job—was welcome, and Laura took it, in spite of her husband's fears. It was only when he heard no word from her that he followed — and learned the terrible purpose for which she really had been hired

KANE PARKER trudged heavily up the three flights of steps, opened the door of his barren, two-room flat. Laura was standing at the window. She turned when the hinge squeaked, ran into his arms, kissed him fervently.

"I've been waiting for you."

Kane held her close. The warmth of her brought comfort. His fingers slipped down her back to the slimly curved waist above the swelling of full hips. It was good to kiss her, to caress her.

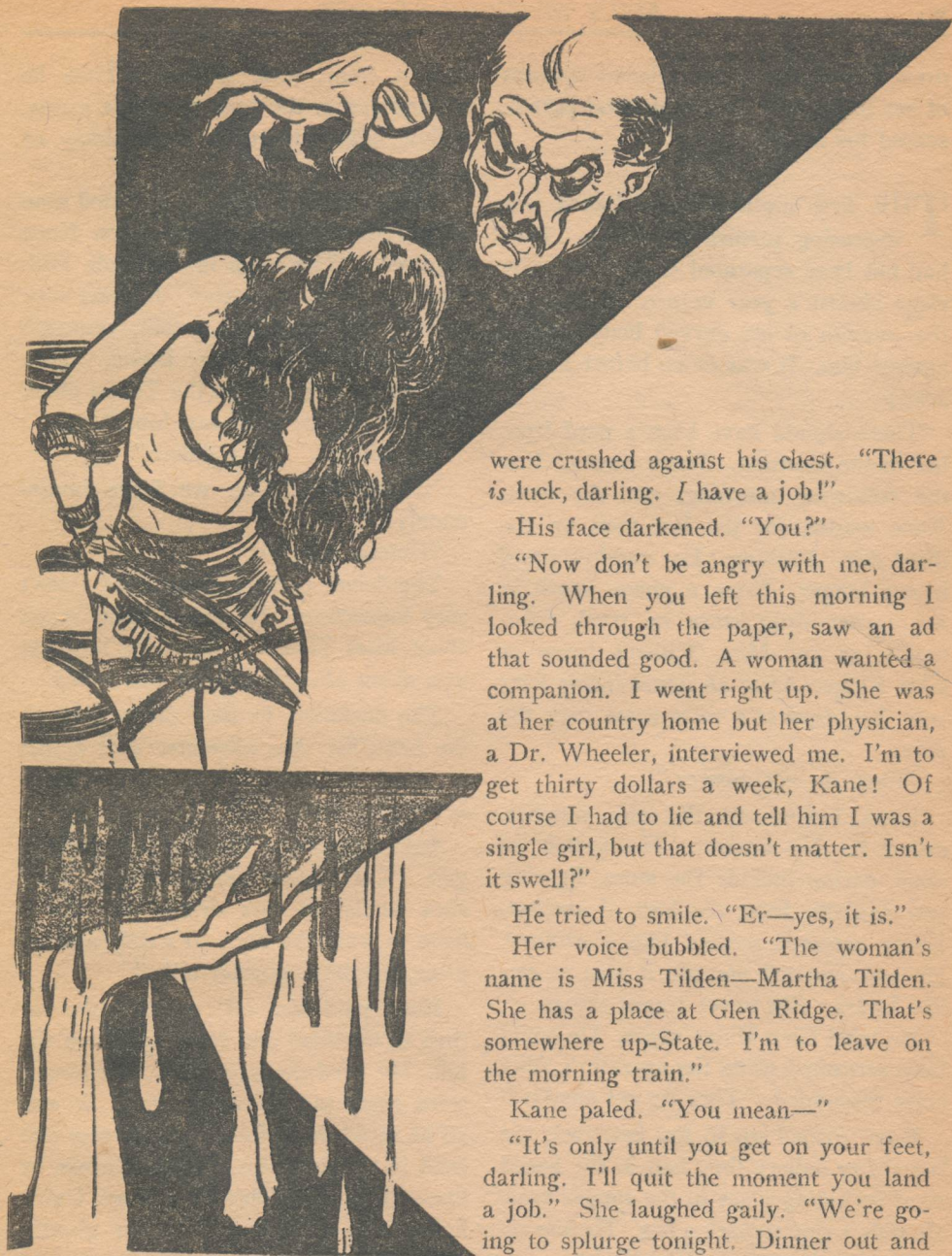
"No luck," he said softly. "I answered four ads and—"

She kissed him again, hugged herself close, so that her softly coned breasts



Young blood for old veins!

Blood of



--and they were the victims!

were crushed against his chest. "There is luck, darling. I have a job!"

His face darkened. "You?"

"Now don't be angry with me, darling. When you left this morning I looked through the paper, saw an ad that sounded good. A woman wanted a companion. I went right up. She was at her country home but her physician, a Dr. Wheeler, interviewed me. I'm to get thirty dollars a week, Kane! Of course I had to lie and tell him I was a single girl, but that doesn't matter. Isn't it swell?"

He tried to smile. "Er—yes, it is."

Her voice bubbled. "The woman's name is Miss Tilden—Martha Tilden. She has a place at Glen Ridge. That's somewhere up-State. I'm to leave on the morning train."

Kane paled. "You mean—"

"It's only until you get on your feet, darling. I'll quit the moment you land a job." She laughed gaily. "We're going to splurge tonight. Dinner out and a movie!" Her arms circled his neck,

Youth

By
**ARTHUR
WALLACE**

drew him down to the relaxed softness of her body. Her lips, moist and parted, seared his mouth.

THE first night without Laura was unceasing torture for Kane. They had not been separated since their marriage almost a year before. He missed the warmth of her curved body molded against him. It was dawn before he fell asleep.

There should have been a card from her in the morning. There wasn't. Nor the following morning, nor the next. Kane waited for the last mail on the third day. Nothing. He couldn't stand it any longer. From a phone booth in the corner drug store he tried, frantically, to get Miss Tilden's home at Glen Ridge. After an interminably long wait the operator's voice came over the wire.

"They do not answer."

Kane looked up the city number, called it. No answer. He waited an hour, pacing outside the store, lighting one cigarette from the butt of another. Every moment seemed like a century. He was worried because it was so unlike Laura. She never forgot things.

He tried Glen Ridge again. He could have screamed when the operator's silky voice responded: "They do not answer."

Kane rushed up to the flat, took the last thirty dollars they had in the world from its hiding place in the copper vase. He didn't stop to pack a bag. He was on the first train out for Glen Ridge.

IT WAS dark when the train drew up at the tiny shack of a station. Kane was the only passenger to disembark. He waited until the tail light of the rear car vanished around a bend in the tracks, until the *puff-puff* of the engine was

only a faint, eerie whisper. Then he walked across the road to where a dim, yellow light burned in the window of a general store.

"The Tilden place," the grizzled man behind the counter echoed when Kane inquired. "That's up to Belgrade Hill. Too far to walk, mister. A good nine miles." He turned to a thin, youngish man seated on a vinegar barrel. "Man here wants to get up to the Tilden place, Jed. Think you could cart him?"

Jed nodded. "Be a dollar."

"That's fine. Can we leave immediately?"

"Dunno why not?"

The driver of the rickety Ford wasn't very loquacious. He didn't know much about Miss Tilden. City folks, but that was about all. Heard she was sickly.

The darkness, as they drove through the low hills, was absolute. Not a star in the sky. Just an ebony curtain blanketing the earth.

Jed stopped the Ford at a large iron gate. "Can't go no farther, mister. They ain't partial to cars drivin' in. You'll have to walk the rest. It's only a short piece, maybe a quarter-mile."

Kane paid him off, watched the car turn in the road and rattle off down the hill. He tried the iron gate. The hinges were rusty but it swung open. It was all he could do to follow the narrow dirt road in the darkness. Almost before he knew it, the steeples of a huge frame house rose up before him like ghostly spires. There wasn't a light in any of the windows. Kane glanced at the radium dial of his wristwatch. Nine-thirty. Maybe he should have called from the general store.

He approached the house. The scraping of his feet against the gravel of the pathway left jagged holes in the un-

seen shroud of ominous quiet. He mounted the porch, groped for and found the door. Just as his knuckles were raised to rap he heard a low, throaty growl from inside the house.

The blood ran cold from his heart. Goose pimples formed on his skin. Again the growl—deep and rumbling. It was only a dog, he knew, but the sound of its throaty protest chilled him. It was the darkness, the silence and his own distraught state of mind.

He rapped three times, heard the hollow echo of it. For a moment the intense silence was unbroken. The dog growled once more. This time the eerie sound started on a heavy basso, rose in a whining crescendo until it faded into nothingness. As it died, another vocal protest came faintly to Kane's ears. It was a pitiful whimpering; the sob-choked keening of a lost, hapless soul. That was no animal. It was a cry torn from a human throat! A wail of anguish tinged with ghastly terror. The plaint of a body in the chill grip of hysteria.

Kane stiffened, held his breath. If that was Laura crying she was sick! That may have been the reason she hadn't written. She was dying! Panic seized him. He pounded on the door with both fists, cried out in a choked voice.

The flame of an oil lamp flickered somewhere within the house. Kane saw its orange-yellow glow. Wood scraped against wood and a panel in the door slid open. Slowly, as though it were even then taking form and substance, a face, visible in the uneven glow of the oil lamp light, appeared at the open panel.

IT WAS a face, the very sight of which stopped the beat of Kane's heart,

placed imaginative tourniquets on his veins and arteries, seemed to freeze the blood that flowed through them. It was a twisted, disease-eaten mask of humanity, the lips thin and bloodless, drawn back over caries-yellow teeth; the nose two gaping, black nostrils beneath small, rheumy eyes. A lock of sand-gray hair fell over the man's temple. Otherwise he was bald, the skin of his skull drawn up like that of a prune.

A sound came from the creature's throat, passed the lips that were powdery blue. Kane took it for interrogation. Somehow he found voice to answer.

"My name is Parker. I'm looking for my—my—" He caught himself, remembered Laura's lie. "I'm looking for my sister, Laura Parker. She was supposed to have—"

"Ain' nobody here," the man grunted. His cadaverous hand came up to close the panel.

"She *must* be here!" Kane screamed. "She came up two days ago! Let me see Miss Tilden!"

"Ain't nobody here," the human corpse repeated doggedly. The panel began to slide shut. Kane jammed his fist through the now small opening, slid it back.

"Let me in! I want to see Miss Tilden!" He would have killed to pass that portal. The horror of mental anxiety was making a madman of him. "Let me in!"

The face disappeared. Blackness filled the opening in the door. Kane found the knob, twisted it. The door was locked tight. He pounded on the heavy oak.

Suddenly he heard the scrape of a bar latch. He took one step back as the door swung open slowly.

"Come in," a cracked voice said.

Without hesitation, Kane stepped across the threshold. He knew, as he raised his foot that he was spanning some mysterious abyss that separated reality from the mad machinations of God only knew what. And yet, he entered the portal without fear. It was Laura he was thinking about, Laura who might be breathing her last. His Laura, who had been—it seemed ages now!—sweet and young and warm in his arms.

It was pitch black in the carpeted hallway. The door slammed shut and the latch slid home with a metallic *click*. Kane sucked in air, held it imprisoned in his lungs. Where was the hideous old man with the lamp?

He heard a soft rustle behind him, turned. Something swung out of the impenetrable darkness, crashed down on the side of his head. The blow sent a hell of pain shooting through the left side of his body, buckled one leg under him so that he dropped to that knee. Instinctively he reached out, fingers clawed. His right hand caught in a loose garment, held. He jerked towards him, swung with his free clenched fist. The knuckles smashed against bone.

The next moment a guttural cry cleaved the black. There was the swish of lightning movement, a hideous growl. A whirling tornado of fur-coated beast lunged at Kane, knocked him down. Hot slobberings from the beast's mouth dropped on his face, burned like molten lead. With his left side rapidly numbing from the blow on the head, Kane fought valiantly but hopelessly against this snarling, fanged adversary. It had all the shape and form of a dog but something in the tenor of its growling seemed wild and untrained.

Kane waited for the horrible moment

when the beast's fangs found his throat. The pain would be short-lived, he knew. He thought of Laura on that last night. Laura with her young body quivering in the grip of passion. Laura with her breasts tight against him in the fever of his embrace. Laura with her moist lips—"

Crack! Brilliant lights flashed across Kane's horizon. All the colors of the spectrum. Why were they doing this to him? Why? Why? There was a sharp hiss and the lights went out. The uncleavable darkness of unconsciousness engulfed him.

WHEN he awoke, his head throbbed as though a million needles were piercing his brain. It was day. Light seeped in through a small skylight window in the sloped roof that formed the ceiling of the room to which he had been consigned.

Recalling his last ghastly moments of consciousness, Kane gingerly touched his throat, fully expecting to find the flesh torn from the beast's fangs. It wasn't. Had it all been a mad dream? No! He could still feel the hot saliva drooling down on his cheeks, hear the husky panting of the animal.

He gained his feet, stumbled to the one door the bare room boasted. It was locked. Kane looked up at the tiny window. There was no way of reaching it, except by climbing, fly-fashion, up the sloped roof. Ordinarily, he would never have dared try it. But the necessity for breaking out of this prison, for finding Laura spurred him on. Slowly, tortuously, he lifted himself up, clung to the cross beams.

Twice he reached a point within two feet of the slanting window, lost his hold. By now three of his nails were almost torn out by the roots. Blood

"You did bring it, didn't you?" she whimpered. Kane had to tear loose from her.

dragging, leaden weight of his body pulling at his arm muscles. Another inch! Another inch! His encarnadined fingers touched the sill. One last, body-wracking effort and he was there, hanging fifteen feet above the floor, gasping for breath.



streamed from his finger-tips. The pain twisted the nerves in his arms, made him want to scream with the agony of it all. He rested, tried again. This time he hung on for dear life despite the

The rest was comparatively easy. The window swung back on a hinge. Kane squirmed out on the roof, lay flat on his stomach until his torn muscles ached only dully. It was a gray day, without

sun. A light mist hung over the hill on which the gabled house was built.

Careful lest he lose his balance and hurtle to the ground below, Kane crawled down the roof on his stomach. His goal was a small balcony with a curtained window opening out on it. He reached it, dropped down on the soles of his feet, noiselessly.

Each moment was precious. There were none to waste. God only knew what horrible things were taking place in this house of madness. He raised the window from the bottom, swung his leg over the sill, found himself in a bedroom. But he wasn't alone. Stretched out on the bed, in cheap, imitation lace-trimmed step-ins and the flimsiest of net brassieres, was a young girl! with bobbed platinum hair and intensely red lips.

She seemed to be sleeping. One rounded arm was bent above her head. The other lay across her gently curved stomach. For a moment Kane watched her small, half-globed breasts rise under the brassiere cups. Her eyes were closed, their long, dark lashes brushing deep purple circles under them. At intervals the muscles of her cheeks twitched and her mouth worked.

Looking at her, Kane had hideous thoughts. Her young face was indelibly marked with all the signs of vice. The swollen lower lip, the circled eyes, the almost too-white body. Was that what Laura had walked into?

Kane crossed the room, gripped the door knob. As he did, the girl awoke, sat bolt upright. Her deep blue eyes were shot through with a feverish light.

"You brought it!" she gasped. "Give it to me!"

She was off the bed, her bare arms about Kane's neck, her lithe body press-

ing close, shaking in an access of near hysteria. "For God's sake, give it to me! I'm going crazy!"

Kane tried to push her away. Some of the blood from his torn fingers stained her alabaster shoulders. She cringed, loathing written on her face.

"Blood!" she screamed. "All I see is blood! Take it away! No more blood! No more!"

KANE clamped his hand over her mouth, his other arm mashing her writhing body steel-tight to him in an effort to squeeze the breath from her lungs. But suddenly he realized it was too late. Her maniacal shrieking had probably aroused whoever was in the house. The old, loathesome man! The wet-jawed beast! He dropped the girl to the bed, crossed to the door, turned the key in the lock. The girl sat up, her mouth quivering, one side of her face cruelly twisted.

"You did bring it, didn't you?" she whimpered. "Say you did! He promised it to me!"

She came towards him again, arms outstretched, palms up. One of her brassiere straps had slipped off her shoulder. The upper rondure of a breast was visible where it dipped into the valley separating the twin mounds of snow-pale softness.

"I'll do anything," she whimpered. "Anything! Just give me one shot! Only one!"

Kane's eyes flashed to the white roundness of her upper left arm. Dozens of tiny punctures marred the smooth skin. Now he knew what she was begging for. Dope! She was a morphine addict!

He had little time to think about it. Someone knocked at the door, turned

the knob. "Open up!" a deep voice called. "Miss Shaw! Open the door!"

The girl's eyes brightened. She shoved Kane roughly aside, turned the key. The door swung open. A tall, gray-haired man came into the room, stopped short as he saw Kane.

"You've got it!" the girl screamed. "Give it to me!" She clung to the gray-haired man, pulling at his jacket. He gripped her arms, backed her to the bed.

"Keep quiet!" he snapped. Then, turning to Kane. "I've been looking for you, Mr. Parker. My name is Dr. Wheeler. I can't tell you how sorry I am about the incident of last night. Miss Tilden's caretaker was over-cautious. He had no right attacking you. Please accept my apologies."

"Where is—is my—my sister?" Kane blurted.

"There is no longer any need for subterfuge, Mr. Parker," the physician said calmly. "Mrs. Parker admitted that she was married. It's quite all right. She's gone to the city on an errand for Miss Tilden. She will be back some time tonight."

The leaden weight of anxiety dropped from Kane's heart. That was why Laura hadn't written. She was coming in. Evidently their trains had passed.

The platinum blonde on the bed began to whimper and grovel. A sharp sob wracked her shoulders and the net bandeau fell away completely from one trembling breast. Dr. Wheeler motioned Kane out of the room, locked the door from the outside.

"A niece of Miss Tilden's," he said softly. "I have been trying to break her of the morphine habit. Truly a pitiful case." He led the way down carpeted steps to a large, walnut-paneled dining-

room. "You must be hungry, Mr. Parker. I'll see that you get some food."

Kane sank into a chair, at rest for the first time since Laura had left. Now he could smile at his groundless fears. It was amazing how the human mind conjured up fantastic horrors from nothing.

Dr. Wheeler returned bearing a tray. There were sandwiches, hot coffee, cookies. Kane wolfed the food down, explained why he had come.

"I can understand readily," the physician said. "You must let me bandage your fingers when you're through. I can't tell you how much I regret the occurrence. Fortunately, I drove up from the city this morning. Otherwise, you might have gone mad from the mystery of it all."

The doctor was attentively solicitous, repeating his apology again and again. When Kane was finished, he brought bandages and adhesive tape.

"I should like to have you meet Miss Tilden," he said. "She is quite pleased with your wife."

Kane followed him upstairs, through a long hallway. He knocked at a door, opened it before there was any response.

"Come in, Mr. Parker," he said.

KANE entered a tremendous bedroom. Seated in a chair at the window was a tiny, shriveled-up old lady. The skin of her face was like time-worn parchment. Her hands, folded in her lap, were tallow white, almost opalescent in their thinness.

"A young man to see you, Martha," Dr. Wheeler said. "A nice young man. I promised I'd bring one and I did, didn't I?"

The old lady's eyes lit up. Her emaciated body quivered. "You did, doctor,"

she wheezed. "Yes, you did." A bloodless tongue licked around her gray lips. As she looked at Kane, her eyes became brighter, flickered like candle flames.

Dr. Wheeler moved close to Kane. "I forgot to tell you," he whispered. "She's just a bit queer."

Martha Tilden's hand came up. "Come here, young man," she croaked. "Come closer."

Kane hesitated. There was something ghoulish about the woman. Something in the pupils of her bright eyes that wasn't clean. He stood there, looking at the shriveled old woman, his flesh creeping. He didn't see Dr. Wheeler back to the door, slip outside. But he heard a key grate in a lock. He spun around. The physician was gone. Kane was alone with Martha Tilden.

"You'll get paid well," she croaked dismally. "It isn't so bad, really. None of them like it at first but they get used to it. That girl—the pretty one—she didn't like it. Maybe it's the blood that frightens them, don't you think?"

Blood! What was she talking about? The platinum blonde girl had shrieked about blood, too! *Blood!* Why did they talk of blood?

"Maybe we won't need the blood with you," Martha Tilden said. "We haven't tried it with a young man, yet. Maybe we'll just need what Dr. Wheeler said."

She lifted herself out of the chair, hobbled towards Kane. She was drooling from the corners of her mouth. "Hold me close to you, young man!" she gasped. "Let me feel the warmth!"

Before Kane could move, she was clutching him, pressing her thin, wasted body against him. It was a gruesome, ghastly sensation; a loathsomeness that turned Kane's stomach. He tried to pull away but her fingers were like talons.

"Kiss me!" she gasped. "Breathe your youth into me! You've got so much of it!"

Revulsion had nauseated Kane to the point of action. He tore away from her clutching hands, his desperate force wrenching her to her knees. She crept toward him again, arms uplifted, her sallow face convulsed with an inordinate frenzy of emotion that was disgusting.

Kane reached the door. It was locked. "Let me out!" he shouted.

A motor hummed somewhere outside the room. Before Kane's eyes, part of the wall slid back, revealing thick iron bars like those of a prison cell. Dr. Wheeler was standing behind the bars.

"You may as well know this now, Parker," he said, his voice ominously unpitched. "Unless you do as Miss Tilden desires, you may never see your wife again."

Kane's heart leaped to his throat, choked him. He lunged at the bars. Wheeler stepped back, laughed softly.

"Don't be a fool, Parker. You'll be paid well for doing what you're told."

Kane found voice. "I'll kill you!" he screamed. "Let me out of here!"

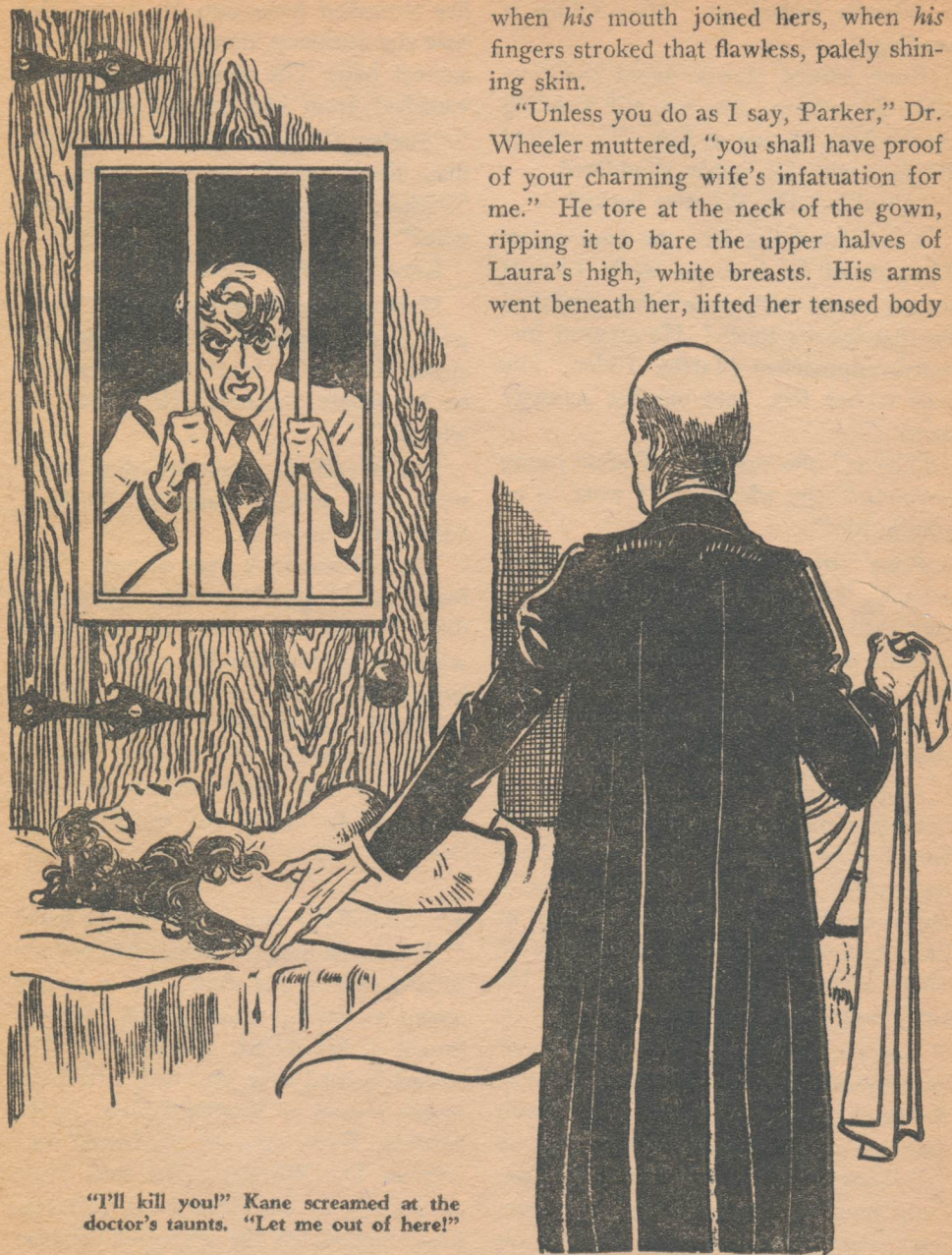
THE physician stepped to one side, out of Kane's vision. There was a scraping on the floor of the room beyond the bars. A large bed rolled into view. Stretched on it, her restless figure covered only by a nightgown that half bared her breasts and did not reach her knees, was Laura!

The name leaped from Kane's lips. "Laura!" He gripped the bars, in his hysteria tried to tear them loose. "Laura!" he shrieked.

She opened her eyes. They were horribly glazed. She seemed not to recog-

when *his* mouth joined hers, when *his* fingers stroked that flawless, palely shining skin.

"Unless you do as I say, Parker," Dr. Wheeler muttered, "you shall have proof of your charming wife's infatuation for me." He tore at the neck of the gown, ripping it to bare the upper halves of Laura's high, white breasts. His arms went beneath her, lifted her tensed body



"I'll kill you!" Kane screamed at the doctor's taunts. "Let me out of here!"

nize him. Dr. Wheeler bent over her, ran his fingers across her bare shoulder. She quivered, moaned softly. He leaned over, kissed her parted lips. Kane saw her slender form stiffen, just as it did

as he pressed kisses to the deathly white sweep of her throat. Kane gripped the bars frantically, as if by his very anger he could rend iron. "No!" he screamed. "For God's sake, no!"

Wheeler looked up. "Miss Tilden is waiting."

Kane turned slowly, faced the horrible old woman. She was still kneeling on the floor, leering at him. He covered his face with his hands, shuddered.

"Quickly," Dr. Wheeler barked.

Kane dared not face the bars again. How could he look on while Laura's sweet, young body was being profaned by that beast's touch? He stepped forward, approached Martha Tilden. She rose to her feet, held out her scrawny arms.

"Come," she rasped. "You're young—young!" she wheezed. "I want to be young, too!"

Kane touched her chill fingers, cringed. The blood in her dried-up veins was cold. She was almost a walking corpse; a thing of skin and bones. It was sickening to touch her. . . .

Dr. Wheeler's voice broke in on his thoughts. "Look, Parker!"

Kane swung around. It was an involuntary motion. At that moment he would have been thankful if something had struck him blind. Anything, only not to be able to see what was going on behind those bars. But no such surcease from horror came. He saw, and his heart was cleaved in two.

Laura's round, soft arms were about the physician's neck. Her breasts were flattened against his chest. Her body quivered in the sublime ecstasy that he had thought she could feel only for *him*. Only, now, he was watching those bliss-maddening kisses of hers lavished on another. Something was mad! The fiend had drugged Laura! But what was the difference? Each fleeting moment only tore his heart with greater agony.

Stop!" he shrieked. "Stop!"

He turned to Martha Tilden, swept

her shrunken body into his arms. But now she stiffened instead of going limp against him. The almost insane frenzy vanished from her wrinkled face.

"Parker," she whispered, so softly that Kane could scarcely hear her. "Parker. That—that girl is your—your wife?"

Kane nodded. "Yes."

Martha Tilden's eyes softened. "Your wife," she repeated. "So young and sweet. I—I told Dr. Wheeler they were to be single persons. He knew my wishes."

The physician, suspicious that something was wrong, came to the bars. "Martha!" he called.

The old woman's eyes blazed. "You fooled me!" she screamed. "Yes, you did! Maybe you fooled me about the whole thing! Maybe I'm going mad to believe you! This boy and that girl are married! It isn't right! I told you only single people!" She gripped Kane's arm. "The top drawer of my bureau!" she gasped. "Keys—to every door—hurry!"

IT SEEMED like hours before Kane found the ring of keys, inserted the correct one in the door. As it swung open, a hairy, white-fanged tornado leaped at his throat. He ducked. The animal hurtled over his head, struck the fragile person of Martha Tilden. In the hallway, Kane saw the shadowed outlines of Dr. Wheeler. The steel blade of a knife in his right hand glittered. Kane lunged, felt the deadly weapon cut through the arm of his jacket. He smashed his fist into Wheeler's face, knocked him down. The knife clattered to the floor. Kane pounced on it, was ready for the physician's attack. Mindless of the consequences, he slashed out.

The point of the blade slid under Wheeler's chin, went into his throat to the hilt. He died without a sound, his jugular cut.

Kane pulled the blade out. It was dripping with blood. He faced the room. The huge, hairy animal—a dog that was half-wolf—was just about to sink its fangs into the old woman's throat when Kane struck with the knife, dropped it in its tracks. He lifted Martha Tilden to the bed. Her throat and chest was red with blood.

A noise behind him brought him whirling around. The revolting old man who had first let him into the house was crouched on the threshold, a revolver in his hand. Kane knew it was a matter of life and death. In that timeless moment his harried mind harked back to the days when he had practised knife throwing for hours on end. His arm went back, fingers tight at the tip of the gory blade. *Zing!* It whizzed through the air. Flame leaped from the old man's gun, but too late. The shot went wild as the knife blade pierced his chest, cut through to the heart.

Martha Tilden's voice—deathly weak—brought Kane to the bedside. "Paper," she whispered. "P-pencil."

Kane found them on the bureau. Slowly, painfully, she dictated her last will and testament. "I—I want you and your wife . . . to have something to repay you for . . . for all this horror." She signed her name to the penciled document, sank back wearily.

Kane leaned over. "Tell me why all this happened?"

A faint smile crossed her face. "Vanity, my boy. I . . . I was young and beautiful . . . once. Like a fool I thought I could regain that . . . that youth. Dr. Wheeler said he could do it with young blood. I . . . I promised him a fortune . . . have given him thousands already. Now I can see it . . . it was all a ghastly trick to . . . to get my money. All this secrecy and mystery he said was necessary to insure me quiet. There have been others . . . poor, young creatures . . . who gave their blood. He doped them to keep them here. When nothing happened he suggested a young man. You know the rest."

Her eyelids closed heavily. Kane heard the horrible rattle of death. She died.

LEAVING the room that was swimming in the blood of man and beast, Kane found the barred room where Laura was stretched on a bed

His arms, now strong, went about her. Feverishly, he kissed her unresponsive lips. It seemed to bring life back to her. She stirred, opened her eyes.

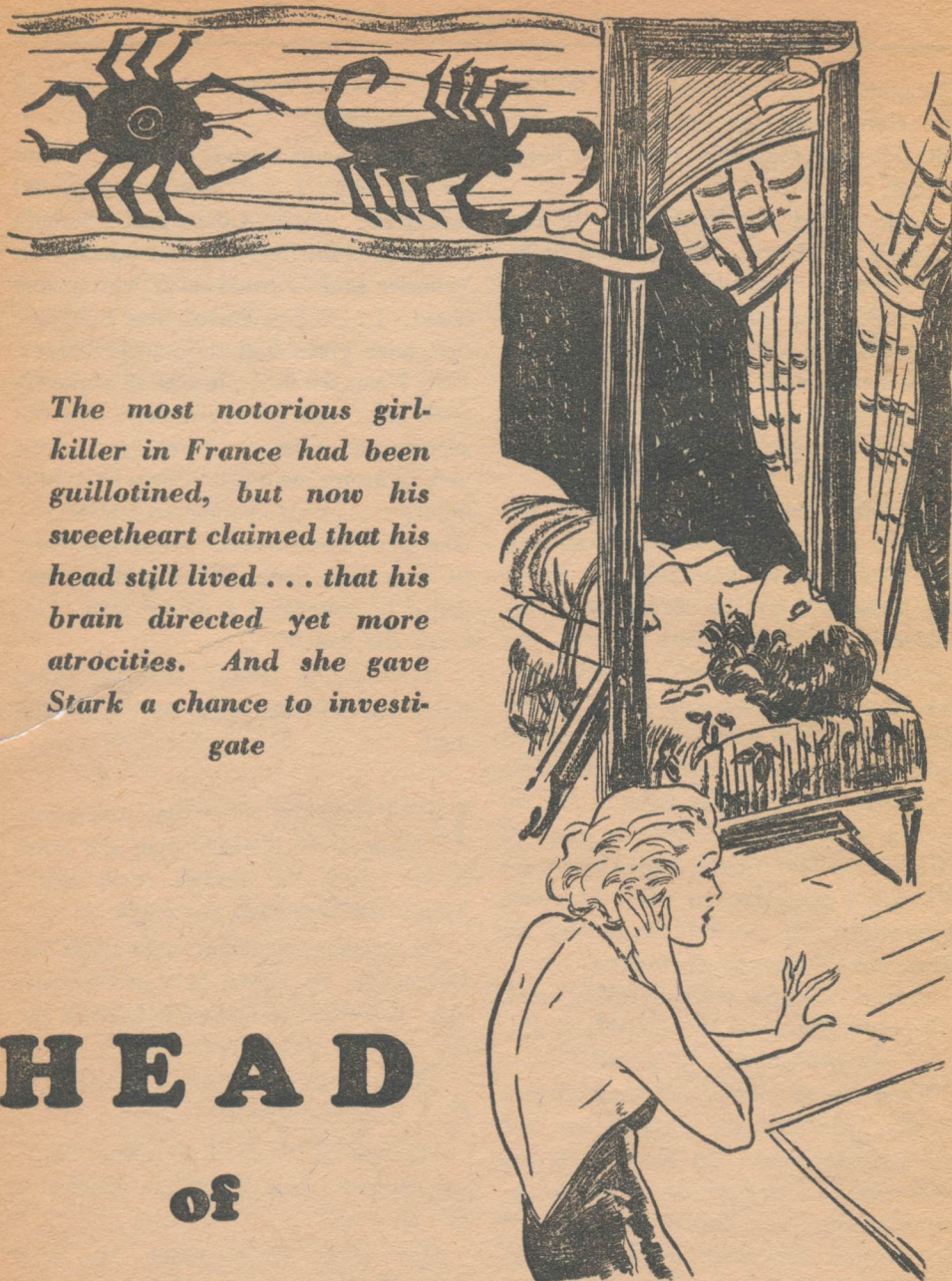
"Kane!" she moaned. "Kane! Oh, God, what happened?"

He touched his cheek to hers. "Nothing, darling. Just a horrible nightmare. It's all over."

Her arms crept about his neck. Warmth flowed between them.

In our next issue—

"VAULT OF HORROR" by Clive Trent!



The most notorious girl-killer in France had been guillotined, but now his sweetheart claimed that his head still lived . . . that his brain directed yet more atrocities. And she gave Stark a chance to investigate

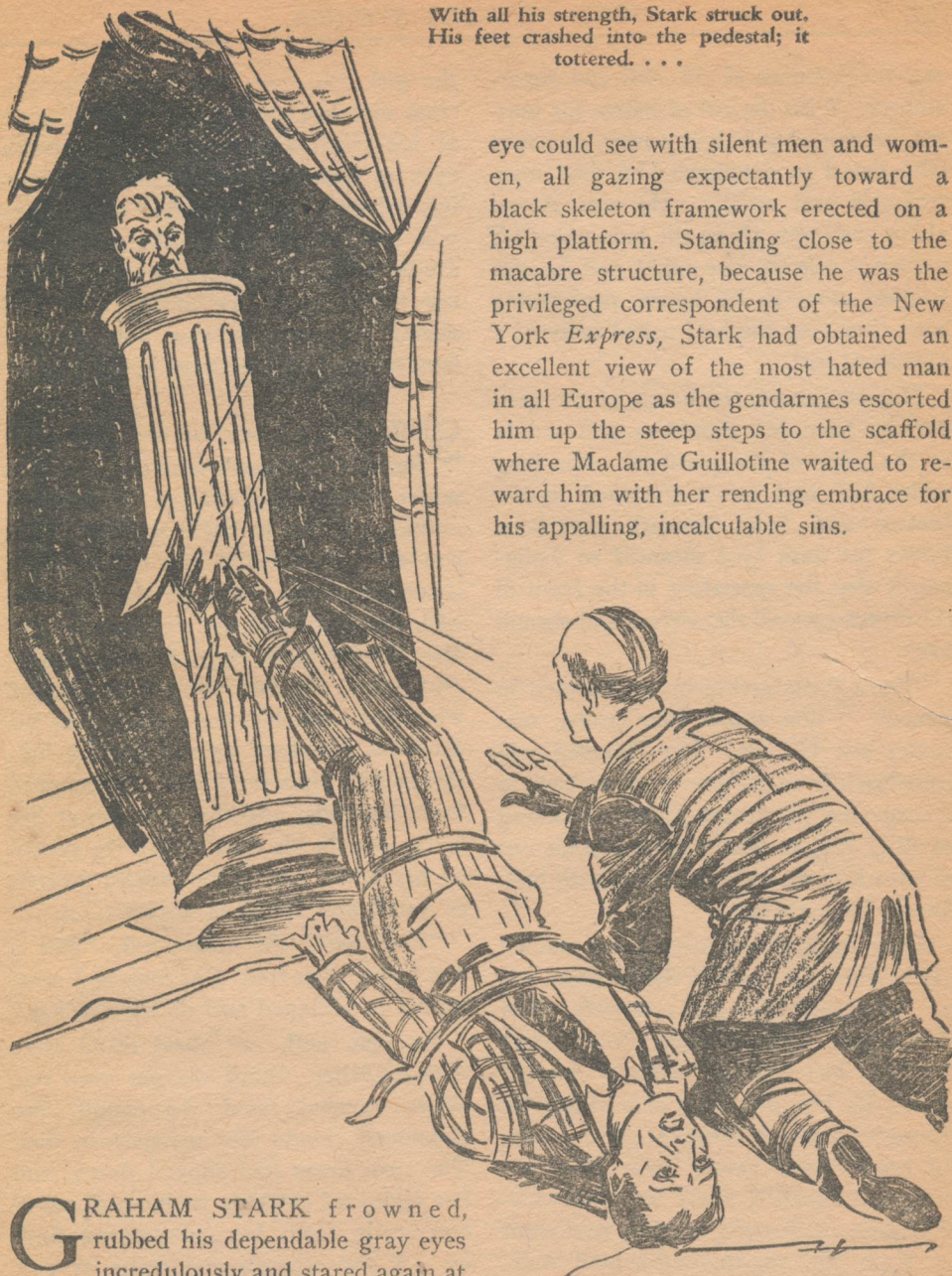
HEAD

of

HAKMED

By C. A. M. DONNE

With all his strength, Stark struck out.
His feet crashed into the pedestal; it
tottered. . . .



GRAHAM STARK frowned, rubbed his dependable gray eyes incredulously and stared again at the reflection of the exotic blonde in the bar mirror. Gradually his lean, aquiline face took on a reminiscent aspect and his mind turned away from the New York glitter, looking backward five years. . . .

He recalled a narrow street in Paris, packed from wall to wall as far as the

eye could see with silent men and women, all gazing expectantly toward a black skeleton framework erected on a high platform. Standing close to the macabre structure, because he was the privileged correspondent of the *New York Express*, Stark had obtained an excellent view of the most hated man in all Europe as the gendarmes escorted him up the steep steps to the scaffold where Madame Guillotine waited to reward him with her rending embrace for his appalling, incalculable sins.

Hakmed, the condemned man had called himself—and people whispered that he was the reincarnation of Cagliostro, the great charlatan of the Eighteenth Century, whose magic bent kings and statesmen to his dark will. Hakmed dealt in magic of the blackest hue, angling with fearsome spells for the souls

and the fortunes of the rich and superstitious. With the aid of Satan, his master, he gained gold and power, and men who dared to denounce him died mysteriously and swiftly. He was almost above restraint, above the law, when his vigilance relaxed one night and he was trapped alone in his house, performing mad rites over the half naked body of a murdered girl.

Hakmed shook the hands of the gendarmes from his shoulders and strode to the edge of the platform. His long white hair and beard streamed in the breeze, and from beneath cavernous brows his dark eyes gleamed so malignantly that the spectators in the front of the crowd crossed themselves and shrank back.

"Fools!" the arch-criminal shouted in French. "You think your pretty machines can kill me! But Hakmed will come back from the grave—come back to scourge the world and make a mockery of all of you, to tear your tiny souls out of your breasts and cook them with hell-fire for his breakfast—"

They dragged him to the blood-stained block, fitted his neck in the wooden collar, strapped his feet securely. The slant-edged knife dropped twenty feet through its grooves with a hissing sound, bit like the blade of a swung ax through flesh. Hakmed's snowy, sinful head tipped gently away from his body and rolled sedately into the wicker basket. A throaty, horrible roar went up from the rag-tag-and-bobtail mob, and all at once the world seemed a better place for the passing of the monster.

Pushing through the crowd, above which his head and shoulders towered, Stark had felt his arm grasped by eager fingers. He looked down into the exotic, strangely beautiful face of Chela,

the girl who had been Hakmed's mistress and had been exonerated of guilt at his trial. Her compelling, feverish eyes of hazel were untroubled at having witnessed the execution of the man who had ruled her life. She said: "You are the gentleman who wrote such shocking things about me at my trial, and whom I forgave because you were so handsome. Come with me to my house."

SENSING a story, he had gone with her to the ancient, fantastic structure where Hakmed had enacted his countless crimes. In the barbaric splendor of a boudoir whose walls and ceiling were shaped like the dome of the heavens, with the stars and the signs of the Zodiac limned upon them in phosphorescent paint, she had poured him spiced wine that made his senses spin. And his dizziness increased as she pressed herself to him for a brief kiss. She stepped back, laughing, and the little pin at her bodice caught his coat, ripped the bosom of her dress, away from snowy breasts as small and fresh as apples.

"Kiss me!" she whispered. "For a few hours I am free. But tonight I must return to Hakmed and do his bidding."

No man with red blood could have withstood her. Stark did not even try. With frenzied hands he caught her shoulders, caught her savagely to him. The torn dress had slipped down, and her high heel catching its hem, ripped it completely from her, uncovering flesh as soft and smooth and white as rich cream, slender curves that no sculptor could have equalled in the purest of marble. His heart hammered until his whole body throbbed to its rhythm, and his blood turned to liquid fire. The little murmurings of rapture that came from her throat were more stirring than any music he had ever heard. . . .

THEN, that night, the head of Hakmed vanished from the keeping of the police. It was to have been sent to the Sorbonne, where learned doctors and earnest students could dissect it and perhaps discover something new about the mentality of criminals. But when the wicker basket was opened the next morning it contained only a big lump of putty, squeezed by unskilled hands into a grotesque caricature of one of the trial judges who had passed the death sentence.

Ridiculous rumors filled the columns of the sensational Paris newspapers and were repeated everywhere. It was said that magic and science had been combined to keep Hakmed's head alive, that the charlatan's evil powers had grown immensely until now, relieved of the responsibility of a body, the brain was to be feared as never before. It was pointed out that Russian scientists had kept the severed head of a dog alive for years by providing it with a mechanical heart and lungs.

Not long after the execution, the trial judge who had been caricatured committed suicide by hurling himself from the top of the Eiffel Tower. In falling, his neck struck one of the bracing girders and the head was torn away, dropping into a basket placed for the disposal of rubbish. Thousands were converted by that startling coincidence to belief in the immortality of Hakmed—so many that a cult of men and women calling themselves his disciples came into being.

Within recent weeks, anonymous letters to the New York newspapers, published for the most part as humorous offerings, had asserted that Hakmed's head was now in America, still living. . . .

THE exotic blonde at the bar in the Hotel Luxor in New York sipped

her creme de menthe sparingly. She whispered something to the man beside her, and Stark, shifting his glance to the man's reflection in the mirror, was surprised again. He could not mistake the fleshy face, piggish little eyes and silver hair of Thornton Lakely, the oil millionaire.

Acting on a sudden impulse, he moved from his cushioned stool at the bar to one beside the girl. He ordered whisky-and-soda from the bartender, pretending not to notice her. Before the drink was served he felt her fingers on his sleeve, exactly as he had felt them that day in Paris, and in spite of himself he was thrilled by the touch.

"M'sieur Stark!" cried a voice he would have recognized anywhere. "Is it possible you have forgotten Chela?"

Feigning glad surprise, he faced her. "Forgotten you!" he said. "Not as long as I live. But I think of you when I think of Paris. How long have you been in America?"

"One month. Since my marriage." "Marriage!"

She said: "Can you be discreet? Can you keep a secret, and not print it in your newspaper?"

He nodded, smiling.

"Then," she said, "meet my husband, M'sieur Lakely. It is a secret no one else knows."

Scowling, obviously ill at ease, Lakely extended a pudgy hand. "Glad to know you," he said.

"M'sieur Stark knew Hakmed," Chela told Lakely. "He was near me at the guillotine when they—how do you say it?—lopped off his head."

Lakely's scowl deepened. Clearly, he did not want to talk about Hakmed. He stirred restively. "My dear," he said, "I have two or three things to attend to. Supposing I leave you with Mr.—ah—

Stark, and meet you at midnight, as we planned."

"As you wish, *cheri*. Only, do not be late. He is very strict about appointments."

"I'll be on time. And while I am gone, perhaps it would be better to say nothing further about—us." He gave Stark an unfriendly nod, squirmed down from his stool and left them hurriedly.

"HE wasn't very pleased to meet me," Stark observed. His eyes were busy appraising Chela, discovering that she had changed not at all in the five years since he had seen her. Her lithe body was just as slender, just as lovely, to judge by the curves that appeared in outline through the metallic cloth of her expensive gown. Her breasts must still be firm and young, to form such delightful, gleaming mounds.

"He was frightened." She was perfectly aware of his scrutiny. For his benefit she moved so that the outlines of her hip and thigh were more sharply portrayed, and straightened her ivory shoulders to draw the top of her dress tighter across her breasts, accenting the soft depression between them.

"Frightened of me?" He wasn't especially interested in what her answer would be. His consciousness was taken up almost entirely with her nearness and the recollection of that afternoon in Paris, after her monstrous paramour had been sent back to the abyss from which he must have sprung.

"No," she said. "Frightened of Hakmed. He is here with me in New York, you know."

Her words shook him out of his pleasant abstraction. He stared into her hazel eyes and thought he saw laughter there. He said: "That wouldn't be a bad joke, except that I can't see the point to it."

"But it is not a joke. I really have him. His head, that is, and his brain—all that was ever very real about him. And even though he is legally dead, let me assure you his mind is very much alive and has been very active."

"I should like to see him," Stark said slowly. He still didn't believe her, but he was beginning to suspect there might be something behind her claim that would make a story.

"And I should like to have you," she remarked unexpectedly. "I should like you to write about it. In order for Hakmed to interest people, to attract clients who can use his powers, he must be talked about. I have written letters to the newspapers, but they have all been laughed at. If you, who are well known, should write an article saying that he is really here, it would be believed and people would seek him out."

"And let him murder them," he supplied.

"Pfah! How can a head commit murder? Even in the old days, he never harmed anyone unless they tried to make trouble for him."

"Self-defense, eh?" Stark was thinking of the girl for whose brutal murder Hakmed had been executed. "Very well—if you take me to see him, I'll write about it."

"Splendid!" She was pleased as a child with a new toy. "But you must let me blindfold you. You are not to know how to find the house he has made his headquarters. That is one of the rules he has laid down."

"I agree."

"And," she continued, her eyes beginning to glow, "you must remember that day in Paris, and try to be a little bit nice to me."

For, as a head cannot commit murder—neither has it the strong arms, the

kisses for Chela . . . as *you* have, *cheri*!

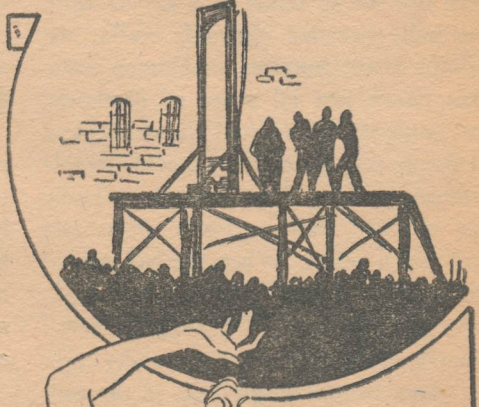
Stark did remember—how could he forget!—that day in Paris. And his heart throbbed with excitement “But how about your new husband, Chela?”

She made a grimace. “He is a fat fool. For twenty years he has had no interest in love. I married him only for his money!”

OUTSIDE the hotel they entered a taxi. Chela whispered directions to the driver. As the cab pulled away from

the curb she took a pair of goggles from her handbag.

“I carry these for my fat husband to wear when he goes to see Hakmed,” she explained. “The lenses are stuffed



The knife flashed down, left a red streak across white flesh. . . .



with cotton. They look ordinary enough, but you can see nothing through them."

Stark discovered she was right. Held close against his eyes by an elastic band, their leather shields fitting snugly, he could not see so much as a ray of light. The cab threaded through traffic for perhaps fifteen minutes, making so many turns Stark lost all sense of direction, then stopped. Chela paid the driver and led Stark, still blinded, for a considerable distance, turning three corners. Finally they climbed half a dozen steps and went into a house. When she had guided him through several rooms, Chela said: "You may take off the goggles now."

Stark blinked in the faint violet light that came from a single bulb in the ceiling. He was standing in a room reminiscent of that luxurious boudoir in Paris, but smaller and less elaborate. Velvet drapes were drawn tightly over windows in one wall.

"I don't see our friend Hakmed," he remarked.

She laughed musically. "You have fulfilled the first condition. You have worn the goggles. Now you must fulfill the second."

Grinning with anticipation, he advanced and put his arms around her. And as her pulsing, vibrant figure melted against him the smile left him. There was nothing gay, nothing laughable about the emotion that shook her, and that leaped like a spark to seize him. As though a powerful electric current flowed from her body, he began to tremble.

The touch of her red lips, moist and slightly parted, was like the searing kiss of a hot iron, tingling every nerve in his body with an indescribable pleasure almost too painful to bear. His arms tightened in a spasm of eagerness; and the wild hammering of her heart made the firm breasts against his chest seem

live, fluttering things. Her smothering kiss and his own thickening pulse choked him until he could hardly breathe. His fingers were scratched by the coarseness of the metallic cloth that shaped itself to the curves of her smooth hips, her sleek thighs. Her fingers rose swiftly, and as if by a magic gesture, the dress rustled to the floor.

Without the gown, clad only in wispy underthings, her white body was a torturing dream. He clasped her so tightly that it seemed he must crush her, yet her breath only came faster and her hazel eyes burned more feverishly as she moaned and writhed, her mouth moist and avid as it clung to his . . .

"FOLLOW me," she said when he again reminded her of the purpose of his visit. "Come—and I'll show you —Hakmed!"

He lingered in the room for just a moment—just long enough to step to a window, pull one of the drapes aside and peer through the shutter. The first thing that met his eyes told him what he wanted to know. It was the sign of a shop across the street—ELMER GUTZ, PLUMBER.

Hastening after Chela, he found her at the entrance to yet another room. It was a long, oblong box of a chamber, bare of furniture, lit only by candles in tall sconces. Floor, walls and ceiling were sheathed in black velvet.

Chela addressed a heavy curtain that hung across the end of the room. "Master, here is one who would know that you still live."

The curtains parted, seemingly without any hand touching them. They revealed a slender stone pedestal, shoulder-high, surmounted by the wax-white head of an aged man, bearded, with flowing white hair. The eyes were closed. There

was no living color anywhere about the head, yet it was an accurate enough likeness of Hakmed, as Stark had seen him that eventful day in Paris, to send a shiver along his spine.

Heightening the illusion, the gruesome skeleton of a guillotine, no more than ten feet high but for all that appearing deadly enough, stood close to the pedestal.

"This," Chela said very softly, "is Hakmed."

Amazingly, incredibly, the lids lifted over the eyes of the statue and dark orbs gleamed, piercing Stark with a malignant stare. Miraculously, the pallid lips moved and a deep, familiar voice issued from them.

"Men laughed when I said I should return from the grave. They thought I would die when they separated my brain from heart and lungs and stomach. The fools! A heart can be made from machinery, blood can be obtained from any living body, steel pumps can filter oxygen into it and it can be fed in a thousand ways."

Beneath the booming of the slow voice, Stark heard the purr of machinery in the pedestal, a pulsing like a heart-throb. He did not doubt any longer. He was awed, terrified, repelled.

Through the doorway came a sudden breeze. It stirred the silver threads of Hakmed's beard, billowed other curtains at a side wall. As the curtains parted, Stark caught a fleeting glimpse of another person beyond them—a girl, almost completely nude, strapped to a low sofa. A bandage covered her mouth and she lay perfectly still, but her eyes were wide and moving, and even in the semi-darkness he noted that they were violet and that the girl was beautiful.

He remembered the hideous murder for which Hakmed had been condemned

to death. Anger arose within him, supplanting the astonishment that had kept him powerless. He clenched his fists and took a step forward. "You have cheated death once," he cried, "but you shall really die this time!"

That one step was all he took. He felt a slight pain in his shoulder, like a pin-prick, and all at once the room seemed to darken. He groped for some support as his strength ebbed away, and, finding none, pitched to the floor, senseless.

A ROUGH hand shook Stark back to wakefulness. A voice growled: "Will ye go home and sleep it off, or will I call the pie-wagon?" He opened his eyes reluctantly and saw that he was lying in a doorway and a cop was bending over him. With the cop's help he got to his feet.

"I'm not drunk," he mumbled. "I was sick, or something."

"Or somethin'!" said the cop in disgust, turning away.

Stark walked unsteadily along the street. He was only half a block from the Luxor. By the time he reached the lobby his brain had cleared and he remembered everything that had happened. He must have been drugged, he thought—stabbed with a hypodermic needle just as he had been going to tear Hakmed's evil head from its mechanical body. Chela had done it, damn her!

And the young girl he had seen strapped to the couch, within half a dozen feet of the guillotine—what was happening to *her*? Was she meeting a horrible fate similar to that of the girl who had been murdered in Hakmed's house in France? Was some ghastly ceremony being enacted even now over her bleeding corpse?

God! To be at the mercy of a head!

To be in the power of an evil intelligence, that was practically disembodied, that had nothing remotely human about it! The very thought was enough to drive a man mad. And the girl had been young—no older, certainly, than nineteen or twenty—and she had been beautiful.

He went to a bank of telephone booths and rifled through the pages of the Manhattan directory. He found the name he sought—"Gutz, Elmer, plmbr". There was an address in East Ninety-first St.

A taxi took him to the plumbing shop. The house that stood opposite it was like all the others in the block, except that the windows were shuttered and it wore a general air of neglect. It was the fourth house from the corner.

He began trying the doors of all houses on the same side of the street which bore signs advertising rooms or apartments. He came to a door that was unlocked. Entering unchallenged, he mounted four flights of stairs to the top floor and a ladder to a trap door that opened on the roof.

Climbing over the low walls that separated the houses, he made his way slowly in the darkness to the roof of Hakmed's house. In the center of the tar-and-gravel expanse was a skylight, hinged. A savage tug broke the catch with no more noise than a sharp *snap*, and he lighted a match and peered into the house. Directly beneath him was a stair well that went down four stories.

Letting his body through the skylight, clinging precariously to its rim, Stark swung himself back and forth until he thought he had gained enough momentum to swing clear of the stairs. Loosening his grip suddenly, he plunged into blackness. His feet thudded on an uncarpeted floor and he reeled back against a railing that sagged and creaked, but

did not break. He stood, breathing hard, listening for sounds from below. When he was sure the noise of his unorthodox entrance had given rise to no alarm, he tiptoed down the stairs, flight after flight, to the first floor.

Instinctively he groped toward the rear of the house. He passed through many doorways and came finally to a room lighted feebly by a yellow ray that sifted between the folds of draperies at one end. Peeping through the draperies, he experienced a shock. Not ten feet distant, Hakmed's head rested upon its pedestal, the malignant eyes closed, as though Hakmed slept beside his guillotine.

Stark would have gone directly to the head, with the idea of completing his original plan of destruction, except that he realized he was in the room in which the girl had lain strapped to the sofa. He strained his eyes through the gloom and, his heart pounding with relief, could just make out her white form beside him.

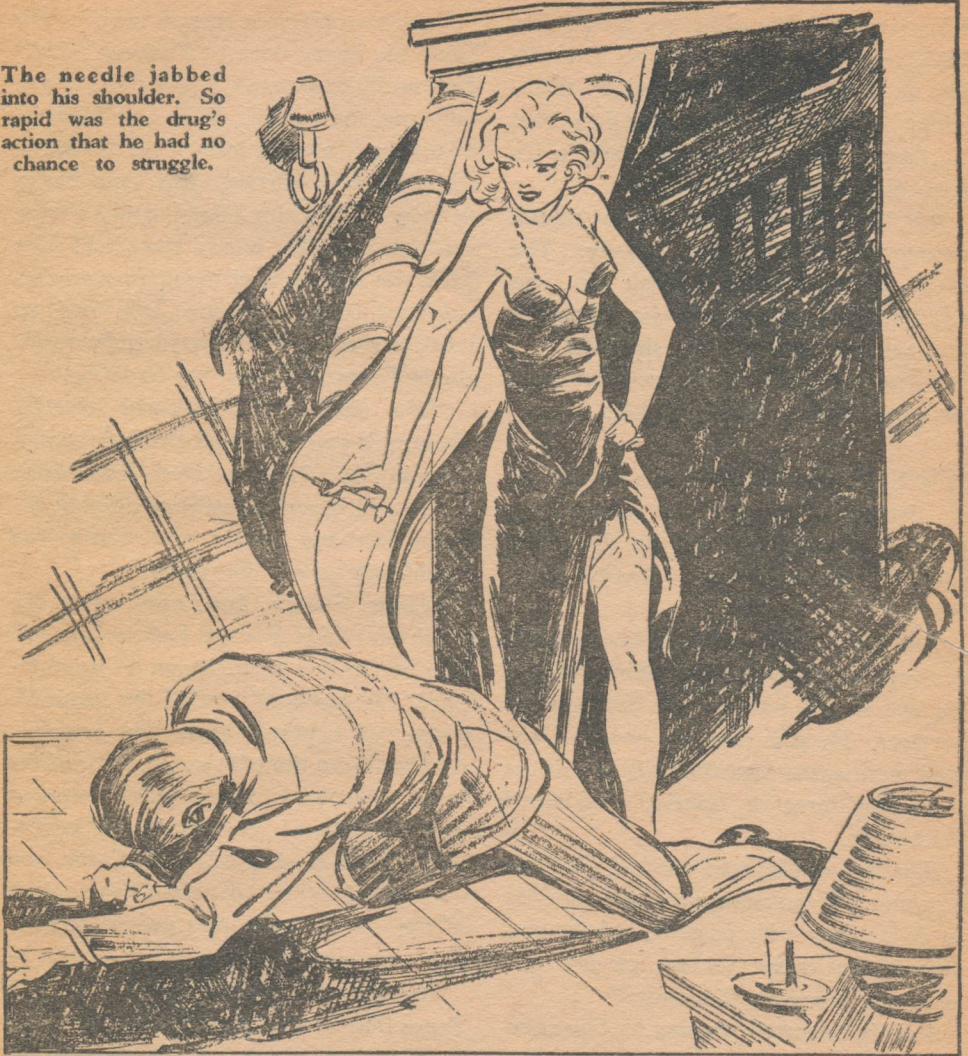
Hastily he tore the bandage from her mouth and withdrew the wadded handkerchief that had served as a gag. He whispered: "Can you talk?"

He could barely hear her choked whisper: "Thank God somebody has come!"

He felt along the warm expanse of her body until he reached the strap that held her legs, just above the knees. All she wore, he found, was a scanty garment over her thighs. He said: "I'll have you free in a minute. How did you get here?"

"I was worried about my uncle," she breathed. "He is Thornton Lakely, and I am Bernice Lakely. He had been acting queerly, and I had seen him with a blonde girl who looked like an adventuress. I suspected she was victimizing him, so I followed them to this house this morning. When I rang the door-

The needle jabbed into his shoulder. So rapid was the drug's action that he had no chance to struggle.



bell, the girl let me in. I don't know what happened after that. The next thing I knew, I was lying like this."

"The blonde girl *was* an adventuress," Stark said. "You're lucky to be alive." He was thinking, grimly, of one of the things the head of Hakmed had told him that evening—"a heart can be made from machinery, blood can be obtained from any living body . . ."

HIS hands fumbled with the buckle of the heavy belt. Even though he was

hurrying desperately, he could not help but enjoy the sensations set in motion within him by the touch of her soft, tempting flesh. The skin of her legs was like living velvet. His eyes, grown accustomed to the dimness, saw that her body was even more exquisitely shaped than the slim form of Chela.

The strap fell away from her, and she flexed her legs with a little relieved sigh. He turned his attention to the second strap, which crossed her chest just beneath the swell of her full, gently trem-

bling breasts. The satiny warmth of her flesh, as his knuckles brushed it working at the strap, set his fingers trembling. . . . Suddenly Stark had forgotten his danger and was crushing her in his arms and kissing her.

His heart leaped as he felt her mouth return his kiss, moving eagerly. The emotion that flooded through him was not like that he had felt for Chela—it was warmer, gentler, less shameful . . . He dropped to his knees and tightened his arms around Bernice Lakely . . .

THERE was the sound of a door opening and closing. Two persons entered the room beyond the draperies. Chela's voice announced: "Master, he is here."

Suddenly cold and self-possessed, cursing his carelessness, Stark applied his eye to the narrow rift between the curtains. He saw that the eyes of Hakmed were open, regarding Chela and the trembling form of Lakely, who stood before her.

The lips of Hakmed writhed like pale serpents. "I presume you have decided to do as your wife advises, Lakely, and place your entire fortune at my disposal for our mutual benefit?"

Lakely hesitated, wetting his lips nervously. "As a matter of fact," he replied hesitantly, "I had decided just the opposite. After all, I have enough money, enough power for one man."

"Then you have decided like a fool!" The face of Hakmed was an evil sneer. "You have made it necessary for me to bring pressure to bear upon you. For no one who has ever been offered a partnership by Hakmed can refuse and be safe. I need your money to enhance my control over men and women who can be useful to me. I shall have it in spite of you!"

Lakely's pale face turned purple. He lifted his heavy cane. "You can't bulldoze me!" he shouted. "After all, you're only part of a man. With one blow of this cane I can—I can—" His words dwindled into silence. His eyes began to bulge. Watching, Stark could almost see the invisible bonds that held him back, the radiation of hypnotic rays that rendered him helpless. Chela had no need to use the little hypodermic needle she had snatched from her handbag.

"We shall see," Hakmed gloated, "how well you can stand the little treat I have in store for you. Note that I have but to will it, and immediately Satan delivers into my power one whom you would hate to see die young."

Before Stark's fascinated eyes the couch on which Bernice Lakely lay, still held by the one strap, began to move toward the pedestal, pulled by invisible wires. It brushed aside the curtains, advanced into the pale candle-light of the larger chamber, passed partly between the uprights of the miniature guillotine. Then it stopped, and Stark saw with awful clarity that the oblique blade of the deadly knife was poised directly above her snowy throat.

Bernice had fainted, mercifully. Her flower-like beauty shone in the room like a glittering vision. A lump rose in Stark's throat.

"I have but to will it," Hakmed said silkily, "and the blade will separate her head from her body, even as the guillotine in Paris beheaded me. Then her blood will help feed and invigorate my brain, that I may devise a fitting torture for you!"

"No!" Lakely gasped. His teeth chattered and his face had gone yellowish. "Take my money—all of it! Only let her live!"

Stark was already crouched, every

muscle in his body tensed. Straight for the pedestal he sprang. He planned to lift it in his strong arms and crush Hakmed's head against the wall before this devil's business could go further. He had no faith in Hakmed's promises to Lakely—when the fiend had possessed himself of the rich man's millions, Lakely and Bernice both would be put to death in some unholy manner. That was Hakmed's way.

Stark's arms were stretched to embrace the pedestal, but they never touched it. A small, furious figure darted at him, struck him with sufficient force to send him sprawling on the floor. Again there was the swift pain of a needle jabbing into his shoulder. So rapid was the action of the drug that he could not ever struggle.

“AND your conscience will watch you while you are away from my presence, making the arrangements to transfer all your accounts and holdings to your wife. Not only will your niece remain with me, but also I will keep evidence that will send you to the electric chair if you try to betray me.

“You have a penknife attached to your watch chain, Lakely. Take it with your bare hands, so that it will retain fingerprints, and cut the throat of this impetuous young journalist. Then dip one of your gloves in the gore and give it, with the knife, to Chela. After that you will write a confession to murder. Then you may go.”

The words penetrated to Stark's consciousness at first as vague sounds, without significance. Gradually their dreadful meaning became clear to him. He was about to be murdered by Lakely! The insane brain was planning, by a single stroke of horrid strategy, to rid

himself of an enemy and gain a new slave!

Lakely's voice was thick and choked. “Good Lord, Hakmed! I can't cut the throat of a helpless man!”

“It is your choice,” Hakmed said. “If you do not, the throat of a helpless girl will be cut, as surely as I am here before you.”

“Please, Hakmed!” Chela's voice was cajoling. “Let the man live. I can take care of him, so that he will not be a danger to you. I—like him.”

“What right have you to like anyone?” Hakmed rasped. “You are only my servant, Chela. You have no will but mine.”

“So!” Lakely's voice had assumed a desperately calm note. “My marriage was only a trick to get me in your power! Chela only pretended to love me to carry out your orders, Hakmed! Very well. I shall do your bidding, too. I shall murder this man to save my niece's life. I shall sign a confession to murder and give you all that I own. But some day, Hakmed—if I die for it—I'll pay you back!” His voice shrilled suddenly. “I'll send you screaming back to hell—forever!”

“We can do very well without the hysterics,” Hakmed said drily. For the time being, let us content ourselves with the work at hand. You may proceed, Lakely.”

ALL during the tragic clash of wills, Stark had not opened an eye or moved a muscle. The pain of tight-drawn straps of hard leather, holding his ankles together and pinning his arms to his sides, told him that any struggle would be worse than useless. But he could not repress a shudder as he heard Lakely's feet coming reluctantly toward him, the

(Continued on page 106)

The Black Thing Walks

[Continued from page 43]

her beautiful legs lengthening, her slender arms stretching. While her face was twisting in unbearable agony, my two artists friends fell furiously to work with their brushes. I guessed that they had been cowed by long tortures of their own.

Once the riata whistled through the air. It curled and while the negro dodged, its lash buried in Carol's back. Curiously, if the Black Thing gloated, it was not before the almost nude form of Carol, even while his riata hissed and stung.

He faced Lydia Bryce and seemed to drink in the terror brought to her face by the suffering of Carol. And when his riata lashed again it crossed the bare and writhing thighs of Lydia, bringing new contortions to her face. He swung upon the two artists, bellowing in his muffled voice, "Get that. Get that down. Both of them into the one face!"

I THINK I fainted. For a time my senses were completely dulled. When they revived, responding to a new turn of that torturing winch, and Carol's shrieks for mercy, I saw that Eric Peters, who was the artist closest to me, was trying to catch my eye. I watched him. The Black Thing's back was turned. General Lee was watching him for signals. And Eric was sliding toward me his palette!

My heart leapt. On the edge of the palette was his scraping knife, its blade protruding as far as possible. A dull instrument it would be, but if I could get it into my hands I could saw the cord that bound me!

I couldn't reach for it, of course, but a look from Eric made me know that he

proposed to drop it into the backward crook of my elbow. If it fell to the floor I was lost. If not—

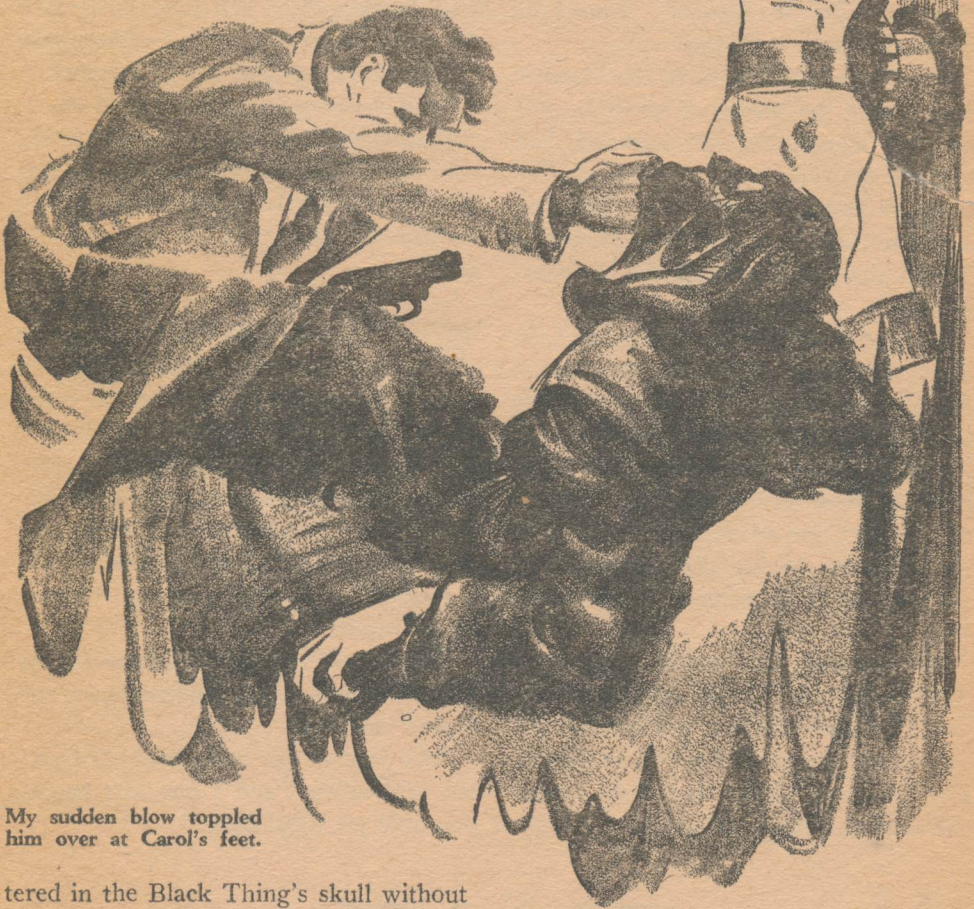
It didn't! and during another twist of the winch, and another fleck of the riata across the soft body of Lydia, my hands were free. I waited until the Black Thing was nearer, his attention fixed on the rising welts on Lydia's legs and the contortions of Carol's face. Now and again he came close to scan the canvases to see if some new combination of torture had been fixed to Lydia's face. At one of these times I sprang.

My sudden plunge toppled him to the floor with my hands at his throat. I knew while he was falling with me on his back that I was dealing with almost superhuman strength, but my own frenzy was not to be discouraged. I think I would have strangled him there and then if the old negro had not come yelling at me, some iron implement in his hand. I had to let go of the Black Thing while I smashed a fist into the negro's face and laid him out unconscious. The Black Thing was on his knees. Strong arms went around my legs and threw me as if I were a child. Again and again my fists battered the face under the black hood but the vise-like arms reached up to pinion my arms.

NOW my own strength was superhuman. I broke free and clutched at another scraping knife which Randal Crawford tossed at me. With the dull but strong blade I jabbed at the creature's hidden face through the hood even while I felt that the bones of my chest must crack in his clutch.

I must have found an eye for the fiend gave a sharp cry of pain and his hold relaxed, only an instant, but long enough! I got my knee on his throat, on his jugular vein, and bore him back and down. The harder he grasped at me, the more he forced my knee against his wind.

At last I knew I had him. I heard his gasps, the rattles in his throat. I released him and picked up the iron bar General Lee had dropped and in my fury I bat-



My sudden blow toppled him over at Carol's feet.

tered in the Black Thing's skull without knowing the features that belonged to that skull!

My friends the artists were screaming their excited joy. Lydia was shrieking a

prayer of thanks to Heaven. Poor Carol's body was motionless on its rack—she had fainted at last.

I tied the negro's hands behind him

before I made another move. Then I flew to Carol, freed her and laid her now limp body on the floor. Lydia's hands I had to free by breaking her chains with the iron bar.

And it was only then that I ripped the hood from the Black Thing and recoiled before the battered features of Dr. Bryce!

IT was hours before Lydia or my friends could talk coherently, and then, while Carol was waiting for me in her room upstairs in Selwyn's house, the whole evil story came out.

Dr. Bryce had discovered that another man shared the beauty of his wife. She had not eloped, but her husband had trapped both her and her admirer. The latter he had killed and then had taken Lydia to the cave, of which he alone had known since he purchased the big plantation.

He had forced Lydia to write him the elopement letter, just as he had forced Peters and Crawford to write Selwyn that they had gone to the Caribbean. He posted the letters. His revenge had taken form in those eleven paintings, twenty-two, in fact, for of each pair painted by his prisoners, he had discarded the one showing the least torture in his wife's face.

He had used his friend's wife, Cora Selwyn, as one of his additional victims, for the tortured contortions her face would donate to Lydia's on canvas. He had used Lisette, but little Lisette had died too soon. He had used the un-

known girl whom he had stolen from the highway—and then Carol.

Lydia explained the amnesia Cora Selwyn and the unknown girl suffered. Dr. Bryce had sent to India for the rare Emorocine drug with which complete amnesia can be effected by hypodermic. Thus, he was safe from his victims if they lived to be released. He would unquestionably have stilled the tongues of Peters and Crawford in the same fashion, and Lydia's, if he permitted her to live. Old General Lee had served him well, carrying food and fresh water into the caves every day, and dwelling upon the Black Thing—the fiend's creation to conceal his movements and spread superstitious fear. That night when Carol had seen the "Black Thing" enter the house, Dr. Bryce had only to hide his wet robes swiftly and appear at the French windows.

WHEN I went back into Carol's room she was sleeping. She lay on her side, to escape the burning of the welts on her back, welts that soon would heal. One leg was drawn up under the sheet and it caressed the lines of those slim thighs I had seen lacerated. A white arm was outside the sheet and a shoulder was bare down to the upper rise of her firmly lifted breast.

Carol must have felt the caress of my eyes. She opened her own suddenly, and looked up at me.

"As soon as my hurts heal, darling," she said softly, "and I can bear having you hold me tight again."



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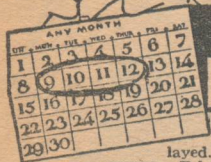
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Head Of Hakmed

[Continued from page 101]

thud of fat knees plopping to the floor at his side, the tiny click of the blade of a knife springing open. Lakely's labored breathing was loud and irregular; the man muttered: "May your soul forgive me for this, Stark!"

Cold steel touched Stark's throat. It bore down hard, began to saw back and forth. Lakely's penknife was too dull to do its work efficiently. It was a long time before it cut through the first layer of skin, bringing agony so enervating that Stark, with the sticky warmth of blood running down the side of his neck, fought to keep from shrieking.

His eyes were opened in narrow slits, veiled by lashes, now. He lay with his feet almost touching the pedestal. Above him Chela looked down, her cheeks deathly white, her hazel eyes wide with fear. Lakely's features were the color of lead and a light of near-insanity darted from beneath his eyelids. Bernice was still insensible, lying beneath the knife like a sacrificial offering upon a devil-god's altar.

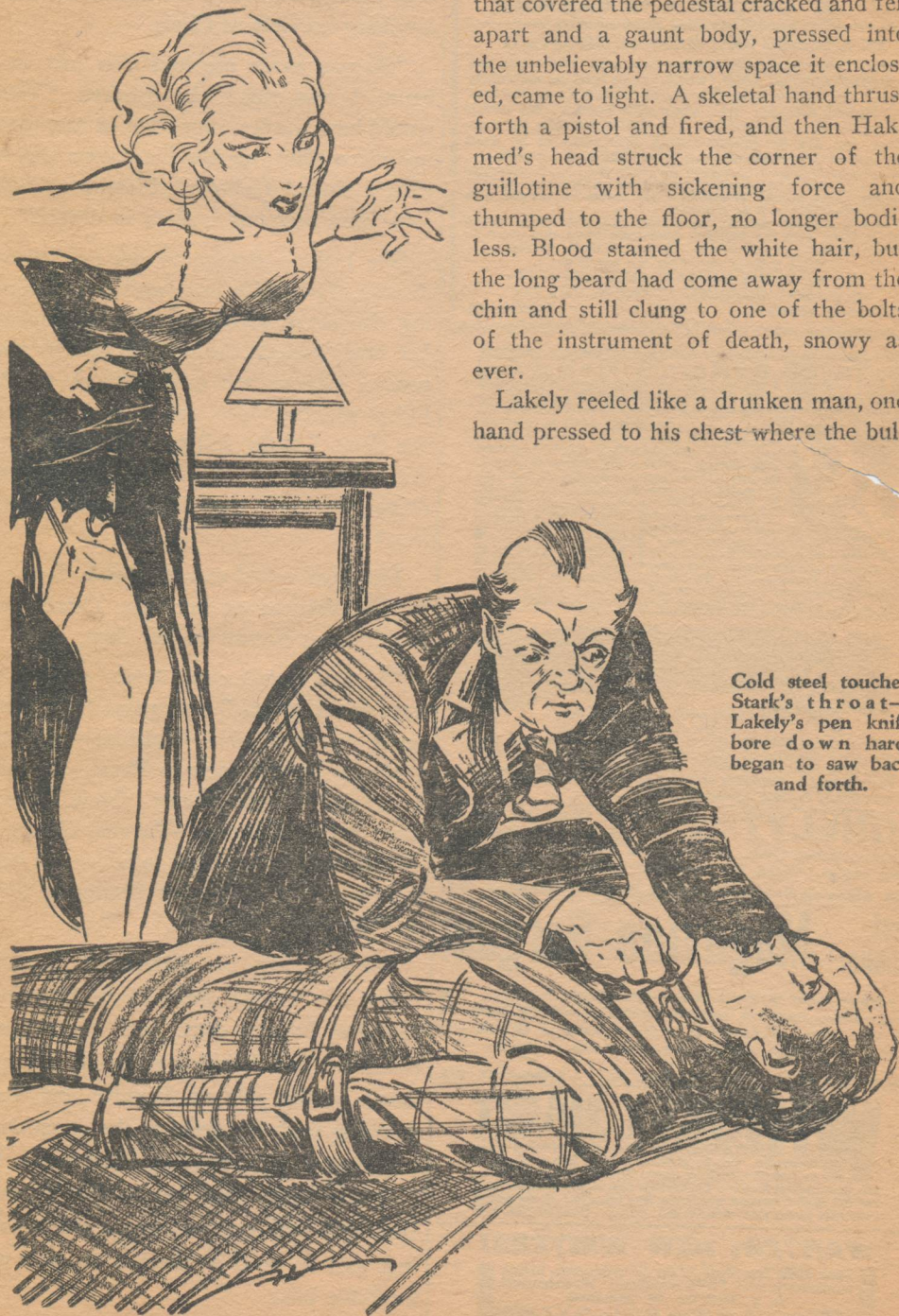
But it was Hakmed's head which drove Stark utterly mad, past all reason. Hakmed's face bore a satanic leer that no human being could look upon without being revolted to the depths of his soul. Blood-lust was in it, unspeakable bestiality and gloating triumph. It spurred his victim to a superhuman effort he never could have accomplished under other circumstances.

His muscles tensed and leaped into action like coiled steel springs. His knees

drew up nearly to his chin, and his long legs shot out like pistons, straight at the pedestal. His feet struck the stone a

shattering blow, toppling it. Chela screamed. A hoarse yell came from Hak-med's throat. The thin shell of stone that covered the pedestal cracked and fell apart and a gaunt body, pressed into the unbelievably narrow space it enclosed, came to light. A skeletal hand thrust forth a pistol and fired, and then Hak-med's head struck the corner of the guillotine with sickening force and thumped to the floor, no longer bodiless. Blood stained the white hair, but the long beard had come away from the chin and still clung to one of the bolts of the instrument of death, snowy as ever.

Lakely reeled like a drunken man, one hand pressed to his chest where the bul-



Cold steel touched Stark's throat—Lakely's pen knife bore down hard, began to saw back and forth.

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let had struck just over the heart. Crimson trickled through his pudgy fingers. His eyes were blazing and his free hand brandished the knife. He was laughing horribly at Chela.

"So you made me love you just because I was rich!" he croaked. "You would have made a murderer of me, seen my niece slain, watched my own death with a smile! Hell-cat! Now you shall join your precious master in death!"

She had no chance to use the hypodermic. The knife rose and fell, shearing the dress from her bosom, baring her small breasts. Across the breasts appeared hideous red gashes from which blood spurted. She sighed and slid to the floor. Lakely fell over her, striving with the last of his dying strength to drive the knife yet again toward her heart.

Her eyes rolled toward Stark. Scarlet bubbles formed on her lips. There was nothing but sorrow in her face.

"If you hadn't come back—we could have been lovers," she gasped. "I was going to leave him—Hakmed—he was really an actor I knew in Paris—as soon as we got enough money. Now I shall have to face Hakmed—the real Hakmed—who never came back to life—and pay in the devil's coin—for betraying him in France—"

No pity for her stirred in Stark's heart, nor even a memory of how her faithless beauty once had enraptured him. He had hobbled painfully on his knees to the side of Bernice and was gnawing with his teeth at the strap that still bound her, pausing frequently to kiss the satin skin below her throat. Bernice's eyes opened, warm and trusting, and he read in them a promise of ineffable bliss.

Mojave Madness

[Continued from page 65]

for the ivory fascinations that blossomed into view as her brassiere slipped in the skirmish. He lunged, just as Joseph recoiled from a well placed kick.

The amorous missionary, hammered end for end by Patton's fist, landed in a thorny cluster of agave. Patton turned to Linda, who lay panting and gasping on the ground, her streaming hair combining with a few scraps of green chiffon and the remains of a skirt to keep it from being a complete showdown.

"Oh—Ray—thank God!" She extended her hands; then she screamed, "Look out!"

HE pivoted. Joseph, now that the agave spines had taken his thoughts from love, was coming into action with a slim, venomous knife. Patton sidestepped the thrust, took a raking cut that ploughed his ribs, and slipped on the grass as he swung for the missionary's jaw. Though dropping, he tackled the fellow about the ankles, toppling him to the sod.

Both were battered and winded. It was anyone's game. Linda was scrambling for an earthenware olla, an ornamental pot harder than any man's skull; but before any of the trio could strike, a pistol blazed in the patio. Linda cried out, slumped.

Maruca, shrieking her rage, bounded from the arcade, automatic in hand. It crackled thrice in as many instants, spattering Linda with 'dobe chipped from the wall. Joseph yelled, ignoring

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Patton, who scrambled to his feet to seize the slaying apparition.

"So you like her, too!" screamed Maruca. "You—"

But as her pistol blazed again, a streak of silver whizzed through the red dawn—Joseph's hurled blade. Maruca's smoking weapon dropped from her grasp. She reeled, clutched at the knife haft projecting from her breast, then collapsed, a bloody froth welling from her lips.

The deadly clash was over before Patton fully realized that Linda, now on her feet and clutching her wounded arm, was no more than grazed; that death checked Maruca's wrath. There was no more fight in Joseph. His swarthy face was drawn and sallow.

"Missionary, hell!" growled Patton. "You and Maruca were teamed up. What's the score? Come across with the answers, and whatever you and Maruca were up to, it can be squared on account of your saving Linda from that mad woman. Otherwise, there are two witnesses against you, and that sweet love scene I broke in on will settle your hash."

Joseph knew that he was across a barrel; so he talked. "You must suspect, since you saw her without her mask. And if you look out in the grove, you'll see *marijuana* plants, and jimson weed, which the southwestern Indians use as a hypnotic, and for producing illusions. You and Linda drank beer, drugged in varying degrees.

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"But why, for God's sake, why?" Linda cut in.

"Simple," said Joseph. "To make Patton's uncle send for you two, and thus quiet the ghost. And Patton, who was drugged, was easy game for Maruca. That was for your benefit. To make you leave.

"Next, during Patton's drugged interval, after you left, she put that ghost mask of your father on his face. She made herself up to resemble you, using a plastic mask based on several photos and my observations of you, months previous."

"I get it," growled Patton, before Linda could repeat her query. "After breaking us up, I was framed for murdering my uncle. Maruca was to marry me, so you two could blackmail me to a turn. But one of you two shot him—"

JOSEPH smiled maliciously, and corrected, "There is no wound on him. That was faked for your benefit. Maruca sapped you. Your uncle's notoriously weak heart failed him when he saw what he thought was Linda and her father's ghost in his room."

"You two knew that'd kill him!" flared Patton.

"Try and prove it!" challenged Joseph.

"Stalemate," admitted Patton, swallowing his wrath. Then, "But why did Maruca go wild and try to kill Linda?"

"Because," answered the fake missionary, "Linda's return threw a hitch into our plan. We had to get you and Maruca married before you got wise to the drugs, and illusions. Maruca flew into a rage, not realizing that you had already unmasked her. An insanely impulsive move. And I—well—I'd seen enough of Linda to—ah—admire—"

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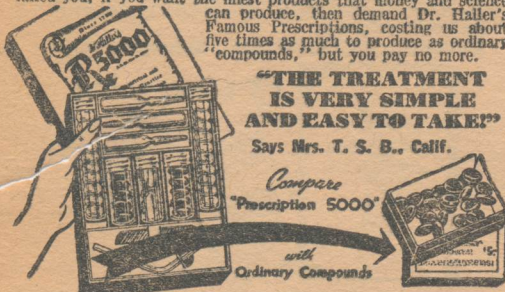
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"Joseph," said Patton, "With Maruca dead, nothing can legally be proved against you. Though I'm taking your car keys, just to keep you bottled up in the desert until I can notify the law of my uncle's death. And instead of the hanging you deserve, you'll probably end up as the hero who saved Linda's life."

Then, as he caught her arm and turned to the patio entrance, he said to the disheveled girl at his side, "Vengeance is futile, darling. And throwing that knife did somewhat level the score. But why the devil did you come back, after—"

The red in his face was not entirely the sunrise glow. Linda laughed softly at his embarrassment, and answered, "Later, I realized that you'd looked drugged, acted unnaturally. I thought it was your uncle's plot to separate us, so I came back to spite him."

"Just for spite?" wondered Patton, taking her in his arms.

"Idiot," she sighed, "do you think I was going to let Mojave madness keep me away from anyone who could kiss a ghost till she was thrilled silly?"

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The Brazen Bull

[Continued from page 77]

years to come, you will remember Europa, who saved you both, because—because of our love."

"Yes," Denis lied again.

"Then kiss me. Because, when I entrapped those others, I did not care. I did not love them. But I loved you. And we would have been happy, my lover."

"Yes," Denis lied once more.

"Then hold me until I die."

Denis held her. And he pressed his lips to those of the dying girl, who had loved him. For now he could no longer hate her . . .

HE waited till she quivered and was still. Then he gathered Elsie into his arms. He clothed her in the toga that he had taken from the body of the dead Count Annibale, and he carried her down to the seashore.

Far in the distance a motorboat was speeding, carrying the four newspaper headliners back to Italy. But Count Annibale's motorboat was drawn up on the beach.

Denis placed Elise in the bottom of it. He dragged it down to the water. He stepped inside, pushed off. He started the engine, and in a little while was speeding back toward Sicily.

The stars were fading overhead in the light of the gathering dawn. Elise moaned, and Denis took her in his arms. She clung to him.



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30 Seconds

[Continued from page 15]

fingers darted out; wrapped about his wife's pulsing throat. "I'll teach you to spy on me, you sneaking little sniveler!" he rasped. "I'm going to kill you, do you hear? I'm going to get rid of you, once and for all time!" He tightened his grasp on her gullet.

She tried to scream; tried to claw at him. Behind him he could hear Rosa Farrand's purring whisper: "Yes. Kill her! Kill her! But not here! Take her back into your own apartment and throttle her. And when she is dead, you will return to me . . ."

HE knew that he was lifting Maizie's struggling form in his arms. He knew that he was carrying his golden-haired wife into their own apartment; into the boudoir. And now he had her pinioned in a death tight clasp. Her negligee was ripped open, so that her tiny boyish breasts were half bared and heaving against the pressure of his chest. He was choking her again. Her naked feet were drumming against the floor, even as they had convulsively drummed once before tonight . . .

Her features were engorged, crimson with suffused blood. Her eyes were rolling back in their sockets, so that only the protruding whites showed. She was panting, trying to breathe. And he kept throttling her, his thumbs gouging and biting into her throat . . .

Then, at last, she lay still. A waxen pallor began to steal over her cheeks. He placed his palm beneath her breast. Her heart was not beating. She was quite dead.

mention SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

Like a madman, he raced from the room; down the corridor to Rosa Farrand's apartment. He plunged in. Then he brought up short.

The place was totally dark. No light showed in the rear room. Dully he flared a match. His eyes widened—

The apartment was untenanted, vacant! There was no furniture, no rugs; no sign of the brunette Farrand woman. The match burned Haydon's fingers; he dropped it, and it glowed redly for an instant, then flickered out. The solid darkness that ensued was like a smothering shroud that engulfed him and gagged him. For the third time that night he had a sensation of being helplessly fettered by psychic bonds, while time and space flowed past him like a black river . . .

Then a wave of nausea welled into his belly. He was back on the roof of the building. He was on the outside of the parapet. He was wavering on the narrow coping, with the dark street mocking at him, twenty stories below. He swayed—

He seemed to hear a voice saying: "You failed to pass the ordeal, Philip Haydon. There is no longer even a tiny patch of white upon your black soul. There is only one thing left for you, my friend."

He turned around. In the shadows, he

thought he saw Dr. Zarkov. Then the soul-surgeon was gone—either down the stairs, or swallowed up by the night. Philip Haydon never knew.

He heard the tolling, somber strokes of a bell far below him. It was the bank's clock at the intersection. He stared down—

BONG! That was the eleventh stroke. The illuminated hands of the clock pointed to eleven. Just thirty seconds had sped by since the first rolling, knell-like stroke had sounded. Thirty seconds since Philip Haydon had first been pulled back to safety by the Surgeon of Souls. And everything that had happened since then—the scene with Nadine Blanding, the discovery that Maizie was still alive, and the meeting with Rosa Farrand—*had all taken place in thirty seconds!*

And now everything was exactly as it had been before. Maizie was dead . . . again. Philip Haydon was a murderer. He'd had another chance; but he'd been fool enough to toss it away—

He leaped far out into space. The night was split open by his shrill shriek of fear as he plummeted downward. Then his scream was drowned out by a duller sound: the sound of a body impacting against hard pavement.

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Prophecy To Kill

[Continued from page 31]

Pauline. Just as a trick of fate—a very mean trick, he vowed—had brought them together two years ago.

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While she talked, his heart was skipping; she had him from the first minute. Her face perhaps wasn't beautiful; it was pert, bold, sensuously pretty. Eyes offering secrets; a little nose with a special wrinkle—almost daring to be reticent; pliant lips allowing the flirtation of an impudent pink tongue.

"Sympathy counts for so much, Doctor," in that confiding, almost whispering voice; "you know that . . . I'm sure you could help me more than Dr. Mitzner."

Peter shouldn't have done it, but he said, "I'll try." He said nothing to Mitzner about the arrangement during the following weeks.

At first he was amazed at Pauline's story; amazed that she should be so infatuated with a man who beat her that she couldn't leave him. "Rickey is cruel," she admitted. "Of course I want to leave him. But you'll have to give me the will, the strength, to do it."

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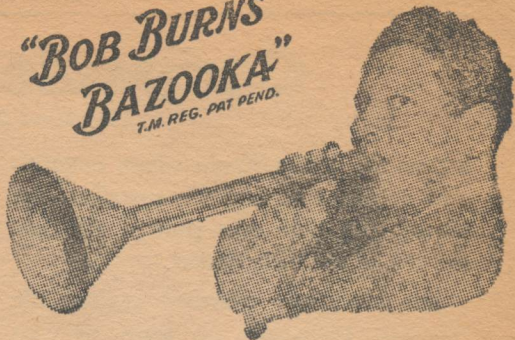
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Corpseless Coffin

[Continued from page 53]

ing on the bed, a figure whose magnificent breasts rose and fell tumultuously, whose wide blue eyes showed the fear she felt of the little doctor.

Jim Hargrove crouched against the far wall, gibbering, his arms clasping the rounded knees of *Nola Sanchez*! Strawn was talking in his high-pitched voice, talking to the half dressed woman on the bed.

"I told you he'd never have you, my dear, not for long at least! I've watched you and wanted you long enough. It was my plan! I drove him mad, I kept him mad! Nola was willing to help me through hate of you and love for him. Mine was the other way about, I loved you and hated the fool. So we faked the suicide. I paid Bradley to help us. He buried a death mask, painted to resemble Nola and she's been at my house ever since, driving him madder and madder, saving you—for me. And now I mean to have you. I've waited long enough for your beauty—"

"Let her alone," screamed Carson and tried to lunge to his feet. Strawn stepped quickly to him, kicked him down again and slapped his own thin chest.

"I am master here," he gloated. "You have seen too much, you know too much. Perhaps it will be the smart Mr. Carson that goes in the empty coffin at the grave. And you—" he turned to Hargrove—"I've hated you ever since you married her!" He aimed a kick at the demented man's head.

Instantly Nola was a flaming fury, a tigress. "Let him be," she screamed, and leaped at Strawn. Her fingernails bit into his face but his fist crashed against her jaw and she went down to

lie quivering on the floor in unconsciousness.

Strawn turned again to Marge. He leaned over her despite her moans, pressed her lips, clasped her soft form to his own body. Saliva dripped from his lips, madness was in his eyes. "I've waited too long for your love . . ." he moaned.

Joe Carson groaned. Then Hargrove crept like a dog from the wall, leaned over the body of Nola and leaped on the doctor, beating with his fists, shrieking curses at the top of his voice. Strawn seized a water carafe, brought it down with terrific force on his head. Hargrove staggered back against the wall, crouched there for a moment blinking the blood away from his eyes.

"What—who—?" he gasped and shook his head like a mastiff. "Damn you," he roared, "what are you doing to my wife?" A surge of gladness leaped up in Joe Carson's breast. A dozen Strawns could not have restrained the attacker now.

FIVE minutes later a sane Jim Hargrove held his sobbing wife in his arms. Over and over she was explaining to the unbelieving man that he had been mad for three years, that the blow on the head had restored his reason. She told about the plot, how Strawn had fed him harmful drugs instead of medicine, how Nola had given him doped wine.

When Joe Carson returned he found them clasped in each other's arms. "Thank God," he breathed. And to the reunited lovers, "The police will be here any time. They're picking up Bradley on the way over."

IT WAS the seventh treatment. As Pauline stretched her shapely young body upon the chaise lounge, she was careful to let the hem of her skirt wrinkle up over her knees, above the rolled top of one stocking.

Sitting back of her, Peter looked at the sleek grace of silken legs and confidently allowed himself to smile at her simplicity. Already (though it *did* seem rather soon), he recognized the symptoms of her 'transference'—her impulsion toward him. That was an expected phase of any psycho-analytic treatment; The patient either feels a strong attraction or a violent antagonism toward the doctor. Either way, the transference must be successfully overcome, for the good of the treatment. He must be tactful. . . .

Yes, he recognized the transference; nevertheless, as he watched her slender figure, the delicate lines of her youthful breasts, the rubescent softness of her mouth, his pulse quickened.

But he gave no sign; if he wanted success, he must resist and remove her attraction toward him.

The girl closed her eyes and said softly; "He beat me again last night—he whipped me with a strap. . . . Here, I'll show you." She sat up and opened her

eyes, and her fingers went to the buttons of her blouse.

"No, no!" Peter reached over her shoulders, despite the bounding of his heart, and seized her wrists. "I don't want to see. It isn't necessary. Go on."

Pauline sank back with a sigh of disappointment. She described Rickey's mistreatment of her last evening; but when Peter tried to follow their usual routine, to lead her thoughts back to earlier memories, back even to her childhood likes and dislikes, now buried deep in her subconscious mind; when he tried to ferret out and bring into the wholesome daylight of discussion the origin of her obsession for her brutal lover, she resisted and came abruptly to the point of the whipping again.

"You've got to look!" she said. And before he could stop her she had ripped off her blouse, tearing the buttons, and revealed herself bare to the waist.

"Here." Without meeting his eyes, she held up her arms so that he could see the reddish bruises that curled in streaks from the velvety skin of her back around to the smooth, taut-surfaced mounds of her breasts. Beneath them, Peter could plainly see the thudding of her heart as she held up her arms and felt his eyes upon her.

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"Yes, yes, I see," he said with outward coolness. "That only proves, doesn't it, that you must not go back to him?"

"Yes." Pauline had admitted that before; often. Even to Dr. Mitzner. But she never had had the strength of will to stay away from the man who beat and degraded her. When she was with Rick-ey (she told Peter), it seemed almost as if she were another girl. . . An evil one.

"Put back your blouse." Peter picked it up and leaned to hand it to her; and as he did, she threw her arms about his neck and with a hungry moan crushed her mouth to his. The moist heat of her lips sent racing blood to his head; the springy yielding of her small breasts as she hugged herself against him inflamed his senses.

But swiftly he tore her arms from his neck and put her away.

"Don't be foolish!" he said hoarsely. "You want—you want to be cured, don't you?"

Pauline grinned impishly. "Do you really want to know what I want?" she almost whispered.

Each time she spoke, he noticed the intriguing faint burr of huskiness in her voice, and it oddly excited him. Somehow it spoke of experience, of dark temptations. . . But now he answered: "No!"

HE FOUND out, though. A month later, she was his wife; and the psychoanalytic treatment had, of course, failed. He found that out, soon enough, too.

It had failed because even her marriage did not prevent her from seeing Rickey. Nor did it prevent Peter from seeing Rickey. He had, in fact, seen him during three consultations with him before he found out the trick. His wife's

sweetheart coming to his house as a patient!

She told him in a moment of cruelty, during one of the bizarre arguments she perpetrated.

"And I say, darling," she drawled, cuddled in Peter's lap, "that you don't know *anything* about women. What you need is a little playmate besides me."

"Ha!" Peter barked a short, uncertain laugh. He was more and more uncertain of Pauline lately.

"I'm not fooling," she said, irritated. "And I have a friend you'd like."

He saw she was serious. "You don't know what you're talking about," he said tersely.

"I practice what I preach." She laughed cruelly. "With Rickey, if you must know. That's the real name of your patient Mr. Simms."

It was two days before Peter came home after that; two days before he was able. And then the prophecy of those incredibly excruciating tremens came true; vividly, tantalizing him, Pauline had ripped off her blouse to show him fresh lash marks where Rickey had beaten her. Peter snarled:

"I'll give you some to go with them!" He tore off his belt and laid a half dozen vicious stripes across her shoulders.

Pauline sobbed and cursed and then came, whimpering, into his arms.

It was nearly twenty-four hours before Peter started on another bat It was months, though, before he had the D.T.'s again:

It was like a prearranged act: For as he unexpectedly let himself into his apartment, he saw Rickey, and the second prophecy fulfilled itself as Rickey stumbled out the door.

"Why, why, do you do it?" Peter asked despairingly.

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SHAKE YOUR CAN	(CHIROPRACTOR BLUES)
NOW THEY'RE BOTH MISTLED WITH THEIR BABY	IT'S WILD ABOUT THAT THING
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IT'S GONNA BE A LONG WASH WINTER	MY MAN OF WAR
PRIZED QUACK PAPA (UNWITTINGLY PAPA)	KEEP YOUR NOSE OUT OF PAPA'S BUSINESS
SWEET FAT DIAMIA	GO BACK WHERE YOU STAYED LAST NIGHT
HOUSE MAN	RADIO PAPA (BROADCASTER PAPA)
MY SWEET HARDBOY MAN	IT'S A STATUARY WOMAN
IF YOU CAN'T GET FIVE TAKE TWO	(LOOKER FOR A PERMANENT MAN)
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And knowing she had him, knowing she wouldn't be kicked out, Pauline answered sweetly:

"I like him, that's why . . . But I like you, too see?"

And she had him crawling at her feet again. Crawling . . . crawling for two years.

PETER was almost crawling, now, on his feet, as he slunk toward the police station.

Since Peter was obviously drunk, Detective-Sergeant Gaines finally listened to his story, because he insisted on telling it before answering questions.

"You've got to lock me up," Peter jittered, "so I won't kill her. It's happened twice before that those delirious nightmares of mine came true; I can tell what's going to happen, when I see it like that."

Gaines whistled softly. "We'll take

care of you, buddy," he assured. "Just tell me about it again, will you. This hop dream of yours: You choked her, beat her up, scratched her. . . . Which side were you on when you scratched her shoulders?"

"Uh. . . her left? I seemed to see myself scratching her left shoulder. Clawing. You got to lock me up. Clawing, like this. . . ."

He extended both hands and curled the fingers. Gaines examined the nails. He shook his head. He didn't know just why he really felt sorry for a killer; for once in his life; but he did.

"Even left blood under the nails," he said. "And of course your prints were all over her. And we'd have found you even if you hadn't come in. I almost believe you were too drunk to know it, Matson; but your D.T.'s weren't prophecy. Just good memory of what happened night before last."

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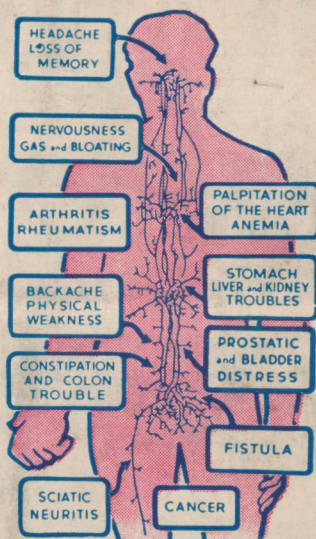


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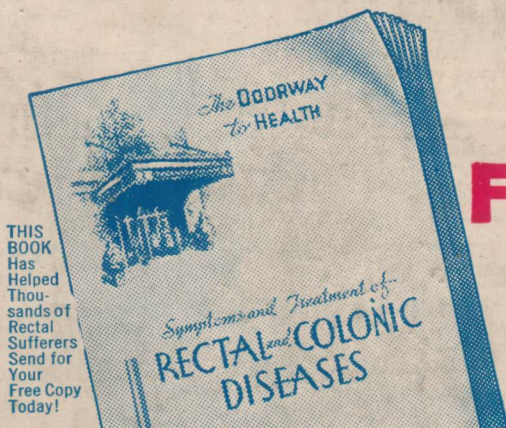


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