

THRILLING

MYSTERY

NOV.

10¢

CARNIVAL OF CRAWLING DOOM

A Complete Bizarre Novelette

By **FRANK
BELKNAP LONG, JR.**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

DEAD TONGUES OF TERROR

A Novelette of a Phantom Killer

By **G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**

AT THE DOOR OF HELL

A Modern Dracula Novelette

By **JOE ARCHIBALD**



MAN AND WIFE WANTED!

To run local
**COFFEE
AGENCY**

Splendid Chance
To Make Up To **\$60⁰⁰** in a Week



**NEW FORDS
GIVEN AS A BONUS**

If you are married and willing to cooperate with your life partner in operating a Coffee Agency right in your own locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—FREE.

It is now possible for married couples to make up to \$60 in a single week if you can work harmoniously together. Wife handles the orders, keeps records, etc., while the husband delivers and collects. Steady, permanent business of one to two hundred customers can quickly be established if you follow the simple, proven plans that I send.

START EARNING AT ONCE

I'll send you everything you need—your complete outfit containing full-size packages of products, also printed forms, blanks, advertising literature, samples, etc., together with simple instructions for both the husband and wife, so you can start your earnings right away. Make as high as \$45.00 your very first week.

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Baking Powder, Flour, Cocoa, Canned Goods, and other foods every day. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

FORD CARS GIVEN

Over and above the cash earnings you make I will give you a brand-new Ford Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. I offer a Ford Car—as an extra reward—to everyone who starts in this business.

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

You can start a Coffee Agency and make money the first week. You don't have to risk a cent of your own money. I absolutely guarantee this. No experience is needed. You use your home as headquarters. You can build your business on our capital. Full details of money making plans are free. Send your name today for the free book giving all inside facts, then you can decide. Don't waste a minute as you might lose this opportunity through unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

ALBERT MILLS

4149 Monmouth Ave., CINCINNATI, OHIO

WONDERFUL SUCCESS

Reported by Others

Clare C. Wellman, N.J., tried my plan and cleared \$96.00 in a week. Hans Coordes, Nebr., made \$27.95 in a day; \$96.40 in a week. Norman Geisler, Mich., reported \$33.00 profit for one day and as high as \$129.00 in a single week. Ruby Hannen, a woman in West Virginia, stated that she made \$17.00 in one day and \$73.00 in a week. Wilbur Whitcomb, Ohio, reported \$30.00 profit in a day and \$146.00 in one week. I have scores of reports of exceptional earnings like these as evidence of the amazing possibilities of this money-making offer.

Free Offer COUPON

ALBERT MILLS, President,
4149 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Send your free book telling how to start a local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or single persons) can make up to \$60.00 in a week. We will read it and then let you know if we want to accept this opportunity.

Name

Address

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

THRILLING MYSTERY

Vol. VIII, No. 3

November, 1937

Price, 10c

Eight Gripping Mystery Thrillers

CARNIVAL OF CRAWLING DOOM Frank Belknap Long, Jr. 14

Voodoo Magic Weaves Its Ghoulish Spell Around a Raving Circus of Inhuman Freaks! A Complete Bizarre Novelette

LORD OF THE LIONS - - - - - Henry Kuttner 31

A Three-Foot Devil Wreaks Ghastly Torment in Order to Protect a Fearsome Secret! A Story of Spine-Chilling Thrills

DEAD TONGUES OF TERROR - - - - G. T. Fleming-Roberts 40

With Fiendish Precision, a Cold-Blooded Killer Builds a Murder Machine to Torture His Victims! An Exciting Complete Novelette

HEAD IN HIS HANDS - - - - - Carl Jacobi 56

A Headless Black God Haunts a South Seas Freighter, Living a Horror-Inspiring and Bloody Native Legend!

AT THE DOOR OF HELL - - - - - Joe Archibald 64

Marlowe Follows the Trail of His Lost Friend to a House of Ghastly Doom in this Novelette of a Modern Dracula

ZOMBIES NEVER DIE - - - - - Richard Tooker 80

A Fiend in Human Shape Struggles Desperately When Voodoo Takes a Hand to Tighten the Burden of the Oppressed

WINGS OF HORROR - - - - - Ray Cummings 89

Huge Vampire Bat Wings Conceal a Bloody Menace Haunting the Rocky Precincts of a Castle on a Caribbean Island

ACCESSORIES OF DEATH - - - - - Milton Lowe 98

The Touch of a Demon's Hand—and a Pleasure Ship Turns Into Cargo of Blood in this Weird, Mysterious Sea Story


HORROR-SCOPES - - - - - Chakwa 12

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I AM EMPLOYED BY A RADIO STORE, AND EARNED ABOUT \$2,500 LAST YEAR.
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National Radio Institute
Established 1914

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Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, 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 servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts operate 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, see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained at home have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Almost every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs, how to cash in quickly.

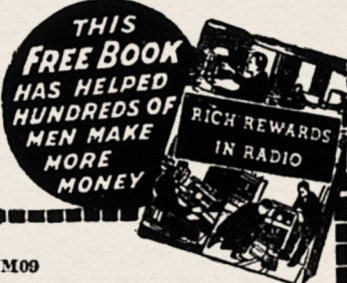
Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send you special Radio equipment, give you practical Radio experience—show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio sets. My Free Book tells more about this.

Find Out What Radio Offers Mail Coupon Below

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you

letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste it on a penny post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Dept. 7M09, Washington, D. C.



J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7M09
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home to become Radio Experts. (Please write Plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... STATE.....

THE GIRLS LAUGHED AT HIS SKINNY FORM!



"It's no fun to have everybody laughing at you and calling you scarecrow. I was so skinny and weak I didn't want to go out. Finally I tried IRONIZED YEAST. In five weeks I gained 14 lbs. and I'm good and husky all over. Now I go out regularly and have all kinds of good times."
—Irvin Echard, Barberton, O.

— till he gained 14 LBS. QUICK
this new, easy scientific way

**New IRONIZED YEAST
gives thousands
10 to 25 POUNDS
in a few weeks!**

THOUSANDS of skinny, rundown men and women who never could put on an ounce before have recently gained 10 to 25 pounds of solid flesh, new pep and popularity—in just a few weeks!

They've taken this new, scientific formula, Ironized Yeast, which although perfected at the cost of many thousands of dollars, comes to you in pleasant little tablets which cost you only a few cents a day!

Why it builds so quick

Scientists have discovered that many are thin and rundown simply because they do not get enough yeast vitamins (Vitamin B) and iron in their daily food. One of the richest sources of marvelous health-building Vitamin B is the special yeast used in making English ale, world-renowned for its medicinal properties.

Now by a new and costly process, the vitamins from this imported English ale yeast are concentrated to 7 times their strength in ordinary yeast! This 7-power concentrate is combined with 3 kinds of strength-building iron (or-

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The result is these marvelous little Ironized Yeast tablets which have helped thousands of the skinniest, scrawniest people quickly to gain normally attractive pounds, natural development, peppy health.

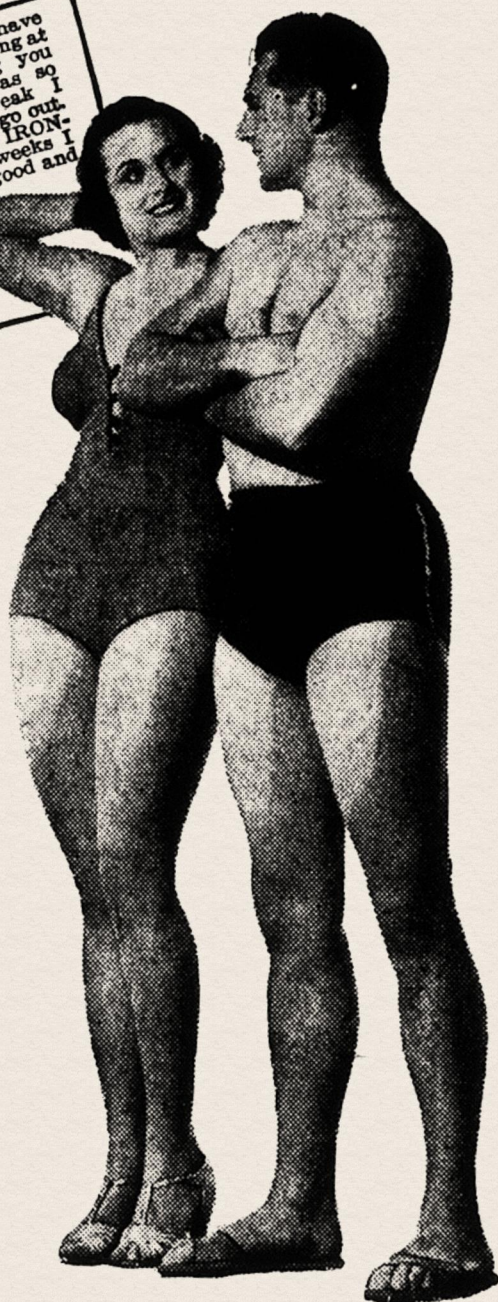
Make this money-back test

If, with the very first package of Ironized Yeast, you don't begin to eat better and to get more enjoyment and benefit from your food—if you don't feel better, with more strength, pep and energy—if you are not absolutely convinced that Ironized Yeast will give you the pounds of normally attractive flesh you need—your money will be promptly refunded. So get Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today.

Special FREE offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists, Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 7711 Atlanta, Ga.

WARNING: Beware of the many cheap substitutes for this successful formula. Insist on genuine Ironized Yeast.



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professional
models



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10 DAYS FREE TRIAL

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K223—Attractive 17 jewel watch with case in charm and color of natural gold. Guaranteed to give you satisfaction. Regular \$30 value.

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M211—Bulova's new feature—the Minute-Man. 17 jewel curved watch in charm and color of natural gold. Leather strap.

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Think of it—as little as 10¢ a day (paid monthly) will enable you to own one of these beautiful Diamonds or Watches. I'll send your choice of these bargains for approval and 10-day trial. Simply put a dollar bill in an envelope with your name, address and number of the article wanted. Tell me your age (must be over 20), occupation, employer and a few facts about yourself. Information held confidential—no direct inquiries will be made. I'll open a 10-month Charge Account for you and send selection for approval. If you are not satisfied, send it back and I'll refund your dollar. If satisfied, pay balance in 10 small monthly payments. Send your order today.

R126—Bulova's newest feature—the Lady Bulova—a tiny 17 jewel watch in charm and color of natural gold.

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A29/C15—Matched Bridal Ensemble consisting of 5 diamond engagement ring and 5 diamond wedding ring. Both 14K white gold. Exceptional value.

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A334—Sworn Perfect diamond with 4 other diamonds in newest 14K natural gold engagement ring. Affidavit of Perfection with purchase. Regular \$75 value.

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K22—Good-looking guaranteed watch for men. Unique style with numerals on case in enamel background. 7 jewels. Leather strap.

\$1.28 a month

I186—Massive Initial ring for men. 10K natural gold with diamond and initials in white gold on genuine black onyx. A real bargain at this low price.

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**But It Can't
Poison You!**

Say Doctors



Modern doctors now say that the old idea of poisons getting into your blood from constipation is BUNK. They claim that constipation swells up the bowels causing pressure on nerves in the digestive tract. This nerve pressure is what causes frequent bilious spells, dizziness, headaches, upset stomach, dull, tired-out feeling, sleepless nights, coated tongue, bad taste and loss of appetite.

Don't suffer hours or even days longer than necessary. You must GET THAT PRESSURE OFF THE NERVES TO GET RELIEF. Flush the intestinal system. When offending wastes are gone the bowels return to normal size and nerve pressure STOPS. Almost at once you feel marvelously refreshed, blues vanish, and life looks bright again.

That is why so many doctors are now insisting on gentle but QUICK ACTION. That is why YOU should insist on Adlerika. This efficient intestinal evacuant contains SEVEN carminative and cathartic ingredients. It acts on the stomach as well as the entire intestinal tract. It relieves stomach GAS at once and often removes bowel congestion in half an hour. No violent action, no after effects, just QUICK results. Recommended by many doctors and druggists for 35 years.

WARNING!

ALL REPUTABLE DRUGGISTS know that Adlerika has no substitute. Always DEMAND the genuine.

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NOW!**

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Sold in Canada by leading druggists

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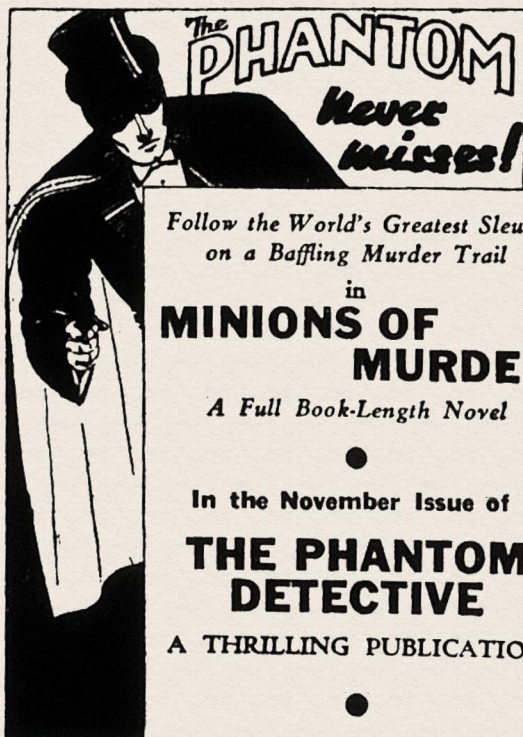
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THAN EVER!**

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In the November Issue of

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

EVERY MONTH 10c AT ALL STANDS

Why Trained Accountants Command

—and how ambitious men are qualifying
by the LaSalle Problem Method

High Salaries

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures where-with he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of

LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at \$30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning \$200 a month—moved up quickly to \$3000, to \$5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than \$10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you can equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. You will be given whatever training, instruction or review on the subject of bookkeeping you may personally need—and without any extra expense to you.

If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training—you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

Check, sign and mail the coupon NOW.



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☐ Higher Accountancy:

Other LaSalle Opportunities: If more interested in one of the other fields of business indicated below, check here:

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Name

Present Position

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Boys - Men - Women

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IVER JOHNSON 22-Cal. Bolt action self-cocking Safety RIFLE or a Genuine 5-tube AC Superheterodyne Floor Model Radio, long or short wave band, dynamic speaker—airplane dial. Striped walnut cabinet, 37 ins. high. An ornament to any home. It's unusual. Radio, Rifle or big cash commission yours for **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** art pictures with famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE**, used for cuts, burns, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remit as per new big premium plan book! Our 42nd year. Be first.



WILSON Chem Co., INC.,
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Mail Coupon!

1938 MODEL STREAMLINE AEROFLITE WAGON

A Beauty! A REAL COASTER WAGON—with a big streamlined all metal body, size 20 x 48, with 8 1/2 in. ball-bearing wheels and 1-inch rubber tires. Yours for **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautiful pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for cuts, burns, etc., easily sold to friends at 25c a box (with picture Free) and remit as per our catalog. **WILSON CHEM CO., INC.** Dept. TG-31-D, Tyrone, Pa.



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BE FIRST!
MAIL COUPON NOW!

GIVEN

Big Guitar or **BANJO** or **MICKEY MOUSE WATCH**

Standard Size Guitar, regulated—fretted ebony finger-board, pearl position dots.—Tenor BANJO with 11 inch rim—16 flat top brackets—inlaid position, calf-skin head, patent pegs. See Mickey Mouse on the Dial of the watch! In colors, too! See the two charms on the bracelet. **WHAT A WATCH FOR BOYS AND GIRLS!** ... You can easily get a Guitar, Banjo, Watch or big cash commission by **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautiful colored Art Pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for burns, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as per our new premium catalog. Many other valuable gifts. 42nd Year. We are reliable. **BE FIRST!**
Wilson Chem. Co. Inc.
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We Trust You!

SEND NO MONEY! MAIL COUPON NOW!

WILSON CHEM. CO., Inc., Dept. TG-31, Tyrone, Pa. Date.....
 Gentlemen:—Please send me 12 Beautiful Art Pictures with 12 boxes **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** to sell at 25c a box (giving picture FREE). I will remit within 30 days, select a premium or keep cash commission as per premium plan catalog sent with order, postage paid.

Name.....

R.D. Bx St.....

Town..... State.....

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PASTE COUPON on a Penny Postcard or Mail in an Envelope Today!

TRY - WILSON'S - COUGH DROPS - 5¢ EVERYWHERE



By CHAKRA

Famous Mystic and Authority on Esoteric Lore

Strange stories will always be popular, especially when these strange stories are true. The person who has a number of weird, supernatural or horror stories at his fingertip will always be the center of attraction in any conversation.

The purpose of this department is to furnish such entertainment. It presents true stories of horror, mystery and the supernatural gathered from all corners of the earth and authenticated by reliable persons.

The Hindu's Helping Hand

DON MONTFORD was an American adventurer visiting in England. He was attending a society carnival on the estate of a wealthy Englishman. One of the entertainers was a young Hindu who was giving a demonstration of suspended animation. The Hindu went into a trance for ten minutes. Mirrors were held to his nose and mouth to prove that he wasn't breathing.

The English host was quite drunk, and when the young Hindu came out of the trance, the Englishman ridiculed the youth as a faker. The lad was headstrong and insulted the Englishman who thereupon called the Hindu a "brown mongrel." As he said this, the Englishman raised his heavy cane to strike the young man—but at that moment, the American, Don Montford grabbed the cane just in time to save the life of the Hindu.

After the excitement had passed, the Hindu thanked Montford and told the American that should he ever need help, to call in prayer to "Sondū—and Sondū will help." Sondū was the name of the young Hindu magician.

Several years later, Montford was spending the summer in an Eastern resort. There was a large lake and dam near the house where Montford, his wife and their young son were staying. Montford that morning, drove his car to the post office, and on his return noticed a crowd of people near the dam. Then he saw his wife in hysterics. He learned that his son had just fallen into

the lake and no one could locate the boy's body. Montford, for some reason, thought of Sondū and sent out a silent prayer to the Hindu friend who was known to be in California somewhere. Then Montford remembered that there was a drain pipe at the bottom of the dam where a small stream of water flowed through. He jumped into the deep water and swam around, searching for the body of his son, hoping that the suction might account for the body not rising.

He was rewarded. He felt the little head

(Continued on page 110)

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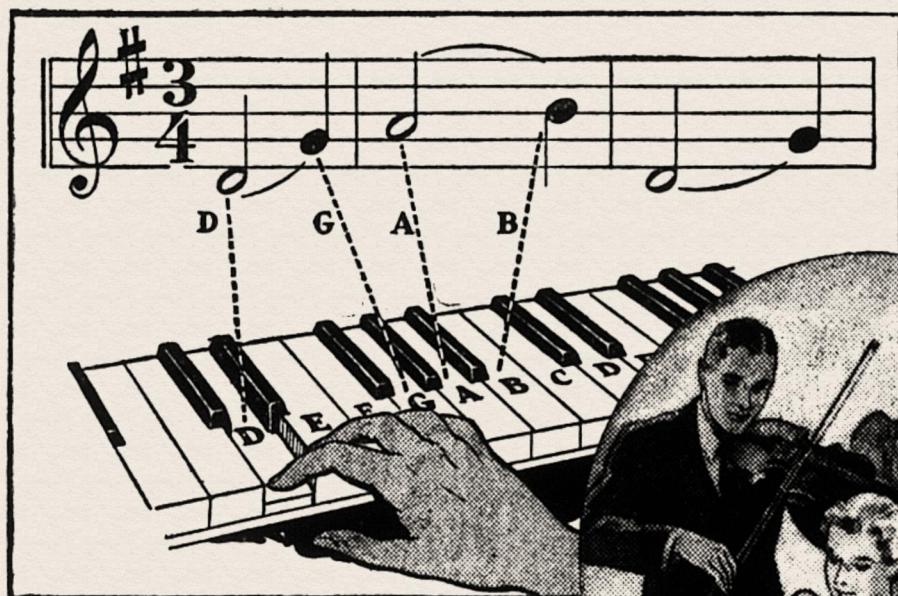
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CHAPTER I

Kiss of the Snake Woman

NATURE in her more somber aspects is a supreme terrorist. The horror of her more hideous wiles is seldom violent or direct. She chills and enmeshes slowly until the victims of her *mad* caprice go insane, waiting for a torture all the more horrible because of its very namelessness.

The horror that oozes from the walls

and ceilings of old, deserted houses, the fleshless faces of the aging dead, the still-born fog which enshrouds graveyards when the moon is gibbous and the night wanes—these slow the breath, strike terror to the heart.

Frightening, too, are the dark and nameless legends that center about blood-drinking and flesh-devouring spirits—vampires, ghouls, were-animals, and the clammy chill of crowded morgues and dissecting laboratories. But when Nature fashioned Jacques Tupulo Jones, she achieved a master-

Voodoo Magic Weaves Its Ghoulish Spell

CRAWLING DOOM

By **FRANK
BELKNAP
LONG, JR.**

*Author of "The Snake
God Kills," "Infants from
Hell," etc.*



the gibbering circle went mad.

piece of the macabre—a crowning horror.

"There's something utterly hideous about him," I told Jim Dickson. "He'll pack them in so fast you won't need a barker to ballyhoo him. Think of it, Dickson. A real voodoo priest from the Black Republic, and a yellow bronze girl from the Vieux Carre."

Dickson looked skeptical. Dickson was a big man with a sallow, saturnine face, and piercing black eyes that gazed right through you, except when they clouded with mercenary

speculation. He wasn't the sort of man you could pull the wool over.

Dickson ran the circus, but he didn't own it. Sally Hunter owned it. Sally was even lovelier than the yellow bronze girl who had sought me out under the big top and begged for a job for herself and Jacques Tupulo Jones.

Sally Hunter was Stephen Hunter's widow. Stephen Hunter had been the shrewdest circus man in Louisiana, but a man's brains are of little use when they're rotting inside his skull

Around a Raving Circus of Inhuman Freaks!

six feet underground.

Jim and I were carrying on for Sally. Jim was head man and I was chief barker and ballyhoo artist. I booked all the talent and even went scouting in the sticks for rarities like the voodoo priest and the yellow bronze girl.

"He wants to show us what he can do," I told Dickson.

Dickson shrugged reluctantly. "All right," he said. "We'll go over and take a look at his mumbo-jumbo."

"Over" was in a little tent behind the animal cages on the south side of the concession. It was ordinarily occupied by Lizzie Reese, the dog-faced girl, whose face was a solid mass of hair from brow to chin.

Lizzie had graciously consented to let Jones use her tent for a preliminary tryout. We threaded our way between the peanut stands, which ran in a parallel line from the edge of the big tent to the animal cages, and then between the cages, while the big beasts glared and roared at us.

When we came to Lizzie Reese's tent, I stopped suddenly and laid my hand on Dickson's arm.

"He'll give you the willies at first," I said. "There's something unholy about him."

Jim Dickson frowned and passed into the tent. I followed apprehensively. Standing with folded arms in the very center of the tent was Jacques Tupulo Jones. He seemed to be expecting us. By his side, dwarfed by his sinister immensity, was the little yellow bronze girl.

The little bronze girl was certainly four-fifths white. Her beauty was not of the voluptuous sort. It was unearthly, unreal. Her eyes were large and lustrous; her skin golden with bronze pigmentation here and there. The golden tint deepened to actual bronze on her cheek bones and temples, but so imperceptibly that you didn't notice any transition.

SHE had a small, straight nose and a red, small mouth. Only her mouth lacked spirituality. It was wanton, inviting. It was the sort of mouth you couldn't just kiss once.

When I looked at it I thought of the mouths of vampires that cling and bite. I shivered inwardly when I looked at it. I was both repelled and sensuously attracted by it.

Jacques Tupulo Jones was at least six feet four inches in height. He was clothed in a checkered suit of loud pattern, a stand-up collar and japanned leather shoes. His trousers were tight-fitting and bulged comically at the knees.

But there was nothing comical about his face. It was the most leerily and maliciously evil face I had ever seen on a human being. It was somehow spiritually evil. I mean by that, there was *soul* in it. You could see Jones' black, inconceivably depraved soul glaring out of his large, blood-streaked eyes.

His jaw was massive, apelike. His nose was flat, with sinisterly flaring nostrils. Utter malignancy shone in his gaze and was stenciled on every lineament of his primitive African features. He was a full-blooded Negro of a type you don't see often nowadays. Just looking at him sent cold shivers up my spine.

We didn't have any difficulty in persuading Jones to show us what he could do. He was down to his last thin dime financially, and the little yellow girl was wearing a 1933-model hat, frayed suede shoes, and stockings with runs in them.

Jones told us what he was going to do before he did it. He explained about the Saintes. The Saintes are disembodied spirits who are so eager to get possession of living bodies that they'll obey anyone who can satisfy their evil yearnings. They can only express themselves vicariously—through the bodies of sleeping men and women.

The Saintes are voodoo cult spirits. In their disembodied state they are devilish, elemental forces—shapes of fire and destruction, with the instincts of snakes and hyenas. Jones claimed that he could put the little yellow bronze girl in a trance and make her behave like a snake. He claimed that the Saintes would enter her sleeping body.

"All right," Dickson told him. "Go ahead. Show us what you can do."

The first thing that Jones did was to drag Lizzie Reese's narrow canvas bed out into the middle of the tent. Then he told the yellow bronze girl to lie down on it and shut her eyes. The girl obeyed as docilely as a lamb, without even taking her eyes from his face.

He stood over her, towering and majestic. Despite his vaudeville comic's clothes, an air of somber dignity seemed to emanate from him. It was the dignity of enthroned evil. If ever a man was evil, Jones was evil. When I looked at him I forgot that he was just a freak attraction whom I was eager to book.

He called the girl Marguerite. Her real name was Josephine Chabot, but in New Orleans the sidewalk cafes of the Vieux Carre preferred glamour-names unknown to the police.

"Marguerite," he said, "open your eyes and look at me."

The girl obeyed. She stared up at him in a kind of trance. And he stared down at her. Bent above her and stared. I saw his face begin to work, horribly. His lips twitched; his eyes narrowed until they were gleaming black slits.

Then he started muttering incantations. A stream of revolting gibberish flowed from his lips. Most of it was in French, but I caught an English word here and there.

It took him about five minutes to put the girl to sleep. Her eyes remained open and fixed, but after about five minutes there was no longer any expression in them at all.

SHE lay utterly motionless, rigid. As soon as she ceased to move, Jones' features relaxed. The intensity seeped out of them. He backed away from the couch and stood intently regarding her from a distance of several feet.

Her toes began to wriggle first. They wriggled and twitched with a kind of obscene animation. Then her legs jerked and twitched. The next instant her whole body was in feverish motion. Without moving from the

couch she wriggled and twitched all over.

Her torso undulated, her head rolled idiotically from side to side. Prone on the couch, she performed a *danse de ventre*, violent, tortured, revolting, lewd. So violent were her exertions that froth appeared on her lips, and her rigidly staring eyes bulged from their sockets.

Jim and I watched her in silent horror. She seemed unaware of our burning eyes that watched her every undulating movement. I won't pretend that I wasn't stirred by the sight. Mingled with the repulsion which I felt was another emotion which was less to my credit.

The dance continued for two or three minutes, and then Jones said in a perfectly calm voice:

"The snake is now in her body. It will come to me when I call it. It will come to me across the floor."

Suddenly his eyes blazed. In the depths of his pupils a fierce light shone. "Marguerite is no longer in Marguerite's body. Only the snake will come. Do you wish me to call it now?"

He glanced inquiringly at Dickson, a bestial smile hovering on his thick lips. I followed his glance to Dickson's white face. What I saw there wasn't reassuring. Dickson, the skeptic, the hard-to-sell guy, was trembling all over. He was as white as a sheet and trembling like a jelly-fish on stilts.

He had sensed something, I guess. It wasn't the dance alone. That was bad enough; but there was something hellish loose in the tent, which we both could feel. I can't describe it or explain it, but it was there.

Dickson gave no sign that he had heard Jones' proposal. I had to speak for him. I nodded at the leering brute.

"Call her," I whispered hoarsely.

The tall man threw back his head so violently that I thought the muscles of his throat would tear across. His blood-streaked eyes rolled, and little blobs of mucus appeared on his thick lips.

"Come to me, Snake-God-in-Wom-

an's-Body," he wailed. "Come now, come quickly."

The writhing woman on the cot obeyed. Slowly, as though in thrall to some hideous and intangible compulsion, she turned about until she was resting on her stomach. Then she moved downward to the floor.

She moved downward in a manner most ghastly. She seemed to *flow* downward from the bed to the floor! With crawling undulatory movements her slim woman's body advanced like a snake on its belly across the tent toward Jacques Tupulo Jones.

Straight toward his quivering, tightly-trousered legs she moved, her arms extended as though in supplication, her face pressed flatly against the wide boards of the floor.

I had never seen anything so shameless and debased and horrible. Dickson was staring wide-eyed, his features twisted into a gargoyle-mask of horror. With an effort I suppressed the nausea which was sweeping over me. Remembering that I had an act to book, I tried to look at the woman with box-office eyes.

IT was a tough ordeal. For a moment I had the awful, sickening illusion that the little yellow bronze girl was really a snake. All her movements were snakelike.

Then she reached Jones' legs and started to twine herself about them. I had to choke down a scream then. Sinuously and relentlessly, exactly like a boa-constrictor contracting, her body wound itself about the quivering, wailing black man, surging upward toward his thighs with undulant and sinister contortions.

Her body seemed utterly elastic, *boneless!* It flowed about the man's tall body with a pouring, rippling sinuousness that suggested the writhings of a Medusa-head. Higher she climbed and higher.

The voodoo priest's eyes were blazing with fanatical triumph. His big hands went out and encircled the woman's skull. She had reached his chest when he seized her head and turned it upward, so that he could gaze down directly into her glazed,

unseeing eyes.

His fingers twined themselves in her black, slightly kinky hair.

"Snake-God-in-Woman's body," he said, hoarsely. "Who are you? Speak your name."

"Who?" murmured the woman, her voice like a whisper from the tomb.

"Speak your name," Jones repeated savagely.

"I am—Ogourn Bagdaris," murmured the woman. "I have come to slay and kill. You will not send me away?"

Jim Dickson was a man of undisciplined and violent impulses. Before Jones could reply he sprang forward with an oath, and seized the yellow bronze girl violently by the shoulders. He shook her, and tried to tear her with violence from the other's big torso.

Jim was broad-minded ordinarily. His moral hide was thick and insensitive. But something about that whole ghastly pantomime had gotten under that rhinoceros skin of his. He was revolted and furious right down to his soles. A great wave of moral indignation had surged up in him, and submerged his money-grubbing instincts.

He called Jones foul and unprintable names. He yelled and screamed at him as he tore at the girl's clinging body. He yelled that he would see that Jones was barred from every circus in the Southwest.

He was still yelling when the girl bit him. She simply twisted her lovely golden bronze face about suddenly, and bit him viciously on the wrist with her little red wound of a mouth. Her teeth sank deeply into his flesh and met under the skin.

CHAPTER II

The Twisted Corpse

HE showed me the wound afterward. But when it happened, I thought the girl had merely kissed him. I didn't know that he had been bitten till I saw bright blood on his wrist. Then the girl turned her face

toward me and I saw the blood on her mouth, too.

I helped him then. Together we got the girl untangled, while Jones screamed dire threats. We threw the girl roughly down on the cot and slapped her cheeks till they were deep bronze all over and the glazed look went out of her eyes.

We didn't waste any time in getting them both out of the tent and off the concession. The girl wept and shrieked and tore at her kinky hair, but we ignored her hysterics and concentrated on Jones.

Jones was more difficult to handle. After his first resentful outburst he remained sullen and silent, and that's what made him difficult. We had to prod and push him. All the way across the concession, between the animal cages and the big tent, we had to threaten to kick him with violence where his dignity would suffer most.

He'd walk a few paces and then turn around and stare venomously at us. If hatred could kill we would have died a thousand hideous deaths. He didn't speak at all until we were outside the concession.

He had a big bag which we put down at the edge of the road which led into town. We advised him to start hiking. The little bronze girl's breast lifted with her hysterical breathing, but Jones just stood still in the center of the road and glared at us with blazing eyes.

Then he mouthed the awful words which were destined to bring poor Dickson to the verge of madness.

"Ogourn bit you," he said, "Through the open wound Ogourn flowed into you. Ogourn's blood is now in your veins. *The blood is the life.* You will kill soon now."

I thought Dickson would knock him down when he said that. I thought he would fulfill that mad prophecy on the spot, bruising the prophet's obscenely leering face with his bare knuckles. I had to hold him off, drag him back.

"He'll sue us," I whispered. "In the name of heaven, man, control yourself."

I got Dickson away finally. We left

the voodoo priest and the sobbing girl standing in the road, and walked back to the big top. But Jones got in one parting shot that sent a cold shiver up my spine.

"When you sleep, the snake will crawl on its belly. It will crawl and kill," he called after us.

I left Dickson as soon as we got back to the concession. He went into his own tent to put a bandage on his wrist where the yellow bronze girl had bitten him, and I went over to Eddie Frond's lunch wagon and ordered myself some doughnuts and coffee.

I liked to talk to Eddie. He had been places and seen things. When I told him about Jones, his brow clouded and he shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said. "If he's really from Haiti, you'll wish you hadn't met him. I was down there once. When one of those witch doctors puts a spell on you, you can't just laugh it off."

"Yeah, I know, Eddie," I said. "I never was one to laugh at voodoo. I've seen things right here in this state that would make your flesh crawl. If a guy stuck pins in a *wahga* doll and named it after me, I wouldn't laugh. I'd go and pick myself out a nice coffin."

I'm a very loquacious duck when I get started. I talked to Eddie for an hour and a half, and while I talked night came down outside the wagon, in slow stages. The evening star appeared first and winked in solitary splendor over the big top. Then there was a wild rush of stars filling all the skies.

IT was black as the inside of a cat's belly when I dunked my last doughnut and descended from the revolving stool before the counter.

"'Night, Eddie," I said. "I'm going to turn in early. I've had a hard day, and the body needs a bath and about ten hours shut-eye."

I was halfway to the door when the big beasts started roaring. It was unusual for them to start bellowing and caterwauling after sundown, and the great volume of sound which suddenly issued from a dozen cages was like

nothing that could be described. The sheer novelty of it stopped me in my tracks.

I turned about, and stared at Eddie. He returned my stare in amazed silence.

"Something has upset the pussies," I said. "I never heard them carry on like that before. What do you suppose it is, Eddie?"

Before he could reply a woman screamed shrilly. Screamed once, and was silent. It was the worst sort of woman scream. It was burdened with despair and frenzied terror. I stared at Eddie and he stared back, but we didn't say anything at all.

Then, suddenly, we heard people running. There was a pattering of steps in the darkness outside, accompanied by shouts and shrieks.

I advanced to the door and threw it open. Gibbs, the animal trainer, was going by with a whip in his hand, his lips white and twitching. I reached his side in three strides and trotted along beside him.

"One of the cats broke loose, Dave?" I murmured breathlessly as we headed for the nearest of the long line of cages which loomed in ominous silhouette on the south side of the concession.

"Don't know," muttered Gibbs. "Heard someone scream over there right after the cats started bawling. Looks like we're in for trouble."

We were in for trouble, all right, but not the sort that Gibbs anticipated. The first thing we saw when we drew near to the cages was the wide circle of illumination cast by a pocket flash.

At first we saw only dim shapes milling about in the darkness, and the bright circle of light on the ground below the square façade of the largest cage on the lot. It was Cissy, the big Bengal tiger's cage, and the animal behind the bars was roaring at the top of her lungs.

Mercifully the light didn't rest on the dead man at first. It simply illuminated a circle of vacant earth and the lower part of the cage, limning the blue-steel bars with a startling clarity. We saw Cissy, too. She was pacing in mad fury from end to end of the cage.

Then the light shifted a little and the dead man leapt into view. We saw only a part of him. Across his body a woman was lying in hysterical collapse. Her extended hands dug in agony into the earth beside him; her lips roamed aimlessly over his dead, staring face.

Sally Hunter had taken it badly. She was wild with grief. The awful condition of the corpse and the staring onlookers did not prevent her from abandoning herself to wild transports of despair.

She kissed the dead man's swollen, black lips; laid her face against his blood-suffused cheeks. Mercifully her slim, prostrate body concealed the twisted horror beneath — concealed most of it. The right arm lay exposed, the fingers clenched on a man's tweed cap. And the legs were partly visible in the shifting amber light.

THE legs curved unnaturally outward at the knees. As I stared down at them I was swept with the sickening realization that only broken bones could have made possible such a frightful distortion of human limbs.

In life Fred Hunter had been strong and tall and incredibly good looking. Women had flocked in droves about him and showered him with kisses. A young Apollo, this fellow, with curly blond hair, and a face and figure that caused the hearts of all women under seventy to flutter violently.

Sally Hunter's brother would never kiss soft, clinging lips again. He had died horribly, the life pressed out of him by something monstrous that had broken his bones and hideously twisted his legs and arms.

Almost as horrible as the corpses on the ground were the men and women who clustered in a wavering, horror-struck circle beneath the tiger cage, their faces white and drawn in the diffuse illumination which streamed outward from the focused beam of the little electric torch.

They were not normal men and women. I shall never forget the awful picture they presented as they stood there, staring and gibbering and moaning in the half-light.

Freaks are seldom normal mentally. In moments of great stress and horror they never behave like ordinary men and women. As I stared about that grotesque circle, I recognized friends of long standing who had gone completely haywire.

There was Gudo, the lion-faced man, whose lips were writhing repellently beneath his distended, hairy cheeks, and whose glaring dark eyes were horribly like those of the jungle lord whose expression he aped.

There was the hunchbacked dwarf, Simon Crisp, whose face bore an expression of devilish malice impossible to convey. There was the skeleton woman, wild-eyed and teetering on the verge of hysteria, and the microcephalic idiot, Prince Charles, whose little, tapering head bobbed loathsomely up and down.

Faces bestial and hairy, wild-eyed and obscene glared at me and Gibbs as we stood looking down at poor Fred Hunter's broken body. They seemed to resent our normality, as though we had eavesdropped unbidden on a spectacle suitable to their perverse and distorted natures alone.

In the presence of gruesome death all that was sinister and abnormal in them surged shockingly to the surface. Some were obviously not to be trusted alone with that poor, broken thing on the ground. They would have lifted and examined it, have pawed it gloatingly, eliminating all clues.

Only one member of that unnaturally excited group remained calm and decent. Jack Kane, the Lisbon giant, who stood seven feet three in his checkered socks, and who could have broken a man's spine with a swift strangle hold as easily as I could have lifted Simon Crisp three feet from the ground, held the electric torch in his huge, massive hand and spoke to me in a perfectly calm voice.

"You'd better get Miss Sally away from him," he said. "She won't listen to me, but maybe you can get her to go to her tent. What she needs now is some strong coffee and someone to lean on. Jim would be better, but you're here and Jim ain't."

I nodded and fell to my knees be-

side the dead man. Looking at him closely like that wasn't pleasant, but I had a duty to perform. I took hold of Sally's shoulders and shook her.

"Come, girl," I said. "There's nothing you can do for him now. You've got to get a grip on yourself."

I HAD to pull her from the corpse. She sobbed hysterically and clung to me, and it made me feel very protective and tender toward her. The freaks fell back reluctantly as I escorted her from the cages and across the concession to her own little tent.

She was still sobbing when I left her. But she wasn't alone. Lizzie Reese, the dog-faced girl, was sitting beside her on the edge of her cot, comforting her as only Lizzie could. Lizzie was terribly maternal and the best sort of prop in an emergency.

But Sally Hunter really wanted to see Jim Dickson. I don't know that I mentioned it, but Sally and Jim were sweet on one another. They had been that way for six months. Sally just wanted to talk to Jim and weep on his shoulder.

CHAPTER III

Horror in the Tent

I COULD hear the freaks wailing and babbling down by the animal cages, as I threaded my way between the deserted sideshow tents and ticket booths which filled all the dismal acres between Sally's tent and the west side of the concession. The moon was hidden behind heavy clouds, and the stars looked very cold and remote as I moved through the thick darkness toward Jim Dickson's tent.

There was a light in Jim's tent. The canvas was illumined just a little on the outside. A spectral, dully glowing cone it was, in the darkness. I pulled back the flap and stepped inside.

Jim was lying fully clothed on a cot at the back of the tent. On a table beside him an expiring candle guttered and flared. His face was white and drawn. His eyes were closed. I

looked at him and shivered.

His skin had the sickly yellow pallor of a dead man's. I wondered if it was the candle-light which made him look so corpse-like. I stole silently up to the cot and looked down at him.

My heart began a furious pounding when my eyes focused on his mouth. His lips were slightly parted, revealing a long row of jagged, tobacco-stained teeth. In sick revulsion, I reached down and laid the tips of my fingers on his lips, tongue and gums.

I drew my hand back quickly. The fingers that I had laid to his lips were crimson-tipped!

Jim opened his eyes then, opened his eyes and stared up at me. He must have read the apprehension in my gaze. With a startled cry he sprang from the cot, stood erect in the dull candle-light.

"What is it, Charles?" he cried. "What has happened?"

I did not answer him. I simply looked at him, conscious only of the nausea sweeping over me. This man who stood staring at me with wide, startled eyes had buried his teeth in human flesh—or *I was gazing upon a deception blacker than sin!*

At all events, Jim Dickson was obviously damned. Something ghastly had happened to him while he slept, and there was gleaming bright blood on his lips and teeth.

His eyes seemed curiously out of focus as he returned my horrified stare. There was a little mirror hanging from a nail on the central tent pole behind him. Shakingly I pointed to it.

"Look at your face, Jim Dickson," I said. "Just look at your bloody mouth!"

Sudden terror flamed in his gaze. Turning, he staggered groggily to the tentpole and looked into the little glass. He stared long, and intently. Stared in utter silence, but the twitching of the veins on his temples was as expressive as a scream.

When he finally did scream, he shouted soundlessly. He turned about, his face aghast, and shaped a scream with his terror-paralyzed lips that was blood-brother to silence.

"You must have killed Fred Hun-

ter," I said tensely. "You must have broken his limbs and bit him on the throat. That black devil hypnotized you! I sensed it as soon as I saw you asleep, with blood on your mouth."

Dickson's eyes were tortured dark pools in his white, twitching face.

"Yes," he murmured, hoarsely. "You are right. You *must* be right. If Sally's brother is dead, I killed him. I remember crawling toward him in the night. I wound myself about his body and bit him on the throat."

HE shuddered violently with the thought. "I tightened in coils about him like a snake," he went on in agony. "Charles, Charles, what have I become? Am I man or beast? When I crawled through the night, I was more snake than man!"

"My thoughts were confused and horrible, but I remember that I wanted to slay and crush. I wanted to coil myself tightly about that poor lad's body, to squeeze him slowly to death." Hysteria was in his voice.

"Then I sank my fangs into his throat. I bit him with my teeth till his bright blood spurted! I was happy, then, satiated. I crawled sluggishly back. I remember crawling—Good God, what am I saying?" He clutched at his throat, panting.

"Am I insane, Charles? *Could* I be sane and talk like this? Has some monster taken possession of my body? *Ogourn Bagdaris*," he said.

"Are we living in two worlds, Charles—all of us? Walking beside ghastly spirits, that ravish and slay—spirits that wait for sleep to render us powerless?"

I stared at him, aghast. "I do not know," I murmured. "I honestly don't know, Jim. A few moments ago, Fred Hunter was crushed to death, his bones broken, his throat torn horribly. You say that you remember killing him. What *am* I to think?" I shuddered.

"Yes, it is true!" he cried, his voice a strangled sob. "I killed him, squeezed him to death! Now I must atone. I must confess my guilt to the world."

Groaning pitifully, he rushed from

the tent into the darkness beyond. I stood staring at the open flap, my head swirling with all that I had heard.

There was a faint breeze stirring beyond that night-black portal. It stirred Dickson's clothes, which were hanging from a horizontal beam near the front of the tent, awoke faint, ghostly creakings in the boards underfoot.

For interminable seconds I stood there, frozen to immobility by Dickson's wild, unbelievable story. Then I, too, rushed from the tent. Out under the star-studded sky I stood for an instant, staring wildly about me, listening for Dickson's retreating footsteps. Only the gentle sigh of the wind and the far-off murmur of human voices broke the stillness.

I started to move in an easterly direction; then changed my course, and headed for Sally Hunter's tent. It had occurred to me that Dickson would be most likely to turn to Sally in his black despair and remorse.

Threading my way between the deserted tents of the freaks and side-show barkers, suddenly I saw the rearing snake. It stopped me in my tracks. Freezing sense of terror surged up in me, constricting my heart, stopping the breath in my throat.

I did not see the snake itself. I saw only its shadow on brightly illumined canvas. Within the tent a bright light was burning, and against the glowing cloth the great shadow reared in awful menace.

Below its wavering, flattened head, a little stooped figure was standing, immobile, as though unconscious of the serpentine bulk that was sinisterly rearing up behind it. Then—so suddenly that I had no time to scream a warning—the big snake fell!

It fell upon the figure, knocking it prone, lashing at it furiously with swiftly doubling coils that reared in hellish, shadowy distortion on the illuminated canvas.

An agonized scream tore from the fallen figure's throat. Instinctively my hand went under my coat and emerged with a small automatic; I carried the gun, just in case. Some

of the boys and girls I wouldn't book got nasty at times and threatened to make trouble. I was glad as hell I had the gun on me then.

ALL caution aside, I went into the tent under steam. It was a big, circular tent, and it belonged to Dhu Ghassen, the Arabian snake charmer. The first thing I saw inside was Dhu, down on the floor, struggling and screaming, and a python ten feet long and as thick as a man's wrist squeezing the breath out of him!

I took careful aim with the little gun, aimed at the big reptile's flattened head, aimed at its eyes. Bright flame spurted, whipped across the tent. There was a roar like thunder, and a spurting, crimson fountain where the snake's head had been.

With slow, convulsive writhings the headless horror uncoiled; writhed repulsively free from Dhu's prostrate body, and withdrew into a corner of the tent, leaving a shiny wet trail behind it.

Swaying feebly, supporting his sagging body against a tent pole, Dhu dragged himself to his feet, stood staring at me with bright, grateful eyes. He was a little man, with a lean, cadaverous face. His skin was the color of aging parchment. All his teeth showed, and all his teeth were black.

"You saved my life," he said. "I thank you very sincerely."

"Hell," I replied, "blasting a brute like that was pleasure. What's the matter, Dhu? Losing your grip? I thought you could control them with your eyes."

"Took too much hormone," said Dhu, shivering. "I changed its nature. It was maddened; it couldn't control itself."

"Hormone," I muttered nervously. "What are you talking about, Dhu?"

"Snakes have ductless glands, like humans," said Dhu Ghassen. "But secretions are different. Secret of long life—secretions of snake's ductless glands."

He was speaking in riddles, pausing for breath between phrases that weren't any too clear.

"I don't get it, Dhu," I said. "Just

what are you driving at?"

"I take snake's blood, inject it with a hypodermic. Take blood from near pituitary, adrenal glands of snake."

"You mean, you inject it into your own body?" I stammered, horrified.

Dhu nodded. "Yes. It is a dangerous thing to do, but I do it for the human race. The life of the snake flows into me. It is the secret of long life. Some reptiles live for hundreds of years. There are turtles living today who were born before the discovery of America. Sea tortoises — hundreds of years old."

I stared at him in mounting terror. He was clearly mad. I don't know much about glands, human or otherwise, but there are some things which are just too cockeyed for sane belief. The mad Arab had obviously picked up some half-baked notions somewhere, brooded on them and gone completely screwy.

Horror seared my brain when I realized what he had done. He had filled his veins with a snake's blood! He was as good as dead already. Despite my ignorance of medicine, it took me only an instant to realize that you can't do a thing like that, and live.

I could see that he wasn't lying either. On a table in the corner where the snake had crawled was a gleaming metallic syringe, half full of dark, glistening fluid. And on the little man's bared right arm was an unmistakable puncture. It was already oozing pus and blood.

But that wasn't what made the muscles of my throat swell and throb, and filled me with sheer, blind panic. Here was another potential killer! Here was another victim of "snake madness." His next words confirmed my worst fears.

"I have noticed a change," he said. "It is peculiar, but I seem to feel very strange at times. All this afternoon I have felt drowsy, tired. Once I fell into a deep sleep, and had a horrible dream."

HIS dark eyes were somber at the memory. "I dreamed that I was a snake. Yes, I dreamed that I was crawling on my belly across the floor.

I don't remember how far I crawled, or where I went. But when I awoke, Ruptar was coiled tightly about me, and his head rested against my cheek.

"He seemed to sense a—a kinship. He uncoiled when I spoke to him, but reluctantly."

Right then I decided on a course of action. I knew instantly that I had to get him away from the concession — both for his own sake, and to prevent him from adding to the confusion and fear which was making a bedlam out of the place.

For Sally's sake, I had to get him away. One madman running amok, bent on atonement and confession, was as much as I could cope with. Two might precipitate a lynching! I knew that if the mad Arab started babbling, the freaks would go completely berserk.

He was one of them, in a way—and they are insanely jealous of their own kind. They would believe him, and attack him, tear him limb from limb. Yes, I *had* to get him away!

Nor did I think he would live. I was certain that the snake blood would poison his heart, kidneys, liver, lungs. But only a competent medico could give him his one chance in fifty. What I decided to do, was to rush him to the hospital at Bay St. Charles, and then return and take charge of Jim Dickson.

I had to argue and plead with him. His squirrely state of mind was a hindrance, but I finally convinced him that his life was worth saving, and that delay would be fatal.

Calculating, I knew that I would lose only twenty minutes on the road. I had a fast coupe, and Bay St. Charles was only seven miles from the circus as the crow flies. My car was parked in one of the toy garages, which ran in a parallel line between the tents of the sideshow artists and the road on the west side of the concession.

And I had to half drag the mad Arab to the garage. He shouted and pleaded with me while I got the car out.

"I feel much better now," he protested. "I do not think I shall go with you. I do not need a doctor. I shall live forever; I have the blood of Rup-

tar in my veins!" Conviction gleamed like a mad spark in his dark eyes.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "But you're going into town whether you like it or not."

It was an unpleasant journey, and I won't dwell on it. As soon as we arrived in Bay St. Charles, I got him a private room at the hospital and explained his case to the head surgeon.

"Insanity," I said, "but it's his body that I'm worried about. Dose him with antidotes, or operate, or do whatever you think best."

The surgeon's eyes goggled when I finished explaining about the snake glands. It was the first case of its kind in medical history, he said, and it shocked him so that he turned white under the gills.

On the way back to the circus the fear in my mind welled up and became a gelatinous black octopus, with tentacles that writhed and twisted all over my brain. I couldn't get the image of Fred Hunter's broken, distorted body out of my head! It seemed incredible that any man could possess strength enough to twist a living body into such a sickening parody of the human body.

Involuntarily I began to wish that I was back in Bay St. Charles. I was driving into a black web of horror and danger deliberately, with my eyes open, and all because of Sally Hunter.

CHAPTER IV

The Spotted Python

MY coupe was a mile from the concession when I saw the flare of the torches. So numerous were they that the sky above the great tent was a faint glow. They bobbed up and down in the distance like will-o'-the-wisps above a haunted swamp.

I didn't drive right up to the concession. The waving points of light were damnably disturbing, and I didn't want to barge right into danger, with the hum of the motor to announce my coming.

So I parked the car on the side of

the road a half-mile from the flaring beacons, and made my way stealthily on foot to the long row of animal cages.

The roar of the beasts was loud in my ears as I drew near to the brightly-lighted cages. Crouching in the shadows below the pacing lions and tigers were huddled forms, holding aloft tall, intertwined pine-knots, flaring flambeaux that cast a lurid radiance over a scene that stopped me abruptly at the edge of the concession, and turned the blood to ice in my veins.

The huddled figures were the corpse-maddened freaks who had been gibbering and moaning and pressing eagerly forward to paw dead flesh an hour before. Now they were intent on inflicting nameless torment on the helpless living!

Roped to a stake in the center of the abnormal congregation was the nearly-nude form of Jim Dickson. The clothes had been torn with violence from his body and lay in tattered fragments at the base of the stake.

He was straining at his bonds, his eyes bright with terror and revulsion. One glance at the ground showed me why he was thus tormented. Creeping slowly toward him on its belly was the spotted form of an enormous python!

The snake progressed with slow, undulating movements of its big body, its head raised slightly from the ground, its tail lashing sinisterly from side to side. Sinisterly and in thrall to pain!

The great reptile did not move willingly toward its pinioned victim. It was impelled forward by the flaring torches. Standing behind it, utterly indifferent to his own peril, was the loathsome, stunted form of a beast in the clothes of a man.

Cygnus Keene had been born of human parents. But even then he had resembled an infantile monster. With the passing of the years this resemblance had grown. Deep crevices had appeared in the smooth, pinkish flesh of his cheeks, and his nose had grown flatter and broader. It had shriveled into a sunken mummy's nose in the

center of his half-human face.

His arms were withered stumps, his hands pudgy and thumbless. He held the flaming torch in his pink baby fingers and lowered it until it scorched the python's tail. Then he raised the brand, cackling with animal-like glee. Why the python did not writhe back and enfold him was a mystery I couldn't fathom.

Perhaps the big reptile was too slow-willed to grasp the fact that it was being burned. It merely felt atrocious pain in its tail, and all its wrath was directed against the man it could see. Nearer and nearer to Dickson it crawled, its eyes shining with torment, glowing black shoe-buttons in its flattened, wavering head.

Suddenly from the sidelines a dwarfed figure arose. It hobbled forward in the glare of the torches, stood teetering on its toes a few inches from the pinioned man. From its thick, ugly lips a torrent of abuse flowed obscenely forth.

THE eyes gleamed. "This is your atonement," pronounced Simon Crisp. "You begged to be punished for your foul crime. You acknowledged your guilt. With your own lips you accused the snake spirit which lives in your body.

"You killed Fred Hunter. You wound yourself about him. You strangled and crushed him!"

Jim Dickson writhed frantically against the tall, straight pole. The cords which held him cut his wrists until a red stain spread slowly over them.

"No, no!" he shrieked. "You are wrong, Simon! I confessed that I killed him in my sleep. I was possessed; I did not act willingly. I am eager to atone—but not *this way*!"

"The law would be less merciful," taunted Simon Crisp. "There would be a trial, delay—judicial torture. You would agonize in a cell for months. This way, you will die swiftly. The snake-spirit will join its brother.

"The evil thing will leave your body when you die, crushed out of you by the python's coils. You will die as Fred Hunter died, crushed to death by

the coils of a snake!"

He had hardly finished speaking when the great snake reared. Its flattened head, now close to Dickson's legs, rose suddenly into the air. Almost simultaneously its long, gleaming body surged upward and curled into a monstrous coil.

Dickson screamed wildly as the ponderous mass of the scorched and maddened reptile descended upon him, enveloped him in a smother of slime and stench. It wound viciously about him, convulsive tremors running up and down its spotted body as it constricted in animal rage.

In the twinkling of an eye the gibbering circle went mad. Prancing and shrieking, the grinning, leering freaks surged inward toward the stake, as though herded together by devils from the pit. Leaping and dancing, shrieking and moaning, they pointed and gesticulated as the great shape tightened about Dickson's agonized torso and limbs.

The torches in their hands bobbed through the air, leaving flaming trails in the darkness. For terror-fraught, interminable seconds, pandemonium reigned beneath the animal cages.

Then a woman's frantic scream tore out of the night, freezing the freaks to immobility, striking with terror even the deformed and gesticulating dwarfs, so that they stood as though turned to stone.

The scream rang from somewhere in the darkness beyond the circle, but it was instantly repeated near at hand. Then footsteps sounded on the trampled earth.

Into the circle leaped a white and trembling girl. A thin silk nightdress clung tightly to her slender body, and her long, dark hair streamed out behind her.

For an instant she stood stark still in the glare of the torches, staring with horror-widened eyes at the constricting snake. Then she turned slowly about, until she was gazing directly at the two unmoving dwarfs.

"Save him," she whispered hoarsely. "I know that he is innocent! Save him for me. In the name of heaven, save him!"

Simon Crisp smiled evilly. Into his leering face came a look of unholy cruelty. He was not to be cheated out of his ghoulish pleasure!

I SPRANG forward then. With a protesting cry, I leaped from the concealing shadows which clustered about the tiger cages into the center of the milling throng.

CHAPTER V

Hangman's Guest

THAT same instant a shot rang out. The great python recoiled as its head was split into crimson slivers by blasts from a leveled automatic that spat again and again in swift, deadly sequence.

Jack Kane, the Lisbon Giant, continued to fire as he advanced, emptying the clip of his smoking weapon and finally hurling it from him. It clattered to the ground at the foot of the stake. Only Kane's right arm was free and unencumbered. The left supported the drooping figure of a bruised and battered man.

With a fierce oath, Kane hurled the voodoo priest to the earth. "I found him skulking about over by the big

wigwam," he muttered.

"I got suspicious and beat the truth out of him. Tell them the truth, Mr. Jones. Tell them who killed Fred Hunter!"

On the ground Jones was a pitiful spectacle. He raised himself on his elbow and stared terrifiedly about him, his blood-streaked eyes beseeching the hostile and menacing faces of the freaks in cringing appeal.

"I killed him," he groaned. "I strangled him and broke his bones. I cut his throat with a knife!"

There was a murmur from the abnormal or subnormal—men and women. A threatening, ominous murmur which grew suddenly into a full-throated roar.

Swiftly I turned and started to move away. But Jones' roving eyes picked me out with unfailing accuracy. When a man is about to be torn limb from limb, his faculties can be surprisingly acute.

Jones pointed at me, then, his voice rising in a shriek. "But *that's* the man who paid me to do it!" he cried. "He hired me to kill Mr. Hunter and deceive Mr. Dickson with a juju act. He paid me to do it, I say! He—"

His voice was drowned out by the screams of rage which welled from the throats of the freaks. [Turn Page]

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This time their anger was directed against me!

I won't pretend that I wasn't frightened. If it hadn't been for Kane, I would have escaped the noose—but not in a pleasant way. Kane saved me for the hangman.

He collared me and twisted my arm until I yelled in agony. But he was decent enough when I ceased to struggle. He kept the freaks at bay. He informed them coldly that I was his prisoner, and berated them for their brutality and utter lack of emotional control.

Just before he led me away, I saw something which gripped and infuriated me. Several of the freaks had cooled off, had repentantly pulled the dead snake from Dickson's torso and limbs.

Dickson was pale as a corpse, but I could see, just by looking at him, that he was going to recover. And Sally Hunter was sobbing and kissing him; holding him tight and raining kisses on his white, detestable face. How I hated him more than ever at that moment!

That vision haunts me yet. I sit here in a cold, dismal cell, and long for the surcease of torment which only death can bring. I am not repentant in an ordinary sense. All my life I have despised the conventional moral codes. When I want a thing, I take it! I allow nothing to stand in my way.

Now, Dickson and Sally Hunter's brother stood in my way. I wanted Sally, and I wanted the circus, too. Fred Hunter owned a part of the big top, so he had to go. I wanted to get my hands on *all* of that rich pie—not just Sally's slice alone.

BESIDES, Fred Hunter hated me. He would have interfered with my plans. I intended to dispose of Dickson and marry Sally. Sally was in love with Dickson, but she liked me, too. I was sure that with Dickson out of the picture, I could turn that liking into a warmer and more intimate emotion. But Sally's brother would have fought me every inch of the way.

Jacques Tupulo Jones was a willing

tool. When he and the yellow bronze girl showed me secretly what they could do, the idea leaped full-blown into my mind. The yellow bronze girl was an extraordinary contortionist. She was double-jointed all over, and by dint of long practice she could twist her torso and limbs into serpentine writhings.

It was simply amazing. I had never seen anything like it! She could crawl with sinister undulations on the ground, twist herself about any object in her path.

Jones was utterly without moral scruples. Money was the only thing that interested him. Well, I offered him plenty to put on a mumbo-jumbo act for Jim Dickson's benefit. My idea was to convince Dickson that he was possessed by a voodoo snake-spirit.

Convincing him wasn't difficult, because I had been feeding him *cannabis indica* for several days. I had put the drug into his food without his suspecting it. *Cannabis indica* is a more powerful and lasting drug than opium. It produces a dream-disturbed slumber and spectral illusions—a deep sleep almost cataleptic.

Every afternoon Dickson fell into a deep trance. I'd creep into his tent while he was still in the twilight-sleep stage, whisper suggestions into his ear. When a man is drugged and only dimly conscious, hypnosis can produce incredible illusions. The will is enfeebled, the drowsy brain responds readily to suggestion.

By adroit hypnosis I instilled morbid fears and horrors into Dickson's subconscious mind. I suggested that he was in the habit of leaving his tent, crawling on his stomach through the night and slaying as a snake slays.

That's why he was so jumpy when Jones put on his act, why he flew into such a rage. My suggestions were lurking obscurely in the depths of his mind, and when the girl bit him he went out of his head.

Jones strangled Fred Hunter and broke his bones before he put on the act in the dog-faced woman's tent. I had instructed the charlatan carefully.

I knew that right after the act, Dick-

son would go to his tent and sink into a deep trance. Dickson and I had shared a late afternoon snack in my tent. I had fed him *cannabis* then, and I was practically certain that the trance would come on just before dark.

Jones didn't hitch-hike into town when we left him standing by the roadside. He trailed Dickson to his tent, while I went into Eddie Frond's

son's cap in young Hunter's clenched, dead hand. And when I went to Dickson's tent after the body was discovered, I found, of course, the fresh blood which I had ordered Jones to daub on Dickson's mouth.

I KNEW that when Dickson awoke and saw the blood on his face, all the morbid fears which I had instilled

PROWLING MENACE!

Sharp-Clawed Doom
Strikes
Terror Among Innocent
Victims

IN



TWISTING DEATH

A Complete Novel of Horror's Labyrinth

By

WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

—in the next issue of THRILLING MYSTERY

lunch wagon to establish an alibi for myself.

When Jones saw that Dickson was sleeping soundly, he planted Hunter's corpse by the animal cages. It was already dark then, and no one saw him drag the body from a little coupe which was parked a few yards away at the edge of the concession.

Having planted the body, he prodded the big Bengal tiger in the flanks with one of the trainer's steel goads, to make him roar and give the alarm. Then he vanished into the shadows.

I planned it all with the greatest care. I instructed Jones to leave Dick-

into his mind would start screaming within him.

I knew that when I told him about the crushed and twisted thing beneath the tiger's cage, he would remember Jones' curse and his own evil dreams, accuse himself of the crime.

Then it would have been Sally and the circus for me, and a life-cell in a New Orleans insane asylum for Jim Dickson.

Jones botched it up by lingering near the big top and letting himself get caught by the Lisbon Giant. I suspect the vicious rascal was planning to blackmail me, was impatient to start

bleeding me white.

The Arabian snake charmer's mania was a devilish coincidence which wasn't on the program. I had to rush him to the hospital to keep him from babbling about his own snake illusions.

Had he started babbling, there would have been confusion worse confounded. With another suspect running about accusing himself, Dickson's guilt would have been open to doubt.

I could just picture Sally Hunter coming to Dickson's defense, and Dickson calming down, repudiating his own confession. But I had another motive in rushing Dhu to the hospital. I was really concerned about him. I wanted to save the poor fellow's life.

Human nature is contradictory always—incredibly complex and contradictory. I take what I want. I allow nothing to stand in my way. But when my own interests are not at stake I am a man of kindly instincts.

Tomorrow they will kill two men. The state will hang by the neck until

dead a moral pariah, a killer. But the executioner will also hang a man sensitive and imaginative beyond the average.

I have always been cursed with too much imagination. When Jones and the yellow bronze girl staged their juju act, I was even more horrified than Dickson. For an instant that grim and sinister pantomime seemed *real*. The girl was so snake-like that I felt a cold chill creep along my spine.

Moreover, I was profoundly shocked and grieved when I looked at Fred Hunter's broken, twisted body. I went through a bad ten minutes while I crouched by the animal cages, watched the freaks shrieking and capering in the torchlight.

Yes, I realize now that I never could have planned and executed a really perfect crime. I am far too imaginative and high-strung. I pray God that I shall not falter when they lead me to the gallows and place a dark hood upon my head. I pray God that I shall remain steadfast at the end.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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By
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Under the menace of a gun, Drake entered.

THERE was a curious odor in the little grocery, acrid and unpleasant. It seemed to Kenneth Drake, leaning on the fly-specked counter, that the wizened, snaggle-toothed oldster facing him was actually afraid of the strange smell. The grocer held a dirty handkerchief to his nose, and his rheumy eyes were furtive.

"A man telephoned from here just an hour ago—at about one-thirty," Drake repeated. "You must have seen him, if you were here then."

"Man? I dunno. Mebbe I was asleep." Yellowed eyes watched, fear in their depths.

"Did anyone telephone from here today?" Drake asked.

"Eh? Well, now—" The oldster scratched his head. "My memory ain't so good, mister. I don't rightly recollect anybody phoning today. Mebbe when I was out, or asleep?"

Drake cupped a silver dollar in his palm, and let the grocer glimpse the dull metal. He slid the coin back into his pocket.

"It'll pay you to tell the truth," he snapped. "The boys can sweat the truth out of you down at Headquarters, if necessary. Now let's have it. What happened to the man who phoned from here at one-thirty?"

The grocer's lips were trembling beneath the tobacco-stained mustache. He licked them furtively.

"Ye—ye're from the police!"

Drake didn't answer. His cold grey eyes bored into the other.

The grocer whispered, "They come an' got him! The little—"

Cutting sharply into his words came a startling sound—harsh, angry, menacing. The roar of a lion!

The oldster's jaw dropped. For a moment he stared at Drake, a look of stark fear on his face. Then he drew back swiftly. His eyes dropped.

"I ain't seen—or heard—nothin'!" he growled. "Git out! Pryin', snoop-in'—"

Drake eyed the man, and then, shrugging, turned on his heel. He knew fear when he saw it—and the grocer was thoroughly intimidated by a terror that would not let him speak. What had caused it? A lion's roar?

Outside the little store Drake hesitated, staring around. This was a well-paved highway, but a little-traveled one. The wayside grocery was the only building in sight, save for a high-walled enclosure some distance away. A dirt road led to it, and a faded sign proclaimed:

CARSE'S LION FARM

Twenty-five giant jungle cats, including Nero, man-killing outlaw. See the lions fed! View the lion cubs! Admission 50c, children 25c.

A horn blew impatiently. Drake went to the roadster that was parked nearby.

"No luck, Joan," he said to the girl at the wheel. "Petrie called up from that store, though. The operator traced the call, all right."

"I wish I could have understood more of what he said," Joan frowned. "But his voice was—funny, somehow. All I could understand was: 'Help! Joan, that little devil has—' Then the line went dead."

"If Petrie weren't so old, I'd feel jealous," Drake said, smiling wryly. His eyes were brooding on the sign that advertised the lion farm.

Joan put her hand on his arm. "Ken, John Petrie gave me my first job when he almost had to starve himself to pay me." Her eyes were misty. "He's been gone three weeks now—without any explanation."

"And the formula with him," Drake grunted. That was the crux of the matter. The formula for making flexible glass—and making it cheaply—by a process Petrie had discovered after years of experiment.

He had never entrusted the secret to paper, despite the urging of the other members of the company that had been formed to exploit the new glass.

"You take care of the business end of the thing," Petrie had told his backers. "I know the formula, and it's safe in my head. Not that I don't trust my colleagues—"

THE big, ruddy-faced scientist had grinned sardonically. "But it isn't necessary for anybody else to know the process. I'll personally supervise the making of the glass."

Nor could he be moved from this stand. And now he had disappeared without trace. The police had searched vainly; there was absolutely no clue. Not until the telephone call that had brought Joan, and Drake, her fiancé racing to this lonely road.

"I'm afraid they may be torturing him," Joan said somberly. "And he's sick, you know."

"Sick?" Drake stared. "He never looked it."

"He was under a doctor's care. I had to remind him every day about his medicine. He may be dying, Ken—or dead."

Talk isn't going to help, then. I've a hunch I may be able to find out something in that lion farm. Listen, Joan—you stay here. If I don't come back in half an hour, go for help. Get the police."

"Why not get the police now?"

"Remember what you said—Petrie may be under torture. If he's as sick as you say, he can't stand much of

that. Besides, time's an important element. After we came back with the police, we'd probably find the bird flown—if there is a bird. It won't do any harm to snoop around a little, anyway."

Drake leaned over the door and kissed Joan perfunctorily. Then, with a jaunty wave of his hand, he hurried away, conscious of the girl's anxious eyes following him.

Heat shimmered from the baked ground. He was perspiring when at last he reached the faded wooden gate of the lion farm. A sign proclaimed that the place was "Closed for Repairs."

Drake pressed a button set in the wall, and heard a bell jangling far away. After a time a wicket slid open, and two black eyes regarded him intently.

"Well, what do you want?" asked a high-pitched voice.

"I didn't know you were closed," Drake said. "I've driven out here a long way just to see the farm. I wonder if—"

"Everybody's on his vacation," said the other. "Except a skeleton staff. Sorry."

The wicket slammed shut. Drake knocked on it peremptorily.

"I'll be willing to pay," he said, pushing a bill through the bars. "I just want to say I've been here. I won't take up much of your time. Can't you make an exception?"

"Well, if you're that anxious," the voice murmured. "We'll see." The eyes disappeared, and presently the gate opened. Drake stepped into a ramshackle office, from which several doors led into unknown regions.

Facing him was a midget. A little man, scarcely reaching to Drake's waist, about three feet high. His bland, pink-cheeked face was curiously doll-like, but the wise eyes were betraying. At the midget's side hung an incongruously large pistol. Drake tried not to stare.

"I'm Carse," the midget murmured. "Captain Carse, formerly of Pinnacle Shows. You may have seen me?"

"I'm afraid not," Drake said. "Sorry"

"You needn't be. Too many people saw me. That's why I retired to this—farm. It isn't pleasant to have everyone stare at you—and laugh." The midget's voice was silky. He glanced down at the bill in his hand.

"The lions, then. Come along." He led the way through an inner door that opened upon a great high-walled yard.

"First, though, your coat."

"Eh?" Drake stared, puzzled.

Quietly the midget extended a grey smock. "It's necessary, for the farm is—well, rather dirty." He took Drake's coat and hung it on a clothes-tree. Drake, donning the smock, followed the midget outside the office.

THE lion farm was an unimpressive place. It reminded Drake of a zoo, with the half dozen great cages scattered about the walled enclosure. Within these lay or paced tawny forms, and occasionally a grumbling roar would be heard. The air was strong with acrid lion stench.

Carse led the way. At one of the cages a man was busy with a hose, sluicing it out. The lion crouched in a corner, a huge black-maned beast that lifted its feet and shook them with curiously catlike daintiness. The man turned as the two approached.

"That'll do, Pete," Carse ordered. "Let the feeding wait awhile, will you?"

Pete looked up swiftly. He was a gaunt, sallow creature who looked like a skeleton, with jaundiced skin hung loosely on his bones. His sunken eyes were dull.

"But—they won't—"

"You heard what I said, Pete." Carse's voice was very gentle. The other nodded and turned away.

Drake was examining the lion. "Is this Nero?" he asked.

"The killer? No, he's over there." Carse gestured and led the way. As Drake followed his eyes were busy searching the enclosure. There was little to be seen, and few places where a man—or a body—might be hidden.

A horrible thought came to Drake as he saw Nero, the giant man-killer, toying with a gnawed white bone, to

which bits of gristle still clung. But a second glance reassured him.

"We feed the lions on horse meat," Carse said dryly, following Drake's gaze. "The cubs have milk, until they're old enough for meat."

Drake was examining Nero's cage. Unlike the others, it was divided into two parts by a partition of iron bars. In one paced the great lion, a growl rumbling in his throat as he glared at the two men. The other was empty.

Carse touched Drake's arm. "Come along. I'll show you the cubs."

The midget seemed fearless. Ignoring the mewling, clawing menace of a lion cub, he picked it up and held a nursing bottle to its mouth. After a moment the cub quieted and sucked greedily, white drops splattering its muzzle.

Carse seemed, on the surface, bland enough to disarm suspicion, and Drake found himself growing more and more at a loss. If Petrie were indeed hidden on the lion farm, he was hidden well. Drake had not made up his mind what to do by the time the tour was over, and Carse was ushering his guest into the office.

The midget lifted Drake's coat from its hanger. Abruptly his tiny hand went exploringly into the pockets. It came out with a slip of white paper.

Before Drake could move Carse had unfolded the paper and scanned it swiftly.

Drake snapped, "What the devil's the idea?" He stepped forward, his hand extended—and stopped dead. The midget's hand flew down to his belt, swung up with the deadly pistol aimed unwaveringly at Drake's stomach.

"Now, now!" Carse's voice was gently admonitory. "You know, I've often heard that a man can face a gun aimed at his eyes, but can't stand one aimed at his stomach. Curious, isn't it?"

"Listen!" Drake growled. "You can't expect to get away with this. What's in that note?" But already he had guessed. A message—from Petrie!

Carse chuckled. "Merely a love let-

ter from one of the lions. They're always trying to smuggle out notes. Turn around and go back into the yard, please. Or I'll blow a hole in your belly."

A LITTLE finger of horror traced a path down Drake's spine. For all the softly spoken words of the little midget, he sensed deadly menace. The man's black eyes were blood-hungry, betraying the pink-cheeked innocence of his face.

Without a word Drake turned and retraced his steps. At Nero's cage, Carse halted him. He fumbled with a lock.

"Good God, man!" Drake gasped. "Are you going to—"

"Feed you to the lion? Not at the moment. I have a more—well, shall I say amusing?—plan. Get in."

Carse opened the barred door. Under the menace of the gun Drake entered. He might not have done so if he had not noticed that while Nero paced restlessly on his half of the cage, the barred partition held him at a safe distance.

Straw crunched under Drake's feet. Carse locked the door and stepped back.

"No, I'll not feed you to Nero—right now. However, you'll note that the bars which separate you from Nero are movable. They slide down into the floor.

"There's a clock-work arrangement which took me some time to prepare—it releases the bars, and removes any hindrances from Nero's hunger. He hasn't been fed for some time."

Beyond the bars the lion paced, sniffing noisily at the straw. Drake's back felt sweaty.

"I'll not tell you just when the bars will be released," the midget went on, smiling. "That would be too easy. You'll simply wait, not knowing when you'll die—and I don't think you'll find the period of waiting enjoyable.

"It's a curious thing," he said very seriously. "Men condemned to death—hardened, courageous thugs—often become hysterical if for some reason their execution is postponed. I remember one case—a man was waiting

to be hanged, and was actually on the scaffold when somehow the trap couldn't be sprung.

"The noose was already around the condemned man's neck. For months he'd stubbornly refused to talk to anyone, except to curse the priest who attended him.

"He went to pieces because the trap couldn't be sprung immediately. Hysterically he begged to be killed. He could wait—courageously—for certain death. But he couldn't bear to wait in ignorance of just when he'd die.

"I'm a student of human nature—an amateur psychologist, as you may have noticed. And I've often wished to experiment with the reactions of a condemned man who doesn't know when he'll die."

Drake didn't answer. He was remembering Joan. He still had an ace in the hole. She would go for help if he did not return within half an hour. Automatically he glanced at his wrist-watch.

The midget chuckled. "Anxious already, eh? Well, it'll do you no good to know what time it is, as long as you don't know when Nero will be loosed. He seems hungry. Poor beast."

The great lion reared upright against the bars, shaking them with his talons. The acrid stench was overpowering.

Carse went away.

Drake looked at his watch again. Then he glanced at the lion, who was watching him unwinkingly out of amber eyes. The beast yawned, and stretched luxuriously.

It relaxed on the straw and waited, panting a little. Drake wondered whether this trap had ever been used before. Certainly Nero seemed to know what to expect.

But the diabolical little midget would get no satisfaction from him, Drake resolved. Still, it wasn't likely that the bars would fall very soon. Carse would wish to prolong his victim's agony.

If only Joan could summon help in time—

"Hello," said a low voice.

DRAKE turned. A girl was standing outside the cage. She wore a scanty garment of lion skin that left one softly rounded shoulder bare. Her eyes were yellow—tawny, like a cat's. Her long hair was the same color.

Drake stared. The girl said, "I am Leeta. Carse plans to kill you, eh?"

"Yes," Drake said. "Can—will you let me out of here?"

"I can't. But—" The girl's tawny eyes lightened. "You can squeeze into Nero's cage, eh?"

That was true. The bars in the partition were set further apart than the others. Drake might conceivably squeeze through—but what good would that do? He told the girl as much.

"Oh, yes. You are afraid of Nero." She pondered. "I know! Wait."

Quickly she raced around the cage, slim legs flashing. For a moment she fumbled with the door to Nero's cage, then swung it wide. A startled cry rose in Drake's throat.

The girl was walking into the carnivore's cage—fearlessly! Nor was the lion harming her! He looked up, a low growl rumbling in his throat. The girl—Leeta—swung herself astride his back. Her slim fingers entwined in his mane.

"Up, Nero!" she commanded. "Up!"

The beast arose. At the girl's urging he moved out of the cage. Leeta leaped from his back, swung the door shut.

"Now come!" she cried. "Quickly!"

Stark amazement had held Drake motionless. But swiftly he rallied his wits. Probably the lion was tamed, harmless. Hastily he squeezed through the bars into Nero's cage.

The lion burst from the girl's grasp. Roaring, he hurled himself at the door. It shook under the impact. A snarling devil-mask glared into Drake's face; a hot breath was nauseating in his nostrils. This was no tamed, harmless beast!

He drew back, hoping the door would hold. Leeta pulled the lion's mane. He made a tentative cuff at her, but she slapped his muzzle mercilessly. After a moment the great head dropped.

"Nero knows me," the girl said. "You, he does not know. I'd better get him away, so that you can come out."

"Wait a minute," Drake requested. "How is it that he doesn't attack you?"

Leeta seemed surprised. "But I have grown up with them. My Father let me play with the cubs when I was a child. They all know me. They know the smell of this." She indicated her lion skin garment.

Drake shot a swift glance around. The midget was nowhere in sight. Leeta said:

"I'll lead Nero away. Then you can get out."

Something made Drake ask, "But your father? Won't he—"

"Carse?" The girl's eyes flamed with golden fires. "He is not *my* Father! My Father is dead—long ago. Killed by the lions. He worked with Carse in the circus, and—and—"

She hesitated, went on swiftly. "Hurry, now. Before he gets back."

Drake watched the girl urge the lion away. The beast could have killed her with one blow of a steel-taloned paw; yet the blow was not dealt. At last the two paused beside an empty cage, and into it Leeta coaxed the lion. She came hurrying back, and Drake went to meet her.

"There was no lock on it," she said, shrugging. "But I think the bar will hold."

Drake looked at her in silence. She met his gaze calmly. "You'd better go. At once."

"All right," Drake acquiesced. "But you're not safe here—you can't be. Not with Carse."

"I don't fear him," Leeta said quietly. "He fears me. Go now."

Drake turned, scanning the yard. The walls were high and bare, broken only at one point by the office door. He moved in that direction.

THE girl halted him. "Let me go first. I'll see if Carse—" She tested the knob, swung the door open slowly.

"Come in," a silky voice said. "Come in, Leeta. Bring your friend."

The midget was standing near the

doorway. He gestured with the automatic in his hand. Leeta shrank back, hesitating. Drake thrust himself between her and the gun's menace. Then he saw who was in the office.

Joan Kirby! She sat rigidly in a chair, eyes wide and frightened. The midget said peremptorily:

"Come in! This girl came to inquire about your health. I had occasion to tell her you had suffered a slight accident."

Drake moved forward, Leeta at his heels. So Joan, too, had been trapped by the midget! Carse's lips quirked in a one-sided smile.

"Wait a minute," he commanded. "Go back. Into the yard. You, too, Miss—eh? We can talk more freely there—safe from interruption."

Carse herded the three of them back through the door. His doll-like face was flushed, the black eyes unnaturally bright.

"Pete!" he called sharply.

There was a little hut within the compound about twenty feet away, and from it emerged the bony, sawn man Drake had seen before. He shambling forward, dully eying the group. A lion roared.

"Pete," the midget smiled. "You won't need the horse meat today. We have other food for the lions."

"You wouldn't dare!" Drake said hoarsely. "The police—"

"The police? What of the police? They do not come here. Why should they? The—er—bones will be burned, but I scarcely think they'll be recognizable after the lions—" He paused.

"Perhaps I am too forthright." His tone was mocking. "The girl seems somewhat ill."

Joan was swaying, her face paper-white. Drake drew her close.

"It's all right, dear," he whispered, his mouth close to her ear. "Buck up. We're not—not dead yet."

"An excellent philosophy," said the midget approvingly. "No doubt it will comfort you while being eaten."

Leeta cried out sharply. "Carse! You can't do that!"

"No? But you needn't worry, my dear. I shall not hurt you, of course. Merely our two uninvited guests."

A half-muffled oath came from Pete. Carse glanced at the man, and Pete shrank back, his wrinkled face fearful. Drake's muscles tensed, but before he could move the midget's eyes had flashed back to him.

"Careful! Keep—"

Then Pete leaped. It was hopeless, of course. He was nearly a dozen feet away, and before he reached Carse the midget crouched and whirled, his gun roaring. Flame belched from the muzzle.

Pete stumbled, fell. He lay face down on the ground, writhing with a horribly serpentine movement. The midget snarled:

"No more of this! I'll put a slug in both of you right now, and waste no more—"

Ominously a lion growled. Then another took it up. The smell of blood was in the air, and the great beasts lifted their heads and sniffed—and roared. A crashing impact came from near by, and Drake, glancing around quickly, saw a great, tawny bulk rear against a barred door.

It was Nero—the man-killer. His deep roar sounded again, and once more he hurled himself against the bars. The door shook, but held. Abruptly Drake remembered Leeta's words:

"There was no lock on it—but I think the bar will hold."

Would it hold?

The midget's eyes were glassy as he stared at Drake. His cheeks were a bright scarlet. Drake lifted himself on the balls of his feet, ready for the death-signal he knew he would read in the killer's eyes.

Two things happened simultaneously: the bark of the shot, and Leeta's cry as she flung herself forward. Her hand was extended to grip the gun, but failed to touch it.

She cried out, a soft, agonized moan, and smashed into the midget.

He was borne down under her dead weight. Horribly the back of the girl's head had vanished in a ghastly explosion, and she was a corpse before the sound of the explosion had died away.

Drake went suddenly sick.

IN a split second he knew that there was but one chance. Carse was too far away for Drake to reach before the midget should recover the gun, jarred from his hand by the fall. Already the tiny fingers were closing over the weapon. But if they could reach the office—

The roaring of the caged beasts, frantic with blood-stench, was deafening. As Drake raced toward the door, half carrying, half dragging Joan, he heard a roar louder than the rest—heard something crash and splinter under a fearful impact.

Then he was clawing at the handle, swinging the door open, thrusting Joan to safety, expecting every moment to feel the shock of a bullet between his shoulder blades.

He caught one flashing glimpse as he went through the door. The midget had fought free of Leeta's body, was on his feet—but he was not facing Drake. Something came charging across the yard, something that moved with express-train speed, roaring as it came.

Nero was free!

Carse fired point-blank. He could not stop that terrible charge. The lion sprang. Simultaneously Drake saw a movement near him. A man was staggering toward the door, clutching a bleeding wound in his side. It was Pete.

The midget was down now, but his gun still thundered. The lion's roaring was edged with pain. The beast put one great paw on Carse's back, holding him down, and threw back the great, shaggy head. Drake saw blood gushing from the thick mane.

Carse's gun was empty, but he still squeezed the trigger. He cursed the lion in a shrill, insane monotone. As Drake pulled Pete through the door and slammed it shut, he saw the most ghastly sight of all—something that he knew would be imprinted on his memory for all time.

Nero's head dropped, very slowly. The midget began to scream as the great jaws opened, and closed very gently upon the man's head.

The shrieking grew to a crescendo. It shrilled out in frightful, ear-pierc-

ing agony. And—it stopped!

There came a brittle crunching sound that turned Drake sick and giddy. Blood spurted suddenly, splashing the lion's muzzle. The great beast lifted its head, something dangling from blood-smeared jaws—something that dangled grotesquely, like a broken doll.

The lion's head dropped. He gave a bubbling cough, and quieted. Abruptly he fell over on his side, his legs contracting in a spasm of agony. Then he lay without movement.

Drake shut the door and barred it. Then he turned and leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. Joan faced him, her eyes wide. Slumped in a chair lay Pete, his hand pressed to his wounded side.

"Carse is dead," Drake said tonelessly. Pete nodded.

"Yes," he whispered. "He got me first, though. I—I—"

"Forget it, Petrie," Drake said. With a stride he reached the wounded man, and was busy staunching the blood. "You'll live to be eighty."

"No—no—"

Joan Kirby was staring in amazement, her lips parted. "Petrie—but Ken! That isn't John Petrie!"

Pete shook his head wearily. "Yes, I am, my dear. Drake—you are Drake, aren't you?—guessed the truth. How—"

"Don't talk," Drake said, his fingers working swiftly. "Just take it easy. When Joan told me about your medicines—how you insisted on taking them so regularly—I had a clue.

"Then, when you tried to save our lives—well, I guessed who you were. Hypothyroidism, isn't it?"

The other nodded. "Yes. Nobody knew—but my doctor. Since I was a child—"

"I know. It's a glandular disorder," Drake said over his shoulder to Joan. "The thyroid gland doesn't work right, doesn't secrete as it should. Unless Petrie get his thyroxin regularly, he suffers the natural results of hypothyroidism. He loses flesh. His eyes get dull, his skin gets wrinkled and sallow, his hair gets dry and brittle. A perfect disguise, eh?"

"Then you've guessed that, too, eh?" Petrie whispered.

DRAKE nodded. "I think so. You knew the formula for making flexible glass, but you didn't have much stock in the company, did you? So you simply decided to disappear—the only one who knew how to make flexible glass. When the news leaked out, the stock dropped. It's way down today. When it hit bottom—"

Drake hesitated. "When it did, you were going to buy up enough shares to get a controlling interest—and then reappear. Is that it?"

Joan gasped. "Mr. Petrie! You didn't—"

"But I did," Petrie said, his lips twisted wryly. "I got a just reward, too. I used to know Carse, a long time ago. He offered to let me hide out here, and I did. I didn't want to be recognized by any chance visitors, so I stopped using the thyroxin."

"Carse doublecrossed me. He kept me prisoner, and tried to make me tell him the formula. I managed to escape this morning, and telephoned from the grocery—but Carse caught me before I could say more than a few words. He threatened the grocer to keep him silent.

"I—I'd have spoken before, but I knew Carse would kill you if he thought you'd guessed the truth." Petrie reached for a pencil and pad that lay on a table beside him. He scribbled something hastily.

"There's the formula. It's for you, Joan—and you, Drake. It will make both of you rich. As for me—I'll be dead very soon."

"No!" Joan gripped Petrie's wrinkled hand in her own. "You're not going to die. Don't—"

She stopped as she saw Drake's face.

"It's all right," Petrie whispered. "The bullet—went too far in. Carse deserved to die—but not Leeta. I'm paying—for—that—"

Joan caught her breath, and Drake's arm went around her, drawing her close. Petrie's jaw dropped; a glaze suddenly filmed his staring eyes.

Within the yard a lion roared, as though in requiem.

Panic Loomed...The Show Went On!



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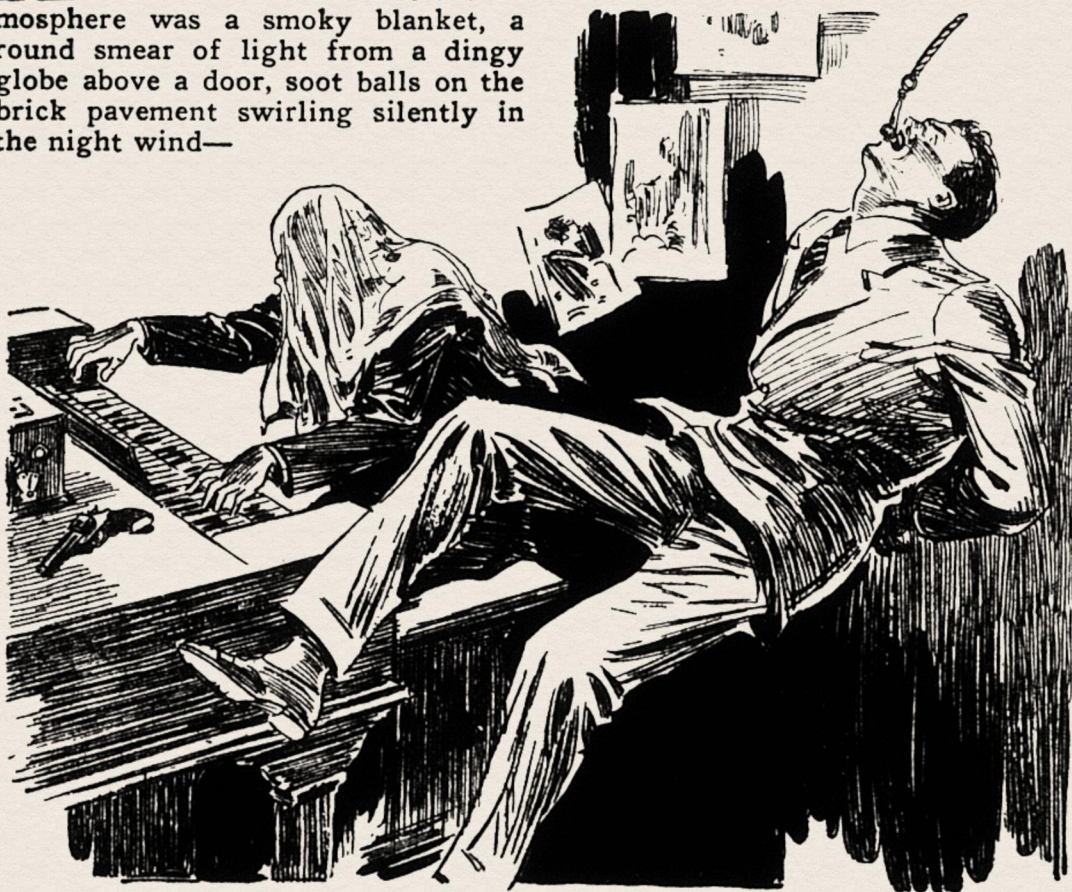
Author of "The Coffin Dwellers," "The Dead Stand Guard," etc.

CHAPTER I

Death Screams Out

A GRAVELIKE narrowness between brick walls, a door of uncertain outline because the atmosphere was a smoky blanket, a round smear of light from a dingy globe above a door, soot balls on the brick pavement swirling silently in the night wind—

Once I had gone to the morgue to identify the body of a man who had drowned, and approaching that sad doorway was very much like approaching the stage entrance of the Royale Theatre.



A man hurtled down upon the fiend.



No doubt I shivered, for Janet cuddled my arm.

"Cold, hon?" she asked.

I wasn't cold. It was just the dreariness behind the glamour you usually associate with the stage; the dreariness and the all-too-distinct memory of the morgue. I would never get used to it. I didn't like the theater. I didn't like having to watch Janet kiss the juvenile man.

It was too damn much as though I was the moon, destined to create a lovers' atmosphere, to watch jealously from thousands of miles of cold and empty space.

You see, I was the master electrician, and Janet the highly successful ingénue. I had forty dollars in my pocket, and if it hadn't been for Janet, I'd have been in the bread line. She

had got me my job.

Then she made love to me with her bright, dark eyes and her clear, school-girl's voice. She kept playing she was taking care of me, until I hated her simply because I loved her. I had always loved her since school days. Now I was being paid for making moonlight for her and a glossy-headed personality boy.

A shadow fell across the doorway in front of us. That was old Pedro, six feet of menace to stage-door Johnnys, a man who wore his overalls with more dignity than many could wear evening clothes.

He always wore a black felt hat that accented the smooth whiteness of his face. I thought of the morgue again, when I looked at old Pedro. That face of his—it would have been lost on a

A Complete Novelette of Phantom Doom!

slab, it was that white and cold and emotionless, except for the eyes.

You couldn't miss the eyes. Small as the brown irises seemed in their jaundiced whites, they were alive; so keen, sometimes, that they hurt you. And then again they softened with a sadness you never heard about.

But he always had a cheerful word for Janet. When he saw us coming, he picked up that white pad that hung from a string about his neck, wrote with remarkable speed upon it, tore off the slip of paper, and handed it to Janet. On it was written:

"Good evening, Miss Reis! And you, too, Mr. Lacross."

I didn't rate an exclamation point, you see. Old Pedro was stingy with exclamation points. They were his orchids. Some of the actors who earned them, kept them always for luck.

Perhaps that was why I always thought of Pedro as something out of the morgue. Vocally, he was as silent as a corpse. Seeing his lips, you never supposed he could eat. As we slid through his jealously guarded portal, I shuddered just a little. Somehow, I never wanted to see old Pedro eat.

We crossed the stage behind the old backdrop they were using until after Director Lynn Barclay had blocked out Clem Marsden's new play. Barclay and Marsden were having a row in front of Janet's dressing room.

Marsden, a young, earnest man with sensitive features and a mop of black hair, was trying to wedge a word in here and there. I got it that things were not moving fast enough to suit him.

BARCLAY, who suffered through a hell of indigestion, was edgy, nervous, and vitriolic. His gaunt hands were doing things with Marsden's script that threatened to put an end to it and the play as well.

"Don't you imply," he shouted, "that I ain't bright."

"I—" began Marsden.

"Because I've been in this business so long I know there ain't a thing gained by pushing and shoving and

pushing. Maybe I ain't bright when I said we'd open on the fifteenth. Well, maybe we don't.

"When I'm producing, I'm producing right. It's a bum play, and you got to rewrite a thirty side part. And you kick, with me trying to whip these hams through the whole business! You don't know what work is."

"But that forfeiture clause in the contract," Marsden recalled. "You lose a thousand a night, for every day you delay the opening."

Barclay raised angular shoulders. "I'm producing right, and if we don't open till Christmas, we still open right. Always, I got trouble with you. Now, for the love of— Hey, Reis!"

Barclay's hooks of fingers got into the fur of Janet's coat before she could open the door of her dressing room. She turned, a little frightened, to partake of the vinegar of Barclay's lean face.

"You got a new dressing room," Barclay told her. He jerked his head in the direction of the next room.

"Demette says she won't dress in Number Three. She's crazy, but she's an actress. If this lousy script is to have any box office at all, we got to have Demette. And she won't dress in Number Three. So you're taking her dressing room. Get it?"

Then he turned on Marsden, who was trying to slip away.

"Hey, I ain't showed you what you got to rewrite. It may be art to you, but unless we're going into the green-grocery business, you got to change it."

Janet looked up at me. "Huh! So the war is on. I can always tell, when they start pushing me around."

She led the way to the next room. There was a star painted on the door. Janet saw it, elevated her diminutive nose, put one hand on her hip, and extended her right hand as though she expected me to kiss it.

"Dick, deah," she drawled, "so sorry I shawn't be able to go to dinnah after the performance. I'm a star now, you understand."

Then she broke into a peal of infectious laughter, threw open the door,

and dragged me into the room. Her laughter stopped. She dropped my hand. Standing directly in front of Janet, her gloved hands folded, was another woman.

"Katie!" exclaimed Janet. "I don't need you. This is simply a walk-through we're doing tonight."

So this woman in her plain, brown cloth coat, was Katie, Janet's maid. I had seen her in Janet's dressing room before this, but always she had appeared as a poorly stuffed, black satin pincushion, thrust full of needles with silk threads of various hues streaming from them. Even now, those tight nippers that were her lips seemed clutching pins.

"Beg pardon, Miss Reis, you're wrong. You need me tonight, if you ever did." Katie spoke very rapidly, without inflection.

"I heard what they were doing to you, and won't stand for it. So here I am. And you tell that horseradish-faced Lynn Barclay that you won't have that Number Three dressing room any more than that Demette hussy." She looked at me then. "Good evening, Mr. Lacross. Now, Miss Reis, I've said my say, but don't let them shove you into this room, because it's bad luck and sudden death."

"That's why Demette and none of the old troupers won't have it. They think you're young and innocent and don't know about it. I don't want to scare you, but—"

THAT out of her system, Katie gripped her pocketbook and started for the door. There she stopped, whitened, and pointed a trembling finger at a gouge in the broad, painted surface of the panel.

"You see, the night Mrs. Renaldo was killed and Renaldo was worse than killed, that happened. Not a person who's been on the stage or about it for ten years don't know about this room."

"That selfsame gouge was made by the bomb that ruined the great Renaldo and killed his wife. It was in a bottle, like his favorite wine, that infernal machine. Piece of the bottle made that mark on the door. See."

"I don't," I said. "What is it all about?"

Janet flung her hat on an old couch. "Oh, it's a silly superstition. Somebody tried to kill Renaldo, the opera singer—somebody who was in love with Renaldo's wife. It's been ages ago that it happened."

"The murderer sent Renaldo a bomb concealed in a bottle of wine, and supposed to be a present from an admirer."



It was the night of Renaldo's greatest triumph. He and his wife were in this room. Renaldo opened the bottle. The bomb exploded. His wife was killed almost instantly.

"But the greater tragedy was what occurred to Renaldo. He lost his voice. Never was he able to sing again."

"He cursed this place," Katie butted in. "That's what he did. And it's all a body can do to keep her scalp on, just sitting in here alone where murder's been done. And it ain't imagination that sometimes you hear strange noises and screechings."

"They say it's Renaldo's ghost, trying to sing, and him with his throat slashed to pieces by that flying glass."

Katie's eyebrows went up under her hat. Eyes, like the black heads of her pins, rolled around in deep sockets.

"You hear screaming in the dark, and it's Renaldo practicing to sing for Satan!" Katie's jaw sagged. Then she closed her mouth, seemed to listen.

"Holy heaven!" she screamed.

She stumbled toward me, fell forward. I caught her in my arms. Her body was convulsively rigid. I held her like a log of wood for a few seconds, because I was something of a log myself. I couldn't move. No one could have moved.

From somewhere in the vast world of basement beneath the theater, came a high, strangled note—a cry that the madness of stark agony had retched from a gore-choked throat.

CHAPTER II

Choking Horror

WELL, I don't remember just what I did with Katie. I don't remember why I didn't have sense enough to prevent Janet from going down into the basement.

All I seem to remember was that world of darkness beyond the light globe that swayed near the door of the furnace room. Janet was with me, clinging so close to me that I had trouble moving forward. Or perhaps I was too terrified to move at my usual gait.

There were voices behind us, a frightened babel of voices. And there were things of human shape in the half-light behind us. But ahead, there was nothing but darkness and the hideous coughing sound. Then there was a *smell*.

"Dick," Janet whispered. "Can't stand this darkness. Going to scream."

"You do and I'll choke you," I grated. You say queer things you don't mean at a time like this. I like to think this was tougher on my nerves than on Janet's. I don't think she has ever been to a slaughter house.

Once, a few years before, I had been to the Chicago stock yards. So I knew what the smell was—new-let blood! And over there in the corner, something was dying. Something was choking on blood that was bubbling up into its mouth.

I thought of Renaldo and the bomb that had ripped his throat wide open. And I thought maybe this was all a dream. A nightmare, perhaps, conjured up by Katie's talk of curses and hauntings.

Then, suddenly, there was light and reality, and for the moment there was nothing to terrify anybody. Old Pedro was shuffling up behind us with a flashlight.

Beldon Soemes, the male lead in the show, was with him. Coming down the stairs were more of the stage people. Somewhere Lynn Barclay could be heard, cursing.

The choking sound had stopped. I had sense enough to say to Janet:

"You'd better get back upstairs. Something pretty ugly has happened."

And I had sense enough to know that Janet couldn't go back upstairs, because she was in about the same state that I was when Katie had fainted in my arms.

Janet's arm in mine felt as stiff as the arm of a wooden woman. Her eyeballs seemed to have the same stiffness, and they were so glassy they didn't seem to be seeing.

That was because of what was on the floor. There was blood, blackening against the concrete. And something else I couldn't name, at first. I remember thinking then that it was a slug or leach of enormous proportions.

It was as wide as three fingers, and nearly six inches long, moist and pink and with one end. The other end was torn and ragged, and seeped blood sluggishly from severed arteries.

Then truth, ugly, unbelievable truth, struck me squarely between the eyes. I swung around so suddenly that I startled a frightened cry from Janet.

I seized her shoulders, tried to push her back. That failing, I picked her up bodily and carried her back to the stairs. Fred Kraus, the male juvenile who was to play opposite Janet, was just coming down the steps. His pretty-featured face was spoiled by a sick, greenish hue that spread across cheeks and livid lips. I thrust Janet into his arms.

"Hang on to her, damn you!" I cracked out. Then I raced back to where old Pedro and Beldon Soemes discovered the body.

Yes, there was a body. Huddled down inside an old packing case was what had once been a woman. Her head was thrown back over the edge of the box, and her face was a mask of clotting crimson. The mouth was undefinable—a gash, a hole, a shapeless well of blood.

It seemed impossible that such a mouth had uttered even the choked cry Janet and I had heard in the

dressing room. It was— But I don't want to describe it. That ghastly mess of a face, if you could have seen it as I saw it, gets down under brain tissue and stays there.

You don't forget. You want to, but you can't.

I DON'T think I have to say anything more than that the moist red thing on the basement floor was a human tongue. It had once been a part of the lovely body of Fran Demette, star of Marsden's new play.

"My God, it's Fran Demette!" That was Soemes speaking.

Was Fran Demette, my mind corrected sharply. She had bled to death. That blood all over the floor was *her* blood. And that tongue—

My eyes clawed for something that they could cling to besides that horror in the box and those crimson splashes on the floor. Something cool and white was what I wanted. And I found it. Mooning out of the half-light, calm and smooth, was old Pedro's face.

Only his eyes lived—flickering tongues of reflected light. He was looking steadily at me. You've seen a dog staring so eloquently it seemed about to speak. Pedro was like that. And deep down in his throat I thought I heard a sound like the turbulent growl of an angry torrent imprisoned under a sheet of ice.

Then Pedro turned sharply. His flashlight turned, too. It was like falling into a pit of black feathers to Soemes and me. We turned, stumbled into each other, grabbed each other's arms for the sole purpose of feeling living flesh under our fingers. Then we raced for Pedro's light until we were back to the stairway.

Clem Marsden and Lynn Barclay were standing there. For once, they weren't fighting. Marsden looked as though he would never fight again, or write another play to fight over, for that matter.

Barclay's jaw had sagged, pulling all the deep wrinkles down with it. He had heard us say that something had happened to Fran Demette. He got his hooks of fingers into my coat

lapels. He shook me and shouted:

"Get a doctor, you knot-head! How the hell can we open without a lead? Demette's the star. We can't swing this without her."

Soemes knocked down one of Barclay's arms. Soemes was old enough to have a level head. If this had been any ordinary kind of accident, he would have been stoical about it, for he had long since learned all there was to know about the show going on. Now, he simply said in a leaden voice:

"Demette is dead. You'd better get the police."

CHAPTER III

Melody of Death

JANET said: "It's insanity." She sat on the bench in front of the mirror in her dressing room.

"Someone in this theater is crazy, Dick. There's no motive behind a thing like this. If Fran Demette had just been murdered—"

She shook her dark curls bewilderedly and gathered the collar of her coat up tight about her throat. It was draughty within the theater, but I felt certain the cold we felt was born from terror.

I trod out a cigarette, the tenth since the police had taken charge of things.

"Insanity," I agreed. "A particularly rotten sort. But still, it's murder."

From the couch, Katie, the maid, put in her croaking two cent's worth.

"It's no such thing! It's the curse, that's what. Guess I saw what was Renaldo when they took him on a stretcher! His face was all bloody, like they say Demette's was."

I gave the woman a look which was optimistically intended to silence her.

"Ghosts don't go around tearing out—well, killing people. Ghosts groan and clank chains."

Katie looked as though she would scream. "Don't talk so, Mr. Lacroix!"

I didn't say anything more. But I

had my own ideas. Some man in that theater was the worst sort of fiend. If he was an actor, he'd conceal his crazy lusts so cleverly that the police wouldn't have a chance to trap him.

Every time I looked at Janet, I got cold all over; because, somehow, I felt the hellish fiend would be at large a long time, and I feared his abnormal appetite would not be appeased with a single blood orgy.

A knock at the door brought the usual scream from Katie. Janet stood up and hugged herself more closely with her coat. I went over to the door, opened it, and saw Lieutenant Flinch, of the Homicide Department, outside. He grinned, Lord knows how.

"Everybody on stage," he said. "A sort of collective questioning."

Katie started to cry, and the lieutenant came into the room and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Nix, sister," he said kindly. "If you've got nothing to hide, as I always say, we won't find it out."

Then he went on to corral the other suspects. Suspects? That seemed the craziest part of the nightmare! Janet and I were suspects, involved in a murder that, as far as method was concerned, belonged somewhere back in the dark ages.

We got out on the stage, Janet, Katie and I. Barclay and Marsden were there, together with the property man and carpenter. Lights were on, white, hot and blinding. Fred Kraus was over at the left side of the orchestra pit, picking nervously at the stops of the organ console.

There were three policemen on the stage. Out in front were a couple of plainclothesmen and a police stenographer. It promised to be a good show when they got started.

While we waited for the police to round up the rest, Fred Kraus started the organ. The air shuddered. Deep notes seemed reverberating in the pit of my stomach.

Kraus improvised a little. The police moved over toward the console to watch him play. They seemed to welcome any break in monotonous routine. A couple of members of the

deck crew came out on the stage, looked bewilderedly about.

Janet's hand crept into mine. It was a very cold hand. "I wish he wouldn't play, Dick. Or if he plays, I wish he'd do something lively."

I HADN'T paid much attention to Fred Kraus' music. In fact, I don't know much about music. But now that Janet mentioned it, there was something about the melody Kraus was playing that made my joints ache. I felt as though I'd just crawled out of a sickbed to find my best girl stolen, my house on fire, and an undertaker's advertisement under the door.

Lieutenant Flinch came on stage with the last of the deck crew. He looked cheerfully around.

"Everybody here?" he asked, just as though his next remark would be: "We're going to play games."

Clem Marsden moistened his lips. "Beldon Soemes isn't here. Neither is Pedro. You can find Pedro out at the stage door. But you'll never get him to talk. He's dumb."

Flinch rubbed his chin and frowned a little. He turned to one of his men.

"Go get Soemes and Pedro. They're around somewhere. No way out of the building without stumbling over one of my men."

"C-captain," stuttered Katie. She was addressing Flinch. "You ought to get him to stop. You ought to get him to play something else, anyway."

She bobbed her head at Fred Kraus, who was weaving a shroud of melody that erased even Flinch's indelible smile.

Beside me, Janet whispered: "Yes, stop him! That's Renaldo's music, his '*Epitaph*.' It was written after his wife was killed."

Kraus seemed carried away by his music. He swayed back and forth on the console stool. And sad as the music was, there was something of a dark, poetic beauty about it. Nobody but a vandal would have interrupted him.

Lynn Barclay jerked out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. He turned toward the back of the stage,

lips parted, teeth on edge. Then he whipped around and lunged toward the footlights.

"Cut that, Kraus, for the love of God!" he shouted.

Fred Kraus looked up quickly. The green shade of the lamp on the console lent a hellish hue to his handsome face. The music rose in a triumphant crescendo, then broke off sharply as Kraus stood up. And as the quivering tones died, the very walls of the building breathed an agonized wail that was scarcely human.

A policeman jumped from the wings as though he was anxious to get to the brighter light. He started to say something, but didn't.

Then—"What in hell was that?" Lieutenant Flinch said huskily. "The organ?"

It wasn't the organ. Kraus had cut the motor, and was standing away from the console. Then that awful sound came again—that cry that had blood in it. Flinch's big body surged into motion. He was across the stage, grabbing the newly arrived policeman by the shoulders.

The cop was shaking his head, speechless, until Flinch threatened to choke words out of him. Then he said: "I can't find them anywhere. The stage door man has flew the coop. And Mr. Soemes isn't around, either."

Flinch snagged out orders. Those on stage were to stay there with a couple of cops. No, I was to go along with Flinch and a couple of detectives. I knew the theater, and could act as guide.

We went off through the left wing. Nobody said anything about *what* we were hunting. I guess that was understood. Someone was dying. Someone was trying to scream with blood gushing into his mouth. Somebody was going through hell, praying for death to cut off that maddening agony!

QUICKLY I led them through one cellar after another. There were monstrous shadows, animated by our moving lights. There were odd bundles of property and rolls of drops

and flies. There were dusty crannies where horror might have lurked.

But we found not so much as a drop of blood. We were keyed up, nervously silent. Had we come across a body, even a hideously mangled one, it would have been a relief. But there was nothing but shadows and velvety, undisturbed dust.

We went upstairs again. Flinch wasn't satisfied until he had climbed up into the fly loft. Then we searched the offices, lobby, and smoking rooms. At last Flinch clenched his fists and his teeth at the same time.

"Damn it!" he swore. "Why doesn't something turn up? I'm going back and sweat something out of those play-actors. Somebody's holding out!"

"Sir—" ventured one of the detectives.

"Yeah?" Flinch snapped him up.

"Consider the angles, why not? This could be extortion. Some of these birds have got money. The Demette dame was filthy with jewels when we found her. And how about Soemes?"

"Well, how about him?" Flinch demanded. "He's gone. He could be the murderer. Where's the motive?"

"This, sir." The detective handed Flinch a slip of paper. "That dropped out of Lynn Barclay's pocket when he pulled out his handkerchief, back on the stage. It's a note."

Flinch snatched at the note, opened it, and I read over his shoulder:

Better come across, Barclay. And keep the police out of this.

Flinch set his jaws. He pulled his notebook out of his pocket, carefully inserted the paper in it, and returned the book to the same pocket.

It was then I got my idea. Entirely on impulse, I slipped that notebook from Flinch's pocket. Then, as they left the smoking room to go back to the stage, I removed that extortion note and dropped the notebook on the floor.

I undoubtedly looked as guilty as a whipped puppy, but Flinch and his men were too absorbed with their own ideas to notice.

Flinch ordered everyone off stage except Lynn Barclay. Janet and I went to her dressing room. I could scarcely wait until the door was closed before I seized Janet's shoulders and said:

"Somebody's trying to squeeze money out of Lynn Barclay. He'll be next, if we don't act fast. The killer's an extortionist. He must have used Demette and Soemes as examples of what he could do if his victims didn't pay up. He's tackling Barclay now."

"Soemes?" Janet's eyes widened. "You found Soemes like — like we found Demette?"

I shook my head. "We didn't find anything. But the second victim *has* to be Soemes. That scream we heard, don't you see? Old Pedro can't scream. So the victim must have been Soemes! Get it?"

"Now, suppose I make copies of this extortion note. I can imitate the handwriting, I think. Suppose I hand extortion notes to all of the suspects. When the real killer gets a note, identical with those he has been distributing, he'll surely show some indication of guilt."

Janet frowned then. "Dick, are you losing your mind?"

There was a rapping at the door. I jumped up and put my hand in my pocket where the extortion note was. The paper burned my fingers like a hot iron. What if the police decided to search me— Janet had the door open now, and there was one of Flinch's men.

"Want to see you on stage, Miss Reis," the detective said. Then he shot a fishy glance at me.

"What's the matter, buddy? Scared?"

WELL, I didn't like being called "buddy." And I couldn't admit I was scared. I started to follow Janet through the door, but the detective held up his hand.

"Flinch just wants to talk to Miss Reis a moment. He'll ask you if he wants you. And you got nothing to worry about. We got things under our thumbs now. There's a maniac on the loose, and we know who he is.

Only trouble is, we ain't quite sure where to find him," the man admitted a bit ruefully.

Then the door closed and I was alone. There can be fifty people inside the Royale Theater, and you can still feel lonely. But tonight, there even weren't fifty people. There was a scant dozen and a half. And one of them was a corpse! Another, I couldn't forget, was a killer.

At the other side of the dressing room, a man came suddenly into view. My heart jerked into my throat. Then I managed a sickly grin at my own reflection in Janet's dressing-table mirror.

I went over to the stool in front of the dressing-table mirror, sat down, and spread out the extortion note I had stolen. I still liked my idea for scaring the killer into admission. These detectives knew murderers, no doubt. But they didn't know how far into real life a clever actor can carry his acting.

So I took up a blank piece of paper, put it beneath the extortion note, and, pen in hand, began to imitate the writing.

Hardly had I formed the first letter, when my pen bobbed up from the paper and stayed there. An icy breath fanned the back of my neck. It was something worse than loneliness, for I was no longer alone. Cold, ruthless, unseen eyes watched me, measured me, as though for a coffin!

CHAPTER IV

Man and Monster

HEART in my mouth, I stared into the mirror. Its reflection included nearly all of the little dressing room. There was no place my unseen watcher could have hidden, except behind the curtain of Janet's wardrobe closet.

Approaching that closet was the hardest thing I ever did in my life. Behind those curtains was a maniac, a man who ripped out human tongues!

I shoved my hand into my trouser

pocket and bulged the pocket with my forefinger.

"Come out!" I ordered in a voice I scarcely recognized. "I'm armed. If you're not out of there by the time I count three, I'll fire!"

But I didn't count three, and I didn't fire. I was totally unarmed, and there was something behind those curtains—something whose silent presence stirred the curtains ever so lightly! Whoever was there could have killed me a dozen times with a gun. But this killer didn't use a gun. He was waiting until I came closer, so that he could tear open my mouth and rip out my tongue!

Oddly enough, I became strangely calm. For the first time, I must have considered the matter sanely. To cut out a man's tongue must be quite a task. It wouldn't be possible, for instance, in a rough-and-tumble fight. And that was the sort of fight this was going to be, I determined.

Just as the curtains seemed to breathe again, I launched my body in a flying tackle that included the curtains and whatever they were hiding.

My arms lashed around thighs. Curtains and man came down at one and the same time. I had the devil himself, and I had no intention of releasing him. But there wasn't any struggle; just dead, unresisting bulk in my arms!

Horried, I scrambled to hands and knees, breathed an oath. A man was all tangled up in the curtains. I could see his trouser legs, splashed with blood. I seized the curtains, yanked them aside.

The head joggled limply, bumped against the floor. Protruding, blood-encrusted eyeballs glared up at me out of a gory face. Jaws were agape, and beyond broken teeth was a horrible, vacant, raw, red maw! The man had been Beldon Soemes.

Could these have been the eyes that watched me from behind those curtains? Impossible, of course. But did that sixth sense, which had troubled me while writing in front of the mirror, extend to include the sightless watching of the dead? Surely not! Living eyes had watched me while

I sat alone in that room.

I entered the closet and looked around, ran my hands down the lovely gowns that were Janet's. There was not a single cranny that could have hidden anyone. And to suppose that the watcher had slipped out of the room while I struggled with the dead Soemes was absurd.

Hastily, I returned to the room, jerked the curtain over that silently screaming mask that was Soemes' face. Then I crossed to the dressing-room door, opened it, ran squarely into Janet. I seized the girl in my arms. Her dark eyes were wider, brighter than I had ever seen them. A jumpy pulse was visible beneath the warm flesh of her throat.

"It's *Renaldo*, Dick!" she gasped out.

"What's *Renaldo*?" I demanded.

"The killer! *Renaldo* isn't dead, never was dead! Don't you see, the loss of his voice drove him insane. *Renaldo* is in this theater, hiding somewhere.

"That's how the police have it doped out. In his mad brain, this throat-ripping must square accounts for the loss of his own voice. The only thing now is to find *Renaldo*."

"Wait," I said, trying to think rationally.

"I am waiting," she said, a little calmer.

"Could anyone here tonight be *Renaldo*? Is that the way it works out?" I spoke slowly, weighing my words.

JANET pouted a little. "Oh!"

"What's the matter?" I demanded.

"Well, I thought at first you were going to kiss me. But don't bother. Go on with your marvelous deductions," she smiled wanly.

"Witch!" I kissed her then, fiercely, and there was a gladness in her eyes I hadn't seen when I watched her kiss Fred Kraus.

"Now what?" she insisted.

I took hold of her arm and hurried her down the runway toward the stage.

"Now what? Why, it's simple as two and two. If *Renaldo* is the killer, and *Pedro* is *Renaldo*—"

"*Pedro*? Old *Pedro*?" she gasped.

"Of course! The bomb intended to kill Renaldo resulted in the loss of his voice. It must have also caused the loss of his ability to even speak. Old Pedro was dumb, so what the hell are the cops waiting for? Find Pedro, and we find the killer!"

A door latch clicked. A breath of air fanned our faces. The end of the gloomy passage was blotted out by a powerful form. And in the semi-darkness, a bone-white face mooned at us, came forward hesitantly.

"Dick!" Janet breathed. Her fingers clenched the flesh of my arm. "It's Pedro!"

In the eyes of the dead-white face bearing down upon us, pale flashes seemed to flicker and fade. Madness, hate, revenge—a veritable maelstrom of mingled emotions came and went in those eyes.

But not a muscle of the man's face stirred. Not so much as a whisper passed those locked lips. And his powerful body was swinging along more rapidly than I had realized. I had only time to step in front of Janet, before he was upon me.

Pedro's arms shot out. His big hands would have closed upon my biceps. But my right arm swung free, and my fist hammered up to the point of that bone-white chin.

There was an odd crunching sound. Knifelike pain passed through my fist, zigzagged up my arm. Pedro staggered back. The glistening white stuff that had been his jaw had become a thousand fragments on the floor!

His face, where there should have been a chin, jaws, and lips, was a hideous, ragged hole that coughed out hurt, inarticulate, animal sounds.

Janet screamed. Both of her arms clasped me around the waist in a panicky embrace that would not let me move, would not let me pursue the monster as it turned and ran back the way it had come, to enter one of the dressing rooms.

"There's a cop at the end of the passage, where the stage door is. Get him, Janet! I'll watch the door to see that Pedro doesn't come out. We've got him cornered—" I gasped.

"But, Dick, his face—" She shud-

dered violently.

"Never mind his face!" I pushed the girl toward the stage entrance. "Get the cops. That was Pedro, all right. His face wasn't anything but a plaster mask, Janet! I'm in no danger."

"Promise me you won't go in there after him alone!" she demanded.

I nodded. "Promise. Now, will you get the cops?"

She turned, ran down the passage. I kept my eyes on the door of the room into which Pedro had disappeared. Janet came back in less than ten seconds, with a cop who was tooting his whistle for additional help.

I pointed out the dressing-room door. The cop drew his revolver, hammered on the door.

"Open up!" he ordered. Then he tried the handle, found the door locked.

"We'll break it in," I said. And got an elbow in my ribs for my offer. "You get back, buddy! This is my funeral. You've done plenty, as it is."

He struck the door with his beefy shoulder. The lock broke. The door swung open, hit a rubber bumper, and hung there, shivering. The cop went in, his gun ready. I wanted to follow, but Lieutenant Flinch came up at that moment and pushed me aside.

FLINCH and the policeman came out of the room a little faster than they had entered. Flinch glared at me and said:

"Are you crazy?"

The cop growled: "That room's empty as somebody's head! What the hell—"

Janet sprang to my defense. "We saw him go in there, Lieutenant. We wouldn't lie about it. No motive, as you say. It was Pedro. And Pedro is Renaldo. His face was just a mask and under that mask—*Ugh!*"

Flinch said to the policeman: "Get the boys. We'll go through these dressing rooms like a vacuum sweeper. Take in every damned thing. Something screwy here, somewhere."

Then I felt sick! There was a lot in Janet's dressing room that would put me in an unhealthy spot. Soemes body was the least of it. There was

that extortion note I had stolen, and the half-finished copy I had been making. I couldn't afford to have the police get hold of that. It had been a crazy idea in the first place.

I turned around on the heels of the cop. When we got to Janet's dressing room, I ducked inside, ignoring Soemes' corpse on the floor, and got to the dressing table. Everything was there—everything, that is, except the extortion note and the copy!

Maybe, I thought, I hadn't left it on the table at all. I searched my pockets. Nothing there. Maybe I had dropped the paper when I had been searching the closet. So I went into the closet and searched in every corner. Lying along the floor was a fine, golden thread—a thread of light that came up through a crack in the floor.

Wondering, I dropped to the floor. My fingers clawed in the darkness and hooked into a small, metal ring. I pulled on the ring, and a trap-door opened silently.

Beneath it was a portion of the Royale basement we had not searched that night—a portion I had not known existed. It was a room of majestic height, fully furnished, and accessible only by a scene painter's bridge which had been rolled up under the trap-door in the closet.

It was a good-sized bridge, nearly as long as the room. Its narrow top must have communicated with other dressing rooms, just as it did with this.

I crawled to the edge of the bridge and onto the ladder that formed its sides, then climbed into the room. Looking up at the ceiling, I was considerably disturbed to see that the trap-door had slid back into place again.

There was no one in the room. It was cold down there, and damp as a tomb. There must have been a hundred pictures on the wall, all of the same woman dressed in various costumes for operatic roles. She wasn't what I would call a beautiful woman, but someone must have loved her very much.

There was a bed and a chair in the room, and a small, new electric organ that must have cost at least two thou-

sand dollars. On top of the organ—it looked like a spinet-model piano—was a curious device that needed investigating.

It was a box of unfinished maple, and mounted on top of it were four silvery tuning forks. A sensitive, double diaphragm of metal was suspended in one end of the box and wires were connected to a switch.

I tapped one of the tuning forks gently. It whispered a musical tone. Then I struck them simultaneously, and something behind me snapped!

Heart in my mouth, I turned around. The sound had come from the painter's bridge.

It was then that I noticed something exceedingly peculiar about the bridge. A little platform extended from one upright and the end of that platform swung down on hinges. The hinged portion was in motion now. Suddenly, I understood.

PLATFORM and upright were spattered with bloodstains. Dangling above the platform was a length of rope and a peculiar sort of clamp. Here was a perfect gallows, with a clamp instead of a noose. And as I understood its purpose, my whole body seemed immersed in a bath of ice water.

That strange murder machine was operated electrically by the tuning forks and the resonance box on the organ. When a particular chord was struck, the complementary vibration of the forks completed an electrical circuit that tripped the platform on the gallows.

I turned my attention to the organ itself. On the carved music rack was a sheet of music, the notes inked in by hand. Here was the original copy of Renaldo's famous "*Epitaph!*"

The music was meaningless to me, but one particular chord was marked with a small insignia that I recognized. It was a skull and cross-bones!

As I studied the music, something at the end of the rack moved. My eyes jerked slightly to the rack. A human hand, long-fingered and lean, was pushing a slip of paper toward me.

Instantly, I recognized the paper as the extortion note I had stolen from Lieutenant Flinch's notebook.

Flesh crawling, I turned around very slowly. My eyes met a soft, white veil where I had expected to see a face. My gaze traveled down the body of a man, lodged at the glistening end of a revolver that sprouted from his fist.

It all happened so suddenly that I have only a faint recollection of what happened. I saw that gun coming up toward my head. I shrank back against the organ. The gun flashed in front of my terrified eyes, and its muzzle must have clipped me across the temple. Anyway, I went out like a light.

CHAPTER V

The Last Chord

GRADUALLY, my mind emerged from blackness to a giddy, spinning world of semi-consciousness, where all things past, present, and future whirled before my eyes like horses on a merry-go-round.

I saw music, skull and cross-bones, veiled man, gallows, gory tongues, police, Janet and Pedro—then, as the merry-go-round slowed down a little, there were not half so many things I had to watch. I really was fully occupied with the veiled man and his gallows.

It was tied to an upright of the painter's bridge. My feet rested on that unstable platform, which could be upset by a single chord from the organ on the floor far below.

The rope, with its curious clamp, dangled in front of me; and just beyond the rope, at the extremity of the platform, was the veiled Pedro. He had a strange-looking tool in his hand—something that resembled both a wedge and a pair of forceps.

Here was horror's own hangman, a man with a mind made in hell! Presently, by some torment of his own design, he would have the clamp at the end of the rope fixed to my tongue.

Then he would trip the platform on which I stood and I would pitch downward. My head would jerk up, because of the rope attached to my tongue. Probably I would scream, as the others had. But I wouldn't dangle at the end of a rope. A man can't hang by his tongue. Something has to give way!

So I was to die as Fran Demette and Soemes had died. Why, I didn't know, except that there was some link between my execution and that extortion note. You can't reason about the actions of a madman. And this killer was mad—

But wait. The gallows trap on which I stood was operated through the sensitive tuning forks on the organ. Suppose Soemes had been put in the same position that I found myself in, except that the tongue clamp had already been fixed to his tongue.

Then, suppose someone had sat at the organ in the theater above and played that fatal chord which occurred in Renaldo's "*Epitaph*." The sensitive tuning forks in this room might have echoed the vibrations from the organ above, springing the trap, and thus killing Soemes by remote control.

And it was Fred Kraus who had played that fatal chord! Knowingly or not, Kraus had killed Soemes. God, how I wished Kraus would play that chord now, while the killer stood on his own hellish gallows!

But maybe this veiled man was Kraus. Maybe Kraus was the mad Renaldo. But that was impossible; for Kraus was a young man and he certainly wasn't dumb. No, Pedro was Renaldo, and Renaldo was the murderer.

He was coming at me now, that expanding wedge in his two hands elevated to the level of my mouth. My teeth clenched. My lips compressed. Then the wedge-thing struck squarely between my lips, an agonized blow that chipped out my front teeth. My jaws sprang apart to emit the scream in my throat.

But the scream was gagged by the wedge-thing that nipped my tongue in its iron jaws. And now my execu-

tioner pulled out his hellish instrument with the utmost caution. My straining eyeballs glimpsed blood on his forceps, where they had bit into the flesh of my tongue.

I became dizzy and sick, beyond all effort to resist. The clamp on the end of the rope was set in place. The hangman's rope dangled in front of my nose. The veiled executioner descended from the platform after freeing me from the upright.

I COULD jump now, get it over with quickly. Perhaps that was what Fran Demette had done, for we had not heard the organ play when she had died.

Carefully I inched my way to the edge of the platform, turning as far around as the rope permitted me. I was going to jump. I wasn't going to give that fiend the pleasure of torturing me with his damnable music that measured death with every note.

But something checked me—the sound of footsteps beating on the boards above my head. The police! They would be looking for me. They might find, as I had found, the secret entrance to this room.

When they heard the organ, the sound might lead them to me. Then, if they shot, without warning, and shot to kill, they might be in time to prevent that madman from striking his fatal chord.

The madman was at the organ now. His long fingers caressed the keys. The music marched into its slow, minor introduction, gained in volume. I wished suddenly that I knew more about music, so that I might gauge the seconds of life that were left to me, precious grains of sand dropping unalterably.

The veiled devil's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. His angular body swayed slowly to the funereal rhythm of his music. I wanted to cry out, and did manage to emit a strangled, choking sound that was horribly like the bloody gurgle I had heard coming from Fran Demette's throat.

Then, mid-measure, the music stopped! The veiled madman turned

his head, looked upward at the ceiling of the secret room. There was a thumping sound, then the splinter of wood. I saw the keen edge of an ax gleam for an instant between boards. The police, at last—

And from the heights of exultation, I was plunged into the depths of despair! The police—what did they know of the murder machine on which I stood? A single chord, four fatal notes was all that was needed to pitch me into hell.

The ax struck again and a narrow board was ripped aside by frantic fingers. And the madman laughed, audibly now. His evil eyes flashed from the small hole the police were making in the ceiling, to the platform where I stood.

The fingers of his right hand spread until, in my fevered imagination, the hand became a hideous albino spider. His fingers were taking the position of the fatal chord. His hand rose above the keyboard.

No matter now, if the police had found the secret room. They were minutes too late. Nothing could save me now. *Nothing.*

Janet—Her dear face, childishly lovely, drifted through the veil of mist that swirled in front of my eyes. That was over now, too. Everything was over, except those seconds of shrieking agony that were to precede my death; those seconds when blood would gush into my mouth and bubble over my lips.

I swayed forward, sick with fear, dazed with terror. Sharp pain lanced my throat.

Then a guttural cry that was not my own broke through the silence that might have become unending. My brain cleared. With a mighty effort, I retained my equilibrium in a spinning world.

Beneath me, I saw my executioner, his right hand still raised, his head up, and his hidden eyes fixed on something I could not see—something that was on the topmost plank of the painter's bridge.

A human projectile shot through the air, straight at the fiend sitting at the organ. Body struck body. The two

forms, interlocked in dead embrace, crashed into the organ.

There was a loud, discordant wail from the instrument. I reeled, clawed at nothing, kicked at empty space, saw the floor dashing up to meet me, heard my own cry of terror screeching in my ears. Then there was a complete blackout of everything . . .

MINUTES later, I came to in that secret room with its organ and its blood-splattered gallows. Janet was holding my hand, and her dark eyes were shimmering with tears. She was smiling, though. I couldn't talk, my tongue was that sore and swollen.

But it was still my tongue! For a long time, I couldn't see anything but Janet. Then my horizon widened, and I could see Lieutenant Flinch and the police.

One officer had a tight hold on Katie, Janet's maid. Two more were over beside a chair where old Pedro, with his ragged, raw mouth, was sitting, writing—writing his confession, no doubt.

Flinch said: "Well, we solved the murders in wholesale lots tonight, buddy. Or rather Katie, here, spilled the whole business. You see, she knew who killed Renaldo's wife and, with the same trick bomb, ended Renaldo's operatic career by ruining his mouth and throat.

"Katie and Soemes caught the murderer fixing up the bomb. So, after the Renaldo deed, ten years ago, Katie and Soemes knew who was responsible. The pair of them had been doing a bit of blackmailing, you see, hitting the killer for hush money. And they were clever enough to keep their identities a secret."

I understood that much. What a mess of things I had made when I had stolen that note that had dropped from Lynn Barclay's pocket and tried to make a copy. Janet was right. I was a little more than half crazy to attempt a scheme like that.

The killer, watching from the closet in Janet's dressing room, had seen me working on the note, taken me for the blackmailer, and had set out to get me.

"This crazy room here," Flinch went on to explain, "was something that Renaldo had fixed up for his own use. It's a portion of the basement that had been walled off some years ago. The organ and furnishings were his.

"The painter's bridge was used as a means of getting into the room from the secret trap-doors Renaldo fashioned. The gallows arrangement was the murderer's own private addition."

Then, I thought, Renaldo wasn't the murderer at all. Then Pedro wasn't Renaldo, and—But Flinch broke in on my thoughts.

"Renaldo saved your life tonight," he said, nodding toward the faceless devil I had always known as old Pedro.

"He's not quite right in the head, but he got the idea that Lynn Barclay was up to something that smelled.

"Renaldo—or old Pedro, as he prefers to be called—came down through one of his secret traps, and jumped from the painter's bridge in time to keep Barclay from springing the trap that would have ended your days of talking forever.

"One of my men, thinking that Pedro was the maniac killer, followed Pedro through the opening in the ceiling, saw that you were about to fall from the platform, and cut the rope just in time to save you."

Then the fog lifted from my brain. Barclay was the veiled devil at the organ! I saw it all in a moment. Lynn Barclay was the killer, who, in a fit of jealousy over Renaldo's wife, had tried to kill Renaldo with the bomb in the wine bottle.

Soemes and Katie had blackmailed Lynn Barclay. Somehow he had discovered that the doorman, Pedro, was really Renaldo. Then Barclay had set out to get his blackmailers. Not sure of their identity, he had resorted to trial and error, in an effort to kill all those who might have been in a position to blackmail him.

Barclay had chosen his terrible murder method, rigged up that gallows in Renaldo's room, all with the idea of making out that Pedro-Renaldo, mad and hungry for revenge, was the killer.

Knowing that some woman was in the blackmail plot, Barclay had started his murder march with Fran Demette. Then he had taken Soemes to the secret room, put him on the scaffold, at about the time that Flinch was getting us all on the stage.

SOEMES had been killed when Fred Kraus had accidentally struck that fatal chord on the theater organ. No wonder Barclay had all but broken down when he heard what Fred Kraus was playing.

The hellish part of Barclay's scheme

was that it would have worked had not Katie's conscience pricked her into telling the police all she knew. Barclay might easily have pinned the whole rotten business on old Pedro, who was dumb and could not very well defend himself.

I ought to conclude this by telling how I took Janet into my arms and kissed her. But that would be sheerest fiction. My mouth was in such a state that I couldn't kiss anybody for a long time. Later, though, Janet and I made up for anything we had omitted that terrible night.



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

MURDER WITHOUT CORPSES

A Novelette of Bloodless Death

By PAUL ERNST



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By **CARL JACOBI**

Author of "Death Rides the Plateau," "Dead Man's River," etc.

WE SAT in the stifling salon, sipping gin *pahits*, listening to Durkee, the Australian curio-hunter, tell his experiences. Top-side, black night shrouded the little Dutch steamer, *Macassar*, as she ploughed through the Java Sea.

Six of us—six lonely whites—clinging to each other's companionship, vainly trying to raise our spirits above the deepening gloom. The typhoon which had kept us locked in our cabins until an hour ago had passed on. Yet even now only Durkee seemed at ease. He smoked his cheroot and talked steadily.

"Sumatra," he said, "is a strange island which the white man will never understand. Even today much of its black history has been only partially uncovered."

Across the teak table Parker, the radio manufacturer from Chicago, stared down at his glass. Sweat dripped



MACASSAR

The body was headless—the outstretched hands were cupped to hold a decapitated head.

from his florid face. Next to Parker, Arthur Gage, the Cockney vaudeville performer bound for Sydney, made designs on an envelope with a dirty pencil. Petrini, the Italian whose business nobody knew, sat stiffly erect, hands folded before him.

The only member of her sex, Janice Meren, drew her chair close to mine.

"Peter — I mean Mr. Jaffrey — how long will it be before we reach port?"

I patted her hand. "Tomorrow afternoon, if all goes well, we should dock at Surabaya. Are you quite all right?"

She nodded, but I could see that her lips trembled. The little dark-haired school teacher who had thought it would be a lark to leave her conducted world-cruise and explore the archipelago on her own, was regretting her decision with each passing hour.

Durkee flicked the ash from his cheroot and continued:

"No one knows who built some of the temples of Sumatra. The Achinese use them, but they date back long before that race existed. All we have to gauge those earlier civilizations are a few stone sacrifice blocks and — carvings like these."

The curio-hunter dug his hand into his pocket and placed a small object on the table.

For a moment we sat in silence, staring at it. Then Gage, the vaudeville man, caught his breath and gasped.

"It's 'orrible!" he cried. "Take it away."

But Durkee didn't take it away. He pushed it farther out into the middle of the table so that we all could see.

"See how lifelike it is," he said.

The thing was a small image, the figure of a man, naked save for a loin cloth, skillfully chipped from some kind of black stone. It was mounted on a flat base. That much I saw at first glance.

The rest was horrible. The stone figure had been decapitated. Kneeling in a position of supplication, it held its tiny head in its outstretched hands. And the face was a face of terror. The eyes were staring; the mouth gaped open; little carved veins and tendons hung down where the neck apparently had been severed from the body.

"In heaven's name, Signor," Petrini cried, "what is it?"

Durkee smiled. "I found it in a Sumatran temple far up the Jambi river," he said. "Once it was the kampong's greatest treasure. In the socket you see on the base was mounted a huge emerald of untold value. But someone stole that emerald only a few weeks before I came. That is why the natives were willing to sell the image to me.

"There is a legend behind that image," the curio-hunter continued. "A legend dating back to the time when human sacrifices were made on the island, when dark and terrible rites were practiced in the name of obscene gods. It is said that if that emerald should be stolen, whoever touches the stone will exchange his head for the head in the image's hands."

"You mean . . .?" Janice Meren's voice was tense as she forced her eyes to gaze upon the carving.

"I mean that somewhere among these islands a man or a woman has the sacred Jambi emerald. He may be the person who stole it or he may have bought it from the thief. Either way, if we can believe the natives, he is doomed. The headless warrior will trail him to the ends of the earth, and the man will die."

Parker, the radio man, wiped the sweat from his face and stood up.

"That's rot," he said. "Abject rot. Ever since I left Singapore I've heard wild, impossible yarns of native curses. I'm going up on deck. Coming, any of you?"

THE spell was broken. Durkee frowned and returned the image to his pocket. I followed Parker and the others up the companionway.

On deck Janice Meren touched my arm.

"Would New York's leading newspaper man care to walk about a little before turning in? The moon should be up shortly."

Laughing, I nodded. Janice Meren was a beautiful girl. Already she had changed my vacation from one of boredom to an exciting adventure. We moved slowly onto the for'ard deck.

But there was no sign of the moon. The ship rose and fell in a brooding sea of pitch. A wind, spice-laden, smelling of the jungle, whispered overhead.

"Peter," Janice said, "do you believe all those things Mr. Durkee said?"

I halted by the rail and frowned. "Durkee is like all men who have spent their lives back of beyond," I said. "They see things other people don't, color them with their own imaginings. But—"

I broke off as Janice suddenly seized my arm. For an instant I heard nothing. Then from somewhere behind us a horrible, soul-chilling scream rent the air. Twice in hideous agony it was repeated. Following it in quick succession came heavy thuds as of human bodies falling. Even as the sounds ricocheted into silence the deck lights flashed on, flooding the ship with a weird brilliancy.

And then a cold chill ran up my spine. I stood frozen with horror.

"Peter, look! Oh, my God!"

The door to the companionway stood open. A hideous malformed figure stood there, motionless, arms outstretched before it. It was the figure of a man, a huge black man, naked save for a loin cloth.

But—merciful God—the body was headless!

The neck ended in a jagged, bloody stump, from which the white coil of the windpipe projected.

The outstretched hands were cupped to hold a decapitated head. Blood trickled down the wrists. Slowly, like a puppet on a wire, the thing strode out onto the deck, began to move toward us. A greenish aura, palpable and translucent, rose from it.

And the head in its hands was still alive! The eyes rolled; the lips quivered spasmodically.

"Don't—don't let it touch me!" White with terror, Janice threw herself into my arms.

Relentlessly, a step at a time, the thing came on. Abruptly it turned. With a low, gibbering sound, it lurched for the port ladder and, still holding its ghastly burden, climbed to the bridge.

Reason filtered into me then. Unmindful of Janice's restraining cry I

threw myself forward, raced after the fleeing apparition. I had a fleeting glimpse of it shambling to the break of the bridge. Then it turned, sped past the chartroom and disappeared down the starboard ladder.

A uniformed Dutch officer emerged from the wheelhouse, gripped my arm.

"Passengers are not allowed here, *Mynheer*. You must . . ."

"Didn't you see it?" I yelled, shaking free.

"See what, *Mynheer*?"

Heart racing, I shoved past him, ran to the starboard ladder and peered down. Nothing. The deck below was empty. But below I heard a sudden yell, voices in a medley of confusion.

Without further word I made my way back to Janice. She was still standing by the rail, eyes wide with terror and bewilderment.

"What was it?" she whispered. "Oh, Peter—"

I forced a smile. "Someone's idea of a clever joke, probably. Someone else must have seen it too, judging from all the noise below decks. Come, let's go down."

Janice's stateroom was Cabin E, mine, the adjoining Cabin D. The *Macassar* was a small steamer, built originally for freight transit, and the quarters of the ship's officers opened off the same corridor.

Now as we made our way down that corridor by the light of a single lamp in a wall gimbal, the sounds of confusion suddenly died. The door to Cabin B yawned open. Inside, in a huddled group, stood three men, Durkee, Parker and Petrini, the Italian. Their faces were white with fear. Blood bubbled from Durkee's left cheek where a knife slash had cut almost to the bone.

I shouldered my way into the room and stopped short. For a second time the icy hand of horror reached out to me.

There were two other figures in the cabin. One I recognized as the ship's captain—Van Doorn, a stolid, thick-set Hollander. He was on hands and knees, bent low over a hunched shape on the floor.

Clammy sweat oozed out on my forehead.

THE shape was a headless corpse, the decapitated body of a man clad in a pongee suit. Arthur Gage, the Cockney vaudeville performer! He lay in a pool of his own blood.

Captain Van Doorn rose to his feet unsteadily, mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

"Gott!" he gasped. "Why iss it anyone should vant to kill him?"

For a moment thick silence pressed down on the room. Then Durkee, the Australian curio-hunter, staggered to a chair and slumped into it weakly.

"The image!" he gasped. "The curse is working. It's working, I tell you." He wiped blood from the wound on his face with shaking fingers. "I saw it. I was in my room preparing for bed when I heard the door open to this cabin—Gage's—across the hall. I thought I would exchange a word of good night, so I went out into the corridor."

Durkee's words were coming in a fast, breathless monotone. "I saw nothing for an instant. Then suddenly it was there before me, bathed in a hideous green light. A headless man with a head in his hands!

"I opened my mouth to cry out, but the thing was upon me like a demon. I fought with it, but its body wasn't solid, just a jellylike ooze that absorbed my blows."

A sobbing sigh escaped the curio-hunter's lips.

"Something hot and sharp cut into my face, seemed to shoot pain into the very core of my brain. And—then—"

As Durkee's voice died into a terrified whisper, Parker coughed deep in his throat and turned to me with a sneer.

"And I suppose you too, Mr. Jaffrey, saw a green-eyed monster, floating about the deck?"

I felt an instant dislike for the man. "Whatever I saw," I replied, "I'll report it to the captain. Right now, it strikes me, an investigation is due. The ship must be searched, an explanation found."

"Investigation, *ja*." Captain Van Doorn nodded. "You must go to your cabins, *Mynheren*. You will all consider yourselves under arrest. My officers will take care of this."

After that the Dutch skipper moved methodically about the room, examining each article of furniture carefully. He asked questions, but made no reference to Durkee's story. And for some reason I shot Janice a glance, warning her not to reveal what she and I had seen. Eyes wide with terror, Petrini stood like a statue, staring down at the mutilated body.

When Van Doorn, with a scowl of bewilderment, nodded our release, I led Janice to her chamber farther down the corridor.

"I'm afraid, Peter," she whispered. "Don't leave me."

I forced a smile to thwart her fears. "You'll be all right. Just keep your door locked. Don't open it under any circumstances."

"But you—"

"Don't worry about me." I produced a small revolver from an inside pocket. "If any more headless ghosts appear they'll stop a slug of lead next time."

I waited until the door latch clicked. Then I turned, cast a glance down the corridor. No one was in sight. Malay sailors already had carried Gage's body from that cabin.

Halfway to the companionway ladder I stopped and listened. A baritone voice was coming from Petrini's room. The Italian was singing—singing a low Latin chant. In somber tones the weird sound pulsed through the corridor.

A chill swept up my spine. Scowling, I mounted to the deck, hesitated a moment, then turned aft. If Van Doorn or his officers wanted to question me, I saw no reason why they could not do it here as well as below.

But was I going mad—? That figure. Was it the figment of an overwrought brain, a brain wearied by the strain of the recent typhoon? But no, Janice had seen it too. And Durkee's story tallied in every detail with the thing's description.

The deck lights had been turned off again, with true Dutch economy, and the tropic blackness about me was intense. Out on the undulating sea it seemed a thousand eyes—phosphorescence—were watching me.

I stopped by the battened aft hatch, tried to control my terrified thoughts.

Was I to believe Durkee's fantastic story of a Sumatran image taking human form?

Suddenly every fibre of my body jerked taut. A hissing voice vibrated into the air about me.

"You are the defiler of the Jambi temple. You have touched the stone of Saja Maka. You will return it or your head will join the other in my hands."

Sibilant and droning the voice repeated those words over and over like a devil litany. Terror stabbed into me. I whirled. There was no one near me on the deck.

BUT again those words pulsed through the blackness. And then I heard a feminine cry.

The funnel shape of a ventilator turret focused itself in my gaze. And as the terrified cry came through that shaft again I realized it was the voice of Janice Meren!

I whipped the revolver from my pocket and lunged for the companionway. Down the stairs I hurtled to the door of Cabin E. It was locked.

But within I could hear the sounds of a struggle.

Madly I threw myself against the panels. The door buckled and crashed inward. On the sill I stood galvanized by what I saw.

Janice Meren, clad only in a filmy night dress, lay sprawled across a chair. Her eyes were dilated, her lips twisted in stark terror. Bent over her was a thing out of hell, a decapitated black man, with a head in its right hand, slobbered with gore. Even in the glare of the ceiling electrolier an aura of livid green effulgence swathed it from head to foot.

The thing jerked around to confront me.

I fired. But before I could yank the trigger a second time, the ghostly figure leaped across the intervening space and threw itself upon me. A suffocating stench of filth and decay swept into my nostrils. An animal-like hand clawed for my throat.

Then as I brought my arms upward to meet the attack, something needle-sharp jabbed into my chest, and a fiery sword of agony lanced into my brain.

In an instant my eyes were filled with swirling colored lights. I stabbed my fists outward, but numbness paralyzed me from head to foot.

Blindly I sought to answer blow for blow. A great roaring filled my ears. Then I felt myself falling backward—into a great cavern of blackness.

When I opened my eyes Janice was pressing a cold, wet cloth to my forehead.

"Peter! Speak to me!"

I staggered to my feet, stood swaying while the dizziness gradually cleared from my brain.

"Peter, are you all right?" With trembling hands Janice filled a glass with water and held it to my lips.

I drank, picked up my revolver from the floor and nodded slowly.

"All right, yes," I said. "And you—"

She sank weakly into a chair, began sobbing softly. "It ran out when you went unconscious."

"How did it get in your room?"

She dug her nails into her palms. "There—there was a knock at the door. I said: 'Is it you, Mr. Jaffrey?', and I thought I heard a voice answer, 'Yes.' I opened the door—and—and—" The girl's voice broke off as she buried her head in her hands.

For a moment I stood there, motionless. Across the room I could see the ventilator shaft, extending through the ceiling. But for that and its ability to convey sounds I might have been too late.

My brain was spinning as I pressed the revolver in Janice's hand. "Take this," I said. "Use it on the slightest provocation. We'll get out of here now, go up on deck. The air will revive you."

She threw a heavy cloak about her shoulders, and a moment later we were climbing the companionway. The Dutch first officer nodded to us from his guard position at the rail. He gripped a heavy service revolver, and his face was drawn.

We moved out onto the for'ard deck. The moon was up now. It cast a yellow-white ghost path across the black water.

Abreast of the windlass I stopped.

"You saw the thing at close quar-

ters," I said slowly. "Was it—was it all it seemed to be?"

Her lips quivered as she nodded. "Yes. It was a headless man. There was a greenish light around it."

"And it didn't seem human? It—"

"No. Oh, it was awful. I—"

"Listen!"

There was the low moaning of the wind, the dull vibration of the engines, the *swash* of the sea. But I had heard something above these sounds.

It came again as we stood there, an intermittent *drip—drip—drip*, as of some heavy liquid falling to the planking. Janice's cold hand reached out into mine. I found a match in my pocket, lit it.

And then, as the tiny flame flickered up, I felt suddenly sick.

THE thing had struck again. The headless man had found a second victim. This time it was Petrini, the Italian. His body stood propped up against the bulkhead, feet spread wide. His neck ended in a scarlet stump from which blood bubbled thickly. There was no sign of the head.

In a daze I passed a supporting arm around Janice, led her silently back along the deck. Abreast of the Dutch first officer, I said:

"Stay here. This man will take care of you. I'm going to find out what the hell this is all about."

But I didn't find out. Captain Van Doorn swore a stream of Dutch profanity when I told him a second murder had been committed. With two lascars and Welkern, the second officer, we combed the *Macassar* from deck to hold. There was no one but the passive Eurasian engineer and his two helpers in the engine room. The fo'c'stle was dark and evil-smelling, but empty.

"I'll swear by the native crew," Van Doorn said. "Every last one of them has been with me for five years or more. This is something that goes deeper. It's the work of the devil."

Nor could the remaining passengers offer any explanation. Parker, the radio manufacturer from Chicago, lifted his eyebrows, scowled and said nothing. Durkee, the Australian curio-hunter, stared at us, and sank trembling on his

bunk. Abruptly he leaped to his feet, brought forth the little Sumatran carving.

"I'm going to throw it overboard," he cried. "Throw it overboard, do you hear? Oh God, if I had known when I bought it, the awful—"

I went back to Janice. I brought a flask of brandy from my room, forced her to take a stiff drink. My wrist watch showed it to be two A.M.

And then as my brain strove to penetrate the growing horror I thought I saw a plan of action.

I paced forward along the deck until I reached Captain Van Doorn's side. The Dutch skipper was superintending the removal of the dead Italian's body.

"Captain," I said, "I'd like to have you come down to my cabin right away."

Two minutes later, the door closed behind us, I opened my steamer trunk, took out a small tin box and handed it to him.

"All my valuables are in that box," I said. "Considering what's happened tonight, I don't like the idea of leaving them in my room. Will you put them in the ship's safe?"

For a moment Van Doorn looked at me half in surprise, half in irritation. Then he took the box and nodded.

After he had gone I rejoined Janice.

"It's getting late," I said. "You'd better get some sleep. Put a chair in front of your door, and if you hear anything, rap on the wall. My cabin is next to yours."

Noisily I undressed, extinguished the light and went to bed. In inky blackness I lay there. Through the open port came the sounds of the sea, the low whine of the wind. An hour passed.

As I fought off sleep I went over in my mind each event of the last few hours. Gage's death and Petrini's. The thing's attack on Janice and me. Was I going mad? Was I to believe what my eyes, without a shadow of doubt, had seen?

These were strange islands, I knew, with histories vague and terrible, steeped in all the black, nameless rites of heathen gods. In Borneo and New Guinea they still hunted heads. In

Sumatra, as Durkee had said, archeologists had come upon grim artifacts, testifying to human sacrifices and devil worship.

The clock on the table ticked steadily.

And then suddenly I sat upright in bed, listening. Cold horror blanketed me from head to foot. Outside in the corridor shambling steps had sounded, moving stealthily past my door.

Instinctively I knew they were the steps of the man without a head.

With leaden feet I slid out of bed, forced myself across to the door and inched it open. The corridor was a gaunt, dismal tunnel wreathed in leprous shadows. Ten feet beyond a tall figure stood motionless.

Terror billowed over me. It was the headless man. His neck ended in a ghastly, blood-clotted stump. A greenish fog, like a fever miasma, swirled about him.

Turning, the thing began to move forward, heading toward the captain's cabin at the far end of the corridor. A step at a time I followed.

AND now the thing was slowly opening the captain's door. Inside I could see the heavy bulk of Van Doorn slumped in a swivel chair, back turned toward me.

A creature from hell, the headless man stood on the sill, swaying from side to side. And then it happened. The thing seemed to flow into the room. By its own accord the door closed behind it. I was alone in the deserted corridor.

But only for an instant. Realization stabbed into me then, and with a hoarse cry I lunged forward.

"Van Doorn!" I screamed. "Look out!"

With a single leap I reached the door, ripped it open and lurched into the cabin. Blackness met my eyes. The lights were out.

But the room was a bedlam of screams and crashing confusion. Two vague forms were locked in a death struggle in the gloom. Paralysis gripped me as I heard Van Doorn's gasping cries of agony.

Then I saw that unholy glow of green, and, in a flying tackle, I threw

myself upon it. I struck hard; my hands clawed out, seized something solid and firm.

But the thing I was fighting was an uncaged demon. Animal-like claws raked across my body, gouged at my eyes. Foul breath hissed into my face. The monster had turned from Van Doorn and was utilizing its every ounce of strength to loosen my grip.

We went down, rolled over and over on the floor. A cruel kick thudded into my groin, sent a wave of nausea surging through me. A blow to my midsection sent the wind sickeningly from my body as I twisted frantically sidewise.

There was savage power in the monster's arms. Twice one of them came out to coil about my throat. Blood hammered in my temples as I felt my windpipe cut off.

And then I found an opening. Locking my legs about the writhing body, I slammed my right fist downward. It ground into something soft and yielding. I struck again.

There was a gasping sigh. The hands relaxed, fell backward. Panting, I stumbled erect, staggered to the wall and switched on the lights.

In the glare of the ceiling electrolier I stood there, staring down. The room was a shambles. In one corner lay the unconscious form of Captain Van Doorn.

In the center was a curious figure. It was a naked man, a white man whose body had been blackened with some preparation. Beside him lay a mask-like contrivance, fashioned to resemble a decapitated neck and shoulders.

It was Durkee!

* * * *

The green coast of Java lay to the east off the starboard bow, shimmering in the morning sun.

"It's all over," I told Janice as we stood at the rail. "Durkee is below, in irons. He'll be tried in a Dutch colonial court of law as soon as we reach port."

She nodded slowly. "I still don't understand," she said. "How did you know—?"

"I didn't at first," I said, lighting my pipe. "I had only one clue. Durkee

had said the headless man would direct its attack against the person who had come into possession of the stolen Jambi emerald. He talked quite a bit last night before he came to, and I've been able to fit together the missing pieces. The emerald, of course, lay at the bottom of the mystery.

"Durkee, traveling through Sumatra, had heard of it and had set his mind on owning it. When he arrived at the kampong in whose temple the emerald had been kept, he discovered the stone had been stolen only a few hours before.

"Only one man, he knew, had preceded him upriver, a white trader. Durkee immediately gave pursuit. But when he reached Palembang, he learned that the trader, fearing trouble, had sold the emerald to one of a group of tourists, visiting the town—a tourist who was a passenger on the ship, *Macassar*.

"Durkee took passage on the boat, expecting the new owner to reveal himself. Desire to obtain that stone had by then become almost an obsession."

"But Arthur Gage and Petrini—?" broke in Janice.

"When no one admitted having the stone," I went on, "the curio-hunter devised the story of the Sumatran image and its curse. The image he had picked up in a Palembang curio shop. His aim was to frighten the owner into talking.

"He then fashioned that masklike contrivance and blackened his body to

make himself appear like the headless warrior. He murdered Arthur Gage, thinking he had the emerald. When he didn't find it, he carried Gage's head in his hands to further increase the terror effect. Later he killed Petrini in the same fashion because he suspected the Italian of having the emerald."

I halted a moment to look over the glittering water.

"FOR the rest, Durkee simply utilized a knowledge of chemistry. He jabbed me with a hypodermic filled with dope when I fought with him in your room. Previously he had inflicted a wound in his own cheek as a proof of his innocence. The greenish haze about him was formed by a mixture of viridic acid and phosphorus."

"Then who really did have the emerald?" Janice wanted to know.

I smiled grimly. "That's the ironic part of it all. When I gave that tin box to Captain Van Doorn, asking him to put it in the ship's safe, Durkee overheard me as I had planned, and assumed at once that the emerald was mine and in that box. He sneaked into the captain's cabin to crack open the safe.

"As for the emerald itself—Parker, the radio man, bought it from the trader in Palembang. But the duty was so high he sold it again before he left Sumatra.

"He sold it to a native Achinese. By now, probably, the emerald is back in the Jambi river kampong."

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LISTERINE SHAVING CREAM

AT THE DOOR of HELL

A Novelette
of
A Modern Dracula

By
JOE ARCHIBALD

*Author of "The Walking Corpse," "Hell's
Half Acre," etc.*

CHAPTER I

Grin of Death

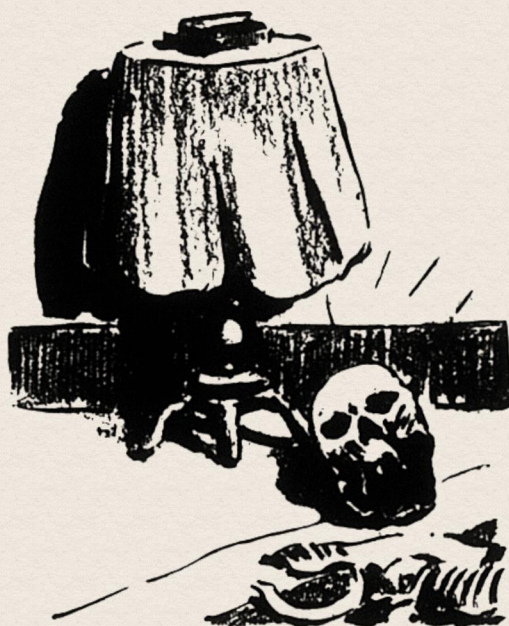
JOHAN MARLOWE stood on the rotting boards of the platform of an isolated railroad stop. Impenetrable veils of mist swirled about him, as the train which had brought him to the God-forsaken spot began to move on, its wheels grinding and screeching on the rusty iron rails.

Panting heavily, like a sluggish monster, it drew away slowly, and when the fireman looked back from the cab of the engine, John Marlowe was seized with an urge to pick up his small bag and run to clamber aboard the train again.

But his feet seemed glued to the worn boards, and he stood as if frozen until the train's eerie whistle sudden-



It lay grinning hideously, with the candle-light revealing the gold tooth.



ly died in the distance. A haunting, incredible silence pressing hard against him, the traveler picked up his satchel and stepped down to the ground.

He felt his boots sink into mud, and dew-soaked weeds lashed against his legs clear to his knees as he made his way to a sloping, rarely used road gutted by recent rains. He plodded along doggedly, albeit apprehensively, as he looked ahead with tingling

Marlowe Follows the Trail of His Lost Friend



scalp at the forbidding stretch of woods into which the road led.

It was the *only* road. It had to lead to Orm, if there was such a place. On the train, Marlowe had asked about that isolated town in the Missouri hills, and a salesman had responded: "Orm? Nope, never heard of it."

But John Marlowe, continuing his way through the woods, had no doubt about the existence of Orm. A year

ago one of his friends—a feature writer for newspapers—had gone to a place called Orm, Missouri.

He had written Marlowe to that effect, and that was the last that anyone had heard of George Stewart. He had never come back from those hills, into which he had been lured by the story of a vampire.

Marlowe still carried that letter in his pocket.

to a House of Ghastly Doom!

"You'll laugh, John," Stewart had written. "Vampires? They are only creations of imaginative minds. There never was a Dracula, or a woman like him. Beautiful women do not leave their graves at midnight to go in quest of blood to keep them alive.

"But I've heard there is a female vampire in a place called Orm, and I am going there in search of a story. Believe it? Of course I don't! But it is a bleak, out-of-the-way place that is slowly disintegrating. Superstition there, I am told, is as strong as in the jungles of Haiti. I want to meet this strange, beautiful woman who has a skin as transparent as a china cup. What a story, John, if—"

John Marlowe's thoughts were abruptly cut short as he came to a sudden stop. Someone's eyes were upon him! Looking to the side of the road, he saw a man standing a few feet away.

His face was shadowed by the brim of a shapeless hat. Ragged, makeshift clothes adorned a gaunt body, giving the general impression of a scarecrow. Marlowe found voice, and when he spoke he was actually startled by the sound.

"Hi!" he said, and the word might have been a shout for the way it echoed from all sides. "This the way to—Orm?"

For several seconds the native did not speak. John Marlowe thought he heard a sharp intake of breath. Then: "Aye! Six miles from here."

He stepped closer to peer into Marlowe's face, and the odor of moonshine fouled the traveler's nostrils.

"Queer thing—nigh 'bout year ago 'nother feller ast me the same thing. Never come back out. Nobody ain't nevah seed him nor heerd tell of him."

The speaker indulged in a cackling laugh. "Yo' mought be goin' in ter find him, stranger?"

But the derelict did not wait for an answer. He shuffled along the rain-gashed road in the direction from which John Marlowe had come.

MARLOWE shivered, hitched his shoulders as if to throw off a cloak of apprehension, and resumed his way. The rutted road sloped grad-

ually upward and the mists lowered as he progressed, curling around him in snaky tendrils.

George Stewart. Marlowe could see him now. A smiling dare-devil who had stopped at nothing to get a story. Stewart had girdled the globe in search of the bizarre, had ventured where other white men had never dared to go.

Yet in his own country he had evidently found his doom, had unearthed one story that he never would write. Or so his friends believed. Never again did they expect to see that devil-may-care smile of his.

That gold tooth of George Stewart's had marked him everywhere he had gone, had been the subject of much friendly joshing among his colleagues.

John Marlowe told himself that he was crazy. He was not a newspaper man, but a lawyer on vacation. Three weeks rest, after as many years of hard work, and he was using it up in seeking the answer to an enigma that had stumped the best man-trackers in the land.

If there were such things as vampires, John Marlowe mused, such a region as this would be just the place to find them. He had covered three miles of his journey. Breathing seemed to become more difficult, as though the altitude were gradually rising.

There was no breeze. Humidity thickened, and his body reeked with sweat. At last the mist gave evidence of being cut asunder. It twisted and turned in lacy tendrils around the tops of the high crags, clung there for awhile, and then dissolved altogether.

A rumble of thunder cut into the silence, and a forked streak of bluish lightning darted across the darkened heavens. The storm broke across the bleak terrain with startling suddenness. Thunder crashed and boomed, and a mighty wind bent trees on either side of the road, as if they were only wheat stalks.

John Marlowe had to seek what shelter he could when the lancing water tumbled out of the low rolling clouds. It swept down in great sheets, pelting him as he stumbled toward the

lee of an overhanging boulder.

Soaked to the skin, he huddled there, while the storm whipped itself to its peak of fury. Thunder drum-rolled and shook the ground under his feet. Flash after flash of lightning bathed the surrounding hills with a flood of sickly light, revealing to the lone traveler a giant dead tree about two hundred yards from where he was huddled.

The bark had been stripped away, and the unprotected wood seemed to quiver as the driving rain beat against its nakedness. Two huge, leafless branches stretched out from the trunk, like the arms of a lumbering, helpless monster flung up to ward off a mighty blow.

Again the jagged lightning cut down through the roiled sky. This time it seemed to be a mighty bomb that burst directly in front of the crouching man's face.

The echo of its terrific explosion went breaking and running from crag to crag, reverberated again and again, while John Marlowe, stunned, lay face downward in the mucky loam. He felt bits of debris rain upon him as he lay there.

When at last he got to his hands and knees, the lightning split through the heavens again and lit up the terrain as if to show the human midge below the havoc it had just wrought.

The dead tree had been split asunder. Not more than eight feet of splintered trunk was still standing, and the taste of sulphur was strong on John Marlowe's tongue as he got shakily to his feet and looked around.

HE looked down at the ground, when the lightning came again, and there at his feet was a thing that sent a flood of horror through him! His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth as he knelt to touch that thing. He trembled as if with ague when his fingers came into contact with it.

In the intermittent flashes of light, it grinned up at Marlowe, jelling the blood in the man's veins. It was a grinning skull. A skull with all of its teeth intact—and one of those teeth was capped with gold!

CHAPTER II

The People of Orm

HORROR draining his strength from him, John Marlowe reeled back against the boulder under which he had sought shelter. There he braced himself, and the skull slipped out of his trembling fingers and rolled over the ground.

Another great flare of light revealed it to him, and he almost screamed out at the ghastly, grinning thing. George Stewart! He had found George Stewart—or what was left of him. Marlowe looked at the stump of the dead tree, and his heart shrank to the size of a nutmeat.

He stumbled across the soggy ground, guided by the lightning flashes. Through a tremendous rent in the rotted wood of the tree, he saw the gleam of bones. Nausea gripped him, and he fought it with all his will-power. That tree-trunk had been George Stewart's oaken coffin! Somebody had murdered the newspaperman; had, in some way, hidden his body in the hollowed bole.

John Marlowe never knew how he accomplished the grisly task of removing those remains. He took them away from the tree, carried them to the overhanging rock. There he dug a shallow grave in a thick bed of rotting leaves, and buried those bones.

He got up, brushed off his hands, and approached the spot where the skull still lay. For a long time he stood there, wondering if he would ever summon up enough courage to pick it up once more. When he did, he shut his eyes. The cold wetness of the bony relic pierced him through and through, like a stab to the heart.

He had to take it away with him. The world would want proof of the death of George Stewart. If he buried the skull along with the rest of the skeleton, some wandering yokel might stumble upon the grave. No, he could not risk losing the evidence of George Stewart's death, repellent as was the thought of carrying his friend's skull

back to civilization. With sick repugnance he wrapped the skull in a shirt, and put the bundle in his bag.

Once more on the way to Orm, John Marlowe felt the threat of an unseen horror awaiting him at the end of the gutted, winding road. . . .

As suddenly as it had come, the storm had abated. Thunder grumbled and growled with increasing intervals, and the flashes of lightning were fading so that the way was rapidly becoming dark. Marlowe wondered if there really was such a place as Orm. It seemed to him that he had been stumbling along that road for days, a road that would never end.

Maybe it ran right into the maw of hell! John Marlowe, his brain a little numbed, his senses shattered momentarily, laughed without mirth as he plodded on through the nerve-jangling stillness. At last he paused halfway down a long, rocky slope, stared at a town that must be Orm.

The lawyer-traveler leaned against the rough trunk of a pine tree and looked with troubled eyes. Orm! No wonder people outside doubted its existence. A forgotten hamlet going slowly to rot. Inexorable Nature was working havoc here.

As he approached the town, John Marlowe could see the brown rust of countless storms streaking the walls of sheds and houses, as the ghostly glow of sporadic lightning blinked on and off like the wandering beam of a distant and unseen searchlight.

There was only one street in the village, and as the stranger walked along it a few people stopped to stare at him curiously. He returned the look of a gaunt-faced woman, saw a vague fear stir in the sluggish depths of her eyes.

She drew a small, ragged and dirty child close to her, mumbled something to a woman companion. A subtle, sinister emanation rose from the drab, crumbling town. Marlowe walked on slowly. He saw the open door of a store, and several faces appeared in the dim light of its interior.

THE stranger to the region felt the deepening silence acutely, the emptiness that gripped everything in

the place. A man sitting outside the store looked up suddenly at Marlowe, then dropped his head again and continued whittling on a stick.

John Marlowe went into the store and nodded to the few who were hanging around. He was to learn in a short time that these people comprised the biggest part of the population. He was to find out that they came there every night when it grew dark, to huddle together like a lot of frightened animals.

Marlowe did not mention his find to the villagers. Instead, he took a seat on a box near a scarred pine counter, asked:

"Any place to stay here—overnight, or maybe a day or two?"

Everyone stared at him, and one man shook his head. The others immediately aped him. All were wearing cheap clothes and shapeless felt hats drawn low over their foreheads. Their eyes were red from the hammering of the wind, their faces browned from the blazing sun of day.

Too much of looking upon one scene was apparent in each pair of eyes bent upon John Marlowe. It was not poverty that gave those faces hard, expressionless, dispirited masks. They had lived too close together, too far removed from the outside world.

The hills pressed them together and made them sullen, lacking conversation for want of a new subject. Friendship was forced, and undoubtedly it flared at times into smoldering irritation and even real antagonism.

But in the dimly lighted store there was an aura about those people that caused John Marlowe's latent terror to stir inside of him. One of them had killed George Stewart. But Marlowe knew he would never find out which one by asking.

The stranger to Orm spoke again. "A man came here—a year ago, maybe a little more," he began. "He was tall and brown-haired, and he had a gold-capped tooth in—"

A man with a wedge-shaped face looked at Marlowe, then at another native. Both shook their heads.

"Wa'n't never heah. We uns'd

know ef he were."

John Marlowe set his lips. "Yeah, I guess you would." He glanced at a man who sat in a darkened corner. The light from the store lamp only reached as far as his hands, made them stand out in dim silhouette against the dark background of his suit. They were gnarled, work-roughened hands, slowly twisting something into the form of a cross.

While Marlowe watched, the man suddenly rose and walked across the store floor. He went outside without speaking. Someone else cleared his throat, and when John Marlowe looked in that direction he saw a man stretching his neck to look out of a dirty window.

The direction of his glance seemed to be toward the sky, and Marlowe saw him paling under his tan. Just then a woman came into the store, leading a scrawny child by the hand.

A native near the door thrust out a bony hand, and said in a cracked voice:

"Heah, Ada, yo' put it on her."

John Marlowe shivered although the air was close. The thing was a cross made out of a small shrub of some sort.

Wolfsbane! Stewart had been right. These people were living in a nightmare of terror. Wolfsbane was purported to keep vampires away. Vampires quailed before the sight of the shrub. They fled in terror at the sight of the holy rood.

John Marlowe felt a horror creeping out of the outside darkness. Soon several other villagers came into the store. Hard lines became more deeply etched on the faces around him. Men muttered incoherently. When the stranger in their midst could stand the silence no longer, he blurted out:

"What's the matter here? Why do you all look as if the devil were after you?" His nerves were on raw edge by then.

MANY glances met, and were averted. Finally a raw-boned native with an unkempt black beard constituted himself spokesman for the group.

"On the hill yonder, stranger, thar's a woman whut walks a lot at night. When she fus' come heah, Nate Watt's li'l gal she took sick an' died. Healin' feller come here an' says she don't have 'nough blood.

"A few weeks later Jeb Lawler's gal she screeched in her sleep. Jeb found her with a mite of a cut in her throat. Bleedin' she was. Half a hour before, my boy, Jonathan, seed that woman a-walkin'—through the night—"

The lawyer from the far-off city wanted to laugh, but he could not. Not while he was among these ignorant, simple people whose lives were led in a region remote from the outside world. Superstition was a part of their daily lives.

"I don't believe in vampires," he forced himself to say.

A bony-faced c r o n e cackled: "Ya-a-ah, furriners don't believe nothin' they cain't see. They's things some folks cain't see thet others kin. She's a daid 'ooman that walks an' drinks of the blood of them as be alive.

"Like as not she sleeps in a coffin in thet house, leastways I heerd tell she does. The blood of Nate Watt's young 'un is in her veins. Soon somebody else'll die—the one as fergits to nail a cross of wolfsbane over his bed—ya-a-ah.

"We're watchin' fer her. We be a-watchin' fer that black bat outa hell to be seed ag'in over the house-top o' the hill. We've seed it. Yo' kin see it, stranger, some nights when it's clear an' the moon is nigh onto full."

The aged woman, who was palsied, partly with her years and partly from the nameless dread that had gripped her, nodded her grey head to emphasize the words.

John Marlowe got up and went outside. Soul a little sick, he looked toward a tree-studded knoll that towered over Orm. A light blinked on its summit. The outlines of the ell of a large house were silhouetted against the lesser darkness of the sky.

The stranger to Orm looked at his watch, saw that it was ten o'clock. From behind him came the cracked

voice of the crone:

"—an' when we ketch her with her lips stained with blood, we're a-gonna drive the stake right through her heart. Then her black soul'll fly into hell an' stay thar! It'll turn into a big bat, an' go back whar it come from. I kin hear her a-screechin' when the stake goes into her heart, an' see the blood comin' out—ha-a-ah!"

John Marlowe looked back at the old woman, nodding vigorously with each bitterly-spoken sentence. Spine crawling, he shrugged his shoulders as if to cast off a cloak of dread. He stepped down from the porch of the store and walked on down the muddy street.

There was a gap between two of the houses that bordered the street, and he turned his steps that way. His course led him up a long slope, where massed vines impeded his progress like writhing snakes.

Slimy moss coated the stones, so that each step forward was succeeded by a slippery half step backward. Progress was slow, but created inside him a stubborn desire to conquer the climb toward that mysterious house on the hill.

Up in the sky, the clouds were parting under the impetus of a rising wind, and the face of a gibbous moon was gradually being uncovered. Its increasing light revealed a path into which Marlowe turned his steps from the more hazardous ground that he had been traversing.

Flying foxes—stringy black clouds—floated across the moon's face. They looked like long-winged bats, and Marlowe felt a chilling sensation pass over him. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks in the center of a glade.

THERE was something not a cloud in the sky just over the roof of the mysterious house he was approaching. A bat—one of the biggest John Marlowe had ever seen. It dipped low, did not appear again. Well, nothing so strange about that. Bats existed, some larger than others.

The lawyer started on again, but a moment later reeled back more steps

than he had taken. His throat became constricted so that the cry that impulsively rose from his lungs was smothered before it materialized.

A woman was coming toward John Marlowe, a woman with a face as white as alabaster. Loosely dressed platinum-blond hair matched the pallor of her skin. She was garbed in a flowing, light-colored dress that made her appear to float over the damp grass.

At sight of the man her large eyes widened. They were dark pools of fathomless depths in the creamy whiteness of her face. Horror struck Marlowe dumb as his startled gaze held to those dilated eyes. There was a smear of blood on her full-lipped mouth!

CHAPTER III

A Guest in Hell

WHEN the first paralysis of fear had vanished, he lifted his hat and said:

"Sorry—you startled me. I'm afraid I have—stared at you."

The woman's response came from deep down inside of her, a soft-purring voice that had a hypnotic effect on Marlowe.

"You're a stranger here?" she queried. Then her red lips curved into an inscrutable smile. "Who are you?"

"My name is Marlowe—John Marlowe. I—" He wondered if the woman's eyes flickered momentarily.

She spoke quickly. "I'm Sybil Cordoba. My—my husband and I—live here. The natives do not like us—much. They're very suspicious of us. Perhaps they have talked to you?"

She raised her hand, wiped her lips with a filmy handkerchief, then explained in her soft voice:

"A rose thorn pierced me. I pressed it to my lips to drink the dew— The people—what did they say?"

John Marlowe parried the direct question with the remark: "Oh, they are very primitive people."

The woman's eyes seemed to be cutting through and through him. Once Marlowe had stepped on a snake; he felt the same way now. His whole being was full of repugnance. Yet he told himself that he was being colossally foolish.

He was allowing the superstition that gripped the people of Orm, and his own experience of finding the skeleton of George Stewart, to interfere with his sane reasoning. He looked at the woman who had introduced herself as Sybil Cordoba and said:

"I have no place to stay. I wonder—"

Her white face lighted up. "Of course," she said eagerly. "My husband will welcome you, I am sure. We are very lonesome—at times."

She glided to his side without making a sound, placed a hand on his arm. It seemed to be weightless, and Marlowe tried to fight off that gnawing sensation of horror.

"It is very rough—the path," the woman explained. "It is so easy to fall—for a stranger."

John Marlowe walked on toward the big house, Sybil Cordoba moving like a wraith at his very elbow. The thought came to him that if she fell, her body would go into dust like that of one exposed to the air after centuries of imprisonment in a mummy case.

Why did such ideas persist, he thought impatiently. But when the wind blew strands of her hair across his cheek, he shuddered. Once she stumbled, and he caught her in his arms. Beads of sweat seeped out through the skin on his forehead.

She was so light—too light—as she fell against him. As they resumed their way toward the house on the path that passed between two clumps of rhododendrons, she turned her eyes toward him.

"You are so big—and strong, Senor Marlowe," she said gently. "Ah, if I could have but a little of your strength! Just a little—"

The moon seemed to have brightened to a leprous hue when they reached the clearing where the house

stood. It was a big, old-fashioned structure with many gables. In condition it was not unlike all the houses John Marlowe had seen down in the village of Orm, namely, crumbling away from age and lack of care.

A blind banged and hinges creaked as they drew near, and Marlowe looked up at the blackened chimney, half expecting to see a bat. The boards of the steps groaned under his weight, but Sybil Cordoba moved as lightly across the veranda as she had across the wooded glade when he first saw her.

SHE preceded him into the house. When John Marlowe followed her, he found himself in a gloomy hallway, lighted inadequately and giving off an odor of decay. Cobwebs floated lazily from the ceiling.

"It is such a big house, Senor," the woman apologized. "We have no servants. You will please to excuse some things. We have done our best, and it suits our purpose—"

John Marlowe did not speak, because he could not. He was wondering if there was a cellar under him; if there was a grave down there that had not been covered. He shook himself impatiently. He had to get a grip on himself, stop imagining things.

But his better judgment was submerged again under a barrage of self-questions. Why were these people here? Why did they live in this dank, tacky house? Why—But Senora Cordoba was calling to him in that strange, faraway voice of hers. She held out a pale, almost transparent hand and led him over the sill.

Marlowe saw that the room was large, and apparently had been a drawing room of some magnificence. But the furniture was old and showed many worn places. Moth-eaten rugs were scattered over the floor, which had a plain-colored carpet tacked at the four walls, so that no wood showed. A few oil paintings, bedimmed by age and dust, adorned the walls. The wallpaper had been expensive in its time, but now it was cracked and faded.

"Ah, good evening, sir!" John Marlowe's head swung around in the direction of the voice. Sitting in a large chair near a stone fireplace was a man who wore glasses with abnormally thick lenses. They made his eyes appear to bulge far out of his head.

His massive bald head rested on almost neckless broad shoulders, and Marlowe could see that his body narrowed quickly into thin legs, so that he would not be tall when standing up. A small goatee served to emphasize heavy jowls, and a long upper lip made an oddly small nose fade into further insignificance.

"You are welcome to what we have to offer—isn't he, darling?" her husband said.

Sybil Cordoba smiled at John Marlowe, and sank slowly into a chair. The chair was obviously rickety, but it made no sound. The woman's dress billowed out around her, causing Marlowe to wonder, subconsciously, if there was more than a skeleton beneath it. He saw now that it was pale green in color, and that her eyes were of greenish hue.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," he began, "but there is no other place in the village, they tell me. I did not know what else to do."

Cordoba gestured with his hands. The visitor was surprised by those hands. They should have been pudgy, but instead they were long, with tapering fingers. Everything and everyone around Orm seemed to be unnatural.

"We welcome you, sir—indeed, yes," the host assured Marlowe. "You are tired, perhaps?"

"And hungry?" supplemented his pale wife. John Marlowe nodded.

"Tonight, you are weary—you do not have to talk," Cordoba went on. "There is a comfortable room upstairs. Sybil, you will show him to the room? I will get the food—a glass of wine."

The woman rose like an apparition, walked to the mantel and took a candlestick from it. She raised it above her head and looked toward Marlowe, smiling. The candle-light made her

pale face look actually ghastly.

"I trust you will sleep soundly, sir. I shall not be long in bringing you something to eat and drink." The man rose from his chair and Marlowe saw that, as he had deducted, Senor Cordoba was not a tall man.

THE guest followed his hostess up a long flight of stairs and down a corridor to a door that stood half open. There she handed him the candle and whispered:

"Good night." Like a wraith, she turned and left him.

Scalp lifting, John Marlowe entered the room. There was a big bed, with a canopy over it. The tester hung in shreds, but the bed was freshly made and looked clean. A dresser and an old rush-bottomed chair made up the other furniture.

One window looked down over the sleepy, terror-ridden village of Orm. Marlowe looked out, knew that eyes filled with dread were peering out of darkened windows down there.

He was half undressed when a knock came at the door. In response to his "Come in," Cordoba opened the door and entered with a tray. There was bread and butter and cold meat on it, as well as an almost empty decanter and a full glass of wine.

"There you are, Marlowe," he said. "Best I can offer you. I don't have guests—often. Do you think it strange you should find people like us in Orm? Strange you should be here, Marlowe!"

He smiled with his lips, but his eyes did not change.

"Everyone has a reason for what he does, *si?* I do not ask what you do here. I do not tell my reasons—though they are many. I—well, good night, Marlowe." He went out and shut the door.

A small draught of cold air hit John Marlowe, and he felt as if it went right through him. Nevertheless, he was hungry, so he sat down and ate of the bread and meat. Desperately he tried to shake off his persistent feeling of terror.

It so numbed his hands as he finished undressing that his fingers fum-

bled at the buttons. His heart thumped until he felt sure he could hear the echoes of its pulsations.

But gradually the wine gave him new strength, and when he climbed into bed, an utter weariness seized him and he was not long in falling to sleep. . . .

A blind outside Marlowe's window began to slam against the side of the house, but he did not awaken. He dreamed terrible things, and cried out chokingly in his sleep—

The huge bat came in through the window, and mocked him with its glittering, beady eyes. He tried to lift himself from the pillow, but it was as if he had been glued to the mattress. The horrible thing fluttered to the bed, stood on his chest.

Billows of damp mist came in through the window like smoke, and seemed to fill the room. A soft, purring voice was in his ear. A hand that carried no weight stroked his face. A sudden stab of pain clutched at his throat. He tried to tear the horrible thing away from him.

It clung more fiercely, and John Marlowe was gagging with horror. He felt his strength ebbing. A silky laugh was in his ear, and that terrible, drawing sensation at his throat persisted. Suddenly there was a flutter of wings, and the thing went away from him. It flew to the window sill, turned to look at him, and its mouth was red with blood.

Slowly the bat's head underwent a metamorphosis. It increased in size, became a woman's head. The face was pale, and the eyes were big and gave off a greenish light. Sybil Cordoba's face! Her red lips curved into a smile, and then her transparent cheeks began to fill out and a rosy hue swept over them.

The mist seeping in clouded that face, enveloped it. There was nothing at the window.

John Marlowe awoke with the echo of his terrified cry in his ears, his body drenched with sweat. For a long time he sat upright in bed, every muscle tense, before he could convince himself that he had had a horrible dream.

THE moonlight was streaming into the room when he forced himself out of bed. He walked to the window, saw the little village of Orm sleeping peacefully in the hollow. There was no evidence of anything amiss.

He retraced his steps to the bed and became conscious of a weak sensation. His head seemed congested, and was aching dully.

The lawyer decided to light the candle his hostess had used to illuminate the way upstairs. In the feeble light he saw the supper tray and the empty wine glass, just where he had left them. Nothing in the room had been disturbed.

Reassured, he was about to extinguish the light and swing into bed, when his eyes suddenly stabbed toward the pillow. There was a dark stain upon it, and sheer terror had its way with Marlowe then. There was no mistaking the fact that blood had soaked into the linen! He put a finger to that stain, and it was moist to his touch.

"No!" he choked out huskily. "No, it cannot be. It could not happen!"

He staggered to the dresser, held the candle close to the mirror. His horrified white face was reflected. He felt of his throat with shaky fingers. There were no marks to be found.

John Marlowe laughed a bit hysterically, and groped his way back to the bed. But the blood was there! *That* was not imagination. He was wide awake—was not dreaming any more, yet he felt as if there was a nightmare horror creeping down the dark corridor toward him.

He expected that door to swing inward, to admit a pale-faced woman who would glide into the room with the flush of health on her cadaverous face. Health taken from his own bloodstream! Out there she had said:

"You look so big—and strong. If I could have but a little—"

Marlowe could not sleep any more. He thought of the woman from the grave walking through the house somewhere. Walking through cobwebs, without breaking their silken strands, passing a mirror that did not

reflect her image.

For a long time he sat on the edge of the bed, mouth half open, senses strained to catch every sound. His breathing was quick and labored. His roving eyes finally lighted on the floor near the bed. A piece of rotting cloth from the tester stirred, as a fitful warm breeze came in through the window.

In the dust was an object that caused Marlowe's eyes to widen and arrested his breathing for several seconds. Heart solidifying, the man bent forward and picked up the stub of a partly-smoked cigarette. It had been bent into a semi-circle without splitting any of the flimsy paper. On that cigarette was the name *Gold Flake*.

Marlowe knew then that his friend, George Stewart, had slept in that bed. Many times he had watched the journalist slowly bend an unfinished cigarette between his thumb and fingers. It had been his habit to do it carefully so as not to break the wrapper, and he had always smiled, showing that gold tooth, when the feat had been accomplished.

John Marlowe was not ashamed of his terror now. Stewart had been the other guest—and Stewart was dead! How had he died? The lawyer did not want to believe what seemed to be the only solution. How could things like that really happen?

A woman needing the life blood of another—and taking it? Draining that blood from a drugged man's throat in the dead of night, until—He had to stop thinking. In that direction lay madness. He had to think now of getting out of here.

He could almost see her there in front of him, feasting her eyes upon him. The scarlet mouth would be curling in that peculiar manner of hers. George Stewart must have seen her like that, too. Now he was dead, and they had concealed his body inside the trunk of a big dead tree.

WAS a vampire such as Bram Stoker, author of "Dracula," had created in the book a live actuality? Marlowe's better judgment scoffed at such an idea, the while he

sat there, sweating with horror. Yet what other answer was there? Natives in the village made crosses out of wolfsbane. A child had died. Another—

The guest in this house of horror felt that his life was in the balance. The first law of nature began to counterbalance the horror that was petrifying him. Slowly he dressed; then, quietly pushing open the door, stepped out into the dark corridor.

Foul, dank air swept out of the shadows and assaulted his nostrils. Blending with it was an alien odor that the trembling man had difficulty in identifying, as he paused outside the door of the room of doom. A shaft of light knifed across the dusty floor of the corridor.

A door was opening without the faintest sound! Horror gripped John Marlowe in iron talons, wrung him to limpness. As the strength oozed out of his fingers, his bag fell to the floor with a thud.

CHAPTER IV

The Blood of Life

SYBIL CORDOBA stood framed in the doorway, her dead-white face fixed upon him, though he stood in shadow. She wore a filmy negligée, and her platinum tresses streamed down her back and over her shoulders like millions of spider threads. There was no red flush in her cheeks, and in the candle-light that bathed her she looked like a corpse risen from its coffin.

Only her compelling eyes seemed alive. They were dilating so widely that none of their greenish hue was visible. Suddenly a terrible shriek burst from her throat, and John Marlowe, following the direction of her glance, saw that his bag had tipped over on its side.

The impact of the fall had made it belch forth its hideous contents—the skull of George Stewart. It lay grinning hideously, with the candle-light revealing the gold tooth.

The echoes of the strange woman's scream kept resounding in the far reaches of the old house. Marlowe finally tore his gaze from that grinning skull and looked at the woman. He forced himself to say to her:

"Y—you've seen him smile before? Stewart was a guest here, you she-devil! You killed him, took him out there—" His voice was cracked, and he choked on the words.

The woman's face was ghastly, and into the depths of her sinister eyes had crept a flash of terror. One of her transparent hands moved with incredible swiftness. It seemed to lose itself in the folds of her negligée, and reappear like the head of a darting snake.

An ugly automatic was clutched in that delicate hand. John Marlowe wondered why he felt no fear of it. Perhaps it was because he knew that he was dealing with something almost human now. The walking dead do not carry guns.

A jerky laugh came to his lips. There is only so much room for anything, even terror, in a man's system.

"You fool!" Senora Cordoba rasped in an entirely human voice. "You had a chance, Marlowe, a chance to leave here—alive! But now you have to die. You know—too much."

John Marlowe forced himself to respond. "You did kill him, then? Why did you do it?"

The woman's scarlet lips made a red gash in her pale face as they spread out in an enigmatic smile.

"You—will—never—know, John Marlowe." She came toward him then, moving like a thing detached.

"I'm going to kill you. In a few seconds you will—"

A booming voice cut through the darkness, spun John Marlowe half-way around.

"Sybil, don't kill him! *You* are the fool!"

Out of the darkness at the end of the corridor moved a blob of white. Into the path of candle-light walked the massive-shouldered, bald-headed man. His bloated face was smiling, and his porcine eyes were fixed upon the woman, not upon their guest.

It was the man's garb that shocked Marlowe into immobility. He wore a soiled white surgeon's coat that reached to his knees. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing great hairy arms that smelled of a chemical.

His voice became soft and gentle as he spoke to the woman. He reached out and took the gun from her grasp, continuing to smile at her strangely. The pallid face of the woman momentarily lighted up with an expression of unholy glee.

Cordoba wheeled about and faced John Marlowe, the gun clutched in his hand. No longer was he smiling, and his voice was metallic.

"Sybil would have been a fool, my friend," he said, "if she had pulled the trigger, for she would have killed *her-self*. She *has* to have a man's blood—all of it!" He shrieked the last words, and madness was apparent in his eyes.

MARLOWE felt that the horror had reached him now. He felt that death was near. He could read it in the twisted face of the man with the goatee, the swollen jowls and a laugh like that of a satyr.

A gun was in his pocket, but his muscles had become sluggish with the rising terror that filled the house like smoke from a fire. He knew he had been too slow in striking for it, just as Cordoba leaped in and clubbed him with the automatic.

His brain seemed to explode with a blinding flash of white light. A brief stabbing pain and then—blackness. As he sank down and down into a pit that seemed to have no bottom, a mocking laugh cut through his numbed senses. It became fainter, fainter, suddenly died. . . .

John Marlowe opened his eyes, then blinked as light pierced them like white-hot needles. His head was thudding with pain, and his throat was as dry as parchment. Strange objects swam in front of his tortured vision.

Slowly they took shape; stopped spinning, and became a crude board table, with straps riveted to the sides of it; a shelf littered with glass receptacles; a retort bubbling over a flame.

A little crucible of blood stood beside it.

He swung his eyes to the side, despite the pain it caused, and saw Cordoba watching him. The fiend was sitting on a high stool, and the woman lay on a couch nearby, looking like a corpse upon its bier.

Cordoba laughed silkily. "Vampires—that is what they call us in the village, Marlowe. It is not so that we drink blood. We take it in a very scientific sort of way. If Dracula had been a scientist, Marlowe, he would have scorned holy roods and monk's-hood.

"Strange coincidence, my friend, that your blood, like Stewart's, is the kind that runs in dear Sybil's veins."

He paused, and the smile fled from his face. Sweat poured from Marlowe's temples as realization slowly reached his numbed brain. He strained at the ropes that bound his wrists to an iron post.

"I will tell you why we came here, Marlowe. I love this woman better than life. She has an incurable disease and cannot live without blood. Once she almost died. I could not get her the blood she needed. But then I found a man—a donor. He would give only a few ounces. So I arranged things in such a way as to take all he had. Consequently—"

He shrugged his shoulders, gestured with his hands and smiled wickedly. "We had to go away because the police were suspicious. We came here to hide."

A dry laugh came from his thick-lipped mouth, and he stroked his goatee with those long, slim fingers and grinned satanically.

"No better place in the world to hide, my friend. We do not want to leave here, because who will find us? So you will die—because you know much, and because you have the blood type that I need. Your life for hers, Marlowe—it is a small sacrifice.

"We have modern times—we keep the blood fresh until needed. Stewart—his blood lasted quite a long time. But not long enough." He sighed.

"You see how she looks now. She is very pale—like a corpse, Marlowe.

She will be a corpse unless she receives a transfusion. Are you interested in modern medical science, Marlowe?"

"Let me loose, you fiend!" screeched his victim. "You can have half of my blood. Take what you need, but don't drain the last drop of blood from a living man. It's—it's inhuman, Cordoba! Only a beast—"

"A man can become a beast to save the thing he loves more than anything else in the world, my friend," the maniac slurred, as though he were enjoying his victim's frenzy.

HE laughed mockingly. "Last night I took blood from the median-basilic vein in your arm—while you slept. I brought it here and found that your blood is one of the four specific groups that run in the channels of man, the group akin to the thin blood that is hardly sufficient to keep the one I love alive.

"I will take your blood, Senor, treat it with sodium citrate to prevent coagulation as it flows from your body. It will be kept in paraffin-coated containers at the right temperature. Very interesting, is it not? Hah, in a way I *am* a vampire!

"I take the blood of a man while he sleeps. Those fools in Orm believe in anything—they still live in the dark ages. Once I made a mistake—almost. I lured a little girl here, and while she slept under the influence of a sleeping draught that I gave her, I drained blood from her arm.

"She was well enough when she went home, but the silly fools had kept her undernourished. She could not afford to lose that blood—and too bad it was not the right kind of blood." He shrugged.

"After that, the natives down there feared us. A cat scratches a child while she sleeps, and they say it is the woman I love who—"

Marlowe fought off the wave of horror that threatened his consciousness. Desperation grew to mammoth proportions within him. In a few minutes he would be strapped to a table and a knife would cut into his flesh.

Cordoba would bare a vein or an

artery and pierce it— He looked at the woman on the couch and wondered if he were still dreaming. Was that hideous nightmare still in progress?

Sybil Cordoba seemed so devoid of life, but when one of her hands moved slightly, Marlowe knew she still breathed. Palsied with terror, he watched while Cordoba went over to her and pressed an ear to her lips.

"In a few hours, my sweet, you will have color in your cheeks again. Your lips will not feel cold against my face." He turned to look at the trussed-up lawyer.

"You see, my friend, it is only to save the one I love. The first man I killed—for her—it made me very sick. Stewart—I did not feel that way about him. He cursed me until the last ounce of strength had oozed out of his veins.

"He called my Sybil shameful things—I did not mind seeing the swine die. But you—you are very much afraid. You do not want to die. I suffer a little compunction, my friend, but unless you die—she dies—"

Cordoba shrugged again; then, as he rose suddenly from his stooped position over the reclining woman, he reeled a little. Marlowe saw the man's face blanch. He saw Cordoba paw at his forehead with his long, surgeon fingers.

"Merely a little heart affliction, Marlowe," he explained as though he were speaking of another person. "But this little bottle—a bit of its contents and the attack is over. Wolfsbane, my dear Marlowe. Strange that it should destroy vampires but keeps Ramon Cordoba alive.

"Cardiac hypertrophy—that is it, my friend. For that the wolfsbane is good. Hah, a little water in the glass," he went on, suiting the action to the word, "and then a drop out of this bottle, and I drink. Then I am all right. Ramon Cordoba is a doctor, Marlowe."

John Marlowe watched while Cordoba took a bottle from a shelf over his work bench, measured out a tiny drop of aconite and put it in the glass

of water. He was returning it to the low shelf when a sound came from below.

Hinges creaked and a door slammed shut, its hollow boom driving along the halls. Cordoba stiffened, set the glass down, and reached into his pocket for the automatic.

"I shall see if we are to be disturbed," he clipped with a steely flash in his eyes.

"You will wait here, Mr. Marlowe?" He laughed mockingly, his eyes dancing with madness as he went out softly and shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER V

Monkshood!

JOHAN MARLOWE had a precious moment or two in which to try to save his life. An almost hysterical laugh rose to his lips as he strained at his bonds. The floor under his feet was unsound, and with every convulsive move he made it quaked.

He saw the tiny bottle on the work bench totter. It was right over the glass that Cordoba had set down on the bench. The man had not yet replaced the stopper.

Face sweating, body clammy, Marlowe shook the boards under his feet. The tiny bottle teetered and he husked a prayer. Aconite, deadly monkshood; more than a drop was fatal to dead beings that walk and take the blood from other people's bodies.

He choked back a sudden rush of mirth, kept pounding the floor, his eyes on that bottle on the shelf. Suddenly he became rigid as the bottle fell, neck forward. Several drops of white liquid splashed into the glass.

Marlowe wanted to shout and laugh, but he had to fight against it. If Cordoba noticed that bottle— The man's boots were already making a scuffle outside the door. The bald-headed, heavily jowled man with the terrible eyes came in.

He was breathing laboriously, and his one thought seemed to be to drink the dose he had fixed for himself.

Without a glance toward Marlowe he clutched at the glass and downed its contents. Then he leaned against the bench and stared at the alabasterlike face of Sybil Cordoba, who lay on the couch with eyes closed.

John Marlowe fought to conceal the triumph that was in his being when the mad doctor turned away from the woman to look at his victim.

The man's eyes burned feverishly as he said:

"It is time, my friend." He reached for a grim-looking instrument, then seemed to stagger slightly. Catching himself, he braced his squat but heavy body against the work table which had the heavy leather straps attached to it.

He clutched at his stomach, swung a face beaded with sweat toward John Marlowe. Horror was in his eyes as he swept them toward the little bottle that lay on its side on the shelf above the bench.

"Hah!" the lawyer ripped out crazily. "Wolfsbane, Cordoba, is death to vampires! Take my blood, will you, you devil out of hell? Not with that much stuff in your system. You feel the pain—that burning pain—in your stomach? Your tongue is becoming paralyzed, and you are unable to speak?"

Marlowe laughed mockingly in hysterical relief. "Your mind will be clear to the last, Cordoba," he flung out, "but in a half hour you will start to retch—if your heart holds out that long. You feel the numbness in your mouth? There is a God in heaven, Cordoba! You've found out! What, you cannot speak? Ha-ah!"

Cordoba's lips moved but he could utter no sound. In a wild burst of fury he snatched up a wicked-looking scalpel and lunged at Marlowe. The lawyer's feet were not tied, and he kicked out with a heavy boot as the maniacal doctor came near.

The man went crashing against his work bench and upset a bubbling retort. Steam filled the room for a few seconds and when it cleared, Cordoba was on his knees, eyes wide, filled with terror. He crawled toward the woman, who seemed too weak to move,

and Marlowe fought desperately to loosen his bonds.

"I am dying—dying, my sweet," the man babbled wildly. "Soon you, too, will—die. His blood—I have not the—strength any more to—Sybil, my dearest one—forgive me. I have been—stupid, my Sybil. Wolfsbane—it has destroyed me."

The bald-headed man groveled on the floor and writhed in pain. Marlowe marveled that his heart kept beating; several drops of the deadly aconite had fallen into that glass of water that Cordoba had gulped.

THE woman struggled to sit up, stared blankly at things around her. Slowly comprehension crept into her catlike eyes, and she screamed with horror. Death was fanning her pallid, sunken cheeks with its cold breath.

She knew that life was but a few feet away from her, life that ran in the veins of John Marlowe, but the man who could transfer that life to her was in the throes of death at her feet.

Strength born of desperation lifted her off the couch and onto her feet. Sanity had been shaken long ago; now it was gone entirely. That man there—big and strong. Rich red blood running in his veins. Life to her, and she did not want to die. She was beautiful and still young!

In a frenzy she clawed toward Marlowe, her white, transparent hand seeking to tear at his throat where the blood pulsated. Sharp finger-nails raked at the struggling, terror-stricken man's flesh.

Superhuman strength came to him then, and he heaved mightily and the knots gave. Another mighty wrench and he was staggering across the room, a free man.

Face distorted now, Sybil Cordoba lunged at him. Her red lips were twisted out of shape, her eyes were twin pools of green madness. Out of the night there came a babble of voices, and the black rectangle of the open window became suffused with a flickering, blood-red light.

Marlowe leaped to the window and

looked out. A grim cavalcade was sneaking its way up the hill. The faces of the villagers of Orm gleamed whitely in the light of many torches. In the van was an aged hag of a woman carrying a long, pointed stake.

Marlowe laughed and spun halfway around. Evidently the people of Orm had decided to destroy the thing in the big house on the hill. They expected to find an open coffin, did they? Poor ignorant fools! They would have been too late to save John Marlowe, if—

His eardrums vibrated when a piercing scream ripped out of the window and halted those steadily plodding villagers in their tracks.

Sybil Cordoba sensed the reason for those sounds out on the hillside. She read her doom in the flare of flickering torches.

White-blond hair streaming from her head like a billow of smoke, she dashed to the side of the bald-headed man in the surgeon's coat, seemed to shrink to the size of a doll in her flowing robe as she threw herself upon him.

"Wake up—wake up—please, my darling!" she cried. "They are coming to—kill me. They have a stake to drive into my heart—oh, speak to me! Oh God!"

A cry of utter terror broke loose from her throat, and John Marlowe staggered across the room to the door, his soul sick. There he paused to look back, and was horrified to see the crazed woman reel across the room to the window.

It was a low sill. She swayed there momentarily while Marlowe was trying to bridge the gap, but a table intervened.

An ear-splitting shriek filled the air as Sybil Cordoba pitched forward into space. John Marlowe closed his eyes as the sound echoed and re-echoed, then was still.

On shaking legs he made his way down the corridor. He came to where George Stewart's grinning skull lay on the floor. He wrapped it up in the shirt that had formerly concealed it. Then he made his way downstairs.

Two gaunt, hard-eyed men stood in

the hall, the flare of their torches making the cobwebs over their heads appear like tendrils of gossamer.

"Yo' won't be a-doubtin' now, stranger," said one of them in an awe-struck voice:

"Yo' kin see her outside ef yo' want. A fence stake went right through her heart. She's daid fer keeps now, stranger, an' I reckon yo' didn't miss dyin' by much."

JOHAN MARLOWE leaned against the wall and wiped his steaming, clammy brow with his sleeve. He remembered that decrepit fence that had bordered the edge of the property adjoining the mystery house.

He tried not to visualize the appalling thing that must have happened. That beautiful, fragile body was impaled there. He knew that there was no use to tell these villagers the truth of the last few hours of terror. They would not believe.

He looked at them with eyes that were a little dulled. He saw that bony old crone thrust her head inside the door, and her yellowed, tusklike teeth gleamed in the flickering light as she cackled:

"She'll walk no more in Orm. Come an' look, stranger, heah!"

"Better git out of here," intoned a bearded man, and he threw a blazing torch into the hall. The fire instantly licked at the rotting hangings as John Marlowe stumbled out into the dawn.

"It'll burn an' burn," screeched the hag. "This house of the devil. Git her an' throw her in thar, too."

Against the mob John Marlowe would have been impotent even had he had normal strength after his ordeal. Recognizing this dully, he groped his way down the slope, horror still riding him hard, the grisly skull wrapped in cloth under his arm.

No one would miss those two benighted souls—the doctor who had taken life more than once so that someone whom he loved might live; the woman who had not been loath to take the blood drained from his victims.

Cordoba, the scientific Dracula—
(Concluded on page 109)

ZOMBIES NEVER DIE



A hoarse cry rasped from his throat as he saw the dead face.

**A Fiend in Human Shape Struggles Desperately
When Voodoo Takes a Hand to Lighten
the Burden of the Oppressed**

By RICHARD TOOKER

Author of "The Swine of Canthros," "Door of the Doomed," etc.

"I SHALL RETURN! Remember—when I return from the grave!"

Like an anthem from hell the deep voice rolled in solemn resonance from the deathbed where Ada Hadyn lay dying. There were five at her bedside, yet one only mourned sincerely. And even in the tear-brimmed eyes of hunchbacked Stephen Darrel, her son, crouched misshapenly near the head of

the bed, awe and terror glimmered chillingly as he listened to that awful prophecy from his dying mother's lips. Hideously she had lived in her declining years—and now more hideously still Ada Hadyn was dying.

Nora Darrel's budding slimness scarcely quivered to the death chords of her mother's voice as she stood listlessly at the head of the bed. Her dream-filmed blue eyes were fixed in a

peculiar preoccupation upon the wasted, gaping face of the woman who once had been a comely, sweet-souled matron. Behind the girl a tall, gaunt figure hovered like the shade of a fiend awaiting the freedom of a soul he owned.

Lance Hadyn, stepfather of Nora and Stephen, showed no sign of emotion at the death of his wife. A faint, bitter smile curved his blue-black lips. His bald, bony brow shelved deep-set eyes that roved shiftily to the willowy form of Nora—eyes that lingered on the youth-flushed beauty of the living so starkly contrasted with the sinking pallor of the dead.

A long, shuddering gasp—the sunken body seemed to gather itself in one last, desperate effort to rise, then sank back, breathlessly still, the grey eyes staring glassily, as if in mute rebuke of those who should have mourned.

"It is over."

In the voice of Dr. Jepson, stout, bearded, standing at the foot of the bed, seemed a sigh of relief. Yet there was an oddly expectant glint in the doctor's somber brown eyes as he glanced to the bedroom door. Almost filling the door frame with her huge body, an old black woman stood muttering a mystic incantation, her widened eyes raised whitely to the deity she invoked.

"MOTHER! Don't leave me, Mother," Steve Darrel moaned. He plucked timidly at the bed covers with his broad, over-developed hands. He alone seemed not to see the ghastly distortions of that body that lumped and sagged beneath the rumpled quilts. "Quiet, boy—make way for the doctor."

Lance Hadyn's command was like a snarl. He reached out with one boar-haired hand and clutched the hunchback's thickened shoulder. The young man shrank from the crushing pain of his stepfather's grip, slunk back whimpering into the huge and comforting arms of the old Negress.

"Don't you cry, honey," the old black woman murmured. "You heerd what she say—she come back!"

Nora turned languidly to the door, started out. She seemed to creep on

her dainty feet, like a sleep-walker or a girl in a trance. Steve Darrel reached out and tugged at her dress. She paused, looked down at her deformed brother with an oddly dazed indifference.

"Don't you care?" Darrel whispered. "Aren't you sorry?" His voice trembled, broke, as he saw no real comprehension in Nora's placid eyes. Only a petulant annoyance. "You don't care," he sobbed. "He's got you, too!"

A softening gleam of realization lighted Nora's eyes, then Lance Hadyn stepped between her and the hunchback, shoving the Negress aside.

"We want no hysterics." Lance Hadyn looked down austere upon the hunchback. "And don't let me tell you again!"

Darrel's square, strong head drooped sullenly, but there was a blaze of resentment in his clear, fine eyes as he saw his stepfather turn to Nora, bend familiarly near her.

"Go to your room, Nora dear." Hadyn's voice was not fatherly in its husky tenderness. "We will talk over the future later."

"Yes—Lance." The girl's pouted lips hesitated at the given name as she turned obediently to the gloomy, curved stairs that led up out of the musty, antique-furnished parlor of a house that had stood since the days of slavery.

Hadyn turned arrogantly to the old Negress when Nora had gone.

"As for you, you clumsy old fraud, Mrs. Hadyn has no further need of you, and I certainly have not. Get out of this house immediately and never let me see your face again. I'll send over your silly charms and potions by one of the gardeners."

An odd smile parted the thick, red lips of Hester Driggs as she moved with all the grace and swiftness of a lioness across the shadowed parlor to the massive walnut panels of the front door. She turned back suddenly. Her eyes crossed hideously as she looked directly at the imperious master of traditional Hadyn house. She made a furtive sign in the air with flicking, dark fingers.

Her deep, musical voice was like a ritual chant as she called softly: "Zombies never die!"

Hadyn laughed harshly, clenched one bony fist as he made a threatening stride toward the Negress. Then the door closed with a muffled shock behind "Black Hester."

LANCE HADYN turned condescendingly to the grieving hunchbacked young man.

"I think you had best go to your room, lad." His tones were a conciliating purr. "It is unfortunate, of course, that your mother had to be taken, but even you ought to realize that her life was a torment. There were mistakes in her girlhood—"

"Stop!" Darrel's voice was the hoarse scream of a soul tormented beyond endurance. "I won't listen to a word against Mother from you. Why was her life a torment in this devil's house? You know why—you who made her an ugly old crone, made her hate her own children! And I know how you did it—how you destroyed her soul, twisted it with your psychic tricks. I know how you made me what I am before I was born—psychometry, the power of suggestion."

"I read your forbidden books when you were away. I know how a man like you could use his knowledge for evil—for revenge! You made even Nora hate me, see only my twisted body. But you forgot one thing, Lance Hadyn—my mind! Nature gave me a mind older than my years for what you did to me before I was born. Yes, I know now that you even arranged that accident before I was born!"

Darrel leaped up like a great toad at the slightly sneering face above him, his long arms shaking clenched fists.

"And you know what I think, Lance Hadyn? You killed Mother as surely as if you had done it with a knife!"

Lance Hadyn chuckled like a huge, grey vulture inspecting a kill.

"You flatter my ability as an amateur psychologist, my boy. But supposing your ridiculous accusations were true. Why would I do such terrible things?"

"Because you hated Mother!" The hunchback's high-pitched voice was a merciless lash of scorn. "She married my Father in preference to you. You never forgot. You wanted revenge—

an amusing revenge. My Father died, left us penniless. I was to be born; Nora was a baby. You offered us security, a home. You lied to my Mother, said you still loved her, and all you wanted was to hurt her. Through the years you drove her to insanity with your cunning tricks of suggestion. And when you could make her suffer no longer you killed her!"

Hadyn laughed low and nervously. There was a ring of gloating confession in his suave derision. His long, horse-like face quickly assumed an expression of injured dignity.

"YOUR imaginings are absurd," he said. "Go to your room and rest. Your grief has quite unhinged you. Everyone knows that Lance Hadyn is the soul of courtesy. Stern, perhaps, but just."

"Just!" Darrel's rage had subsided to a cold intensity. "Yes, you are just—on the surface. That's one secret of your cursed power over people. Your deepest cruelties are disguised as kindnesses. And I'll go to my room, dear Stepfather, after I've finished. Oh, yes, you are stronger than I—you can kill me if you will, but I'll have my say first. There's another reason why you killed Mother in a way that the law could never hold you for. You want Nora!"

"Mother still fought you in her feeble way; she still stood between you and Nora. Now, with Mother gone, and Nora's true nature twisted by your devilish undermining, you think you will have your way. But you'll not—as long as I live. I'll kill you before I'll let you have Nora!"

"Careful—careful, my boy." Hadyn's tones were crackling with an icy chill. "You are likely to follow your mother to an early grave if you let these wild fancies carry you away. You know I could have you confined in a sanatorium for the insane if I wished. These absurd charges of yours would be proof in plenty of your condition."

"To those who can't dream what you really are!" Darrel's voice was choked with tears of despair.

Lance Hadyn turned with an air of wounded resignation to the stairs as he said softly, "Have your way, lad. Tell

your story to Dr. Jepson—if he hasn't heard it all from the death room. His testimony will help when I find it necessary to put you where you belong."

Darrel glared up at the tall, powerful figure slowly mounting the stairs. In the black silk lounging robe he habitually wore around the house and in his study, Lance Hadyn looked more than ever like an incarnate Satan. Darrel knew his stepfather was going up to see Nora. A cunning thought tensed his quivering form.

"Wait!" he called sharply.

Hadyn paused and looked back languidly. Darrel pointed one long arm up at his tormentor.

"Remember her last words," he whispered. "She's coming back. Mother's coming back from the grave to haunt you!"

Hadyn's low laugh was mockery. "The dead never return, my boy." His voice was a hollow knell to hope. "Never!"

Darrel whirled to the door with a sob, ran outside. He wanted to shut from his ears that maddening thump of Lance Hadyn's strides as he mounted the stairs. Nora was up there—a Nora who was and was not the sister he had known in childhood. Lance Hadyn had changed her, cunningly perverted her desires to his will.

He, Darrel, must do something for her—but what? His poor warped body was no match for Lance Hadyn physically. And who would believe the testimony of a "queer" hunchback against that of a rich and powerful scion of an old family?

The warm sunlight of the Southland day soothed him a little as he turned up the lane toward Black Hester's shanty. Black Hester might help. At least she could sympathize.

"**O**H, GOD," he muttered as he hunched along the cypress-shaded lane that led to the cottage of the Negress. "Strike him dead before he touches Nora!"

Slowly he recovered an outward composure as he hastened along the lane. The drowsy hum of bees, the songs of thrush and hangbird reassured him that life was still good, that there was hope

even in these darkest moments. An unnatural life Darrel had lived in the gloomy chambers of the ancestral home of the Hadyns. Much to himself in his affliction, he had brooded and studied, solving the poison plot that had clouded his mother's life and now threatened the future of his sister Nora.

Lance Hadyn, dilettante psychologist and dabbler in mysticism, had perverted his gifts and knowledge to subtle evil. A criminal of the mind was Lance Hadyn—Steve Darrel knew that. As his stepfather had often said, "The mind can commit no crime." Yet it had—and only a Higher Court could punish or confine the criminal.

"I'll kill him," Darrel whispered hotly. "But it won't come until after the funeral. I'm sure Nora's safe till then."

The ghostly glow of monuments through the bearded trees hushed him. He was passing the cemetery where his mother would be laid to rest. His throat swelled with pain as he realized that the mother whose tortured soul he had so faithfully loved would never return. He could not really believe she would come back.

He cried out eagerly as he saw the hedge of tall oleanders that concealed Black Hester's shanty a quarter of a mile from Hadyn house. Black Hester Driggs had served the Darrel family long and faithfully, had nursed Steve Darrel as a baby. The old Negress had never been revolted by his affliction. And she had been his mother's only intimate during the horror of the wasting years when it was believed that Ada Hadyn's mind had failed with the advance of a strange, malicious disease that had aged and twisted her body.

Like a huge, long-legged crab Darrel sprang through a hole in the hedge, scrabbled at a worn latch, stumbled through a sagging doorway into Black Hester's welcoming arms.

"Theah, theah, lamb," his old nurse comforted him. "Yo' mammy ain't dead—she jus' sleep awhile. An' she comin' back to git dat debbil. Jus' yo' wait."

Steve Darrel stole a fearful look up at Black Hester's shiny face, her rolling eyes that were two dark and alien

moons of mystery. His eyes darted around the oddly appointed "parlor" of the old Negress' house. Those withered strings of herbs swinging from the rafters, the weird curios on a curtained table—bones, skins of serpents, bowls of mystic powders. Always he had dreaded the secrets of Black Hester's life of which she seldom spoke.

"But how can she come back, Hester?" he quavered. "He said 'the dead never return' and he knows everything."

"De Lawd do His works an' sometimes the debbil he'ps him," Hester murmured.

Then she bent and whispered in his ear—whispered words that started his eyes with wonder and horror. Allusions to unwritten rites, to secrets of the living dead. Zombies! It was a terrible thing at which Black Hester hinted!

AND she was asking him to help. It seemed like sacrilege. Yet he must do his part. His mother had promised to return and Black Hester was only trying to help her.

"I'll do it, Hester," he promised. "I can't believe it will do any good, but—" He caught his breath in a sob as he twisted away to the door. "I've got to go now, Hester. I can't leave Nora alone there with him very long."

Black Hester called him back as she took something from the pocket of her checkered apron. She gave it to Darrel stealthily, and he cried out hoarsely as he saw that he held a serpent's withered head.

"Keep it," the Negress said solemnly. "Long as you have 'at in yo' pocket no ha'm can come to Mis' Nora."

With a grimace of distaste Darrel thrust the grisly amulet into a high-hung hip pocket. Then he ran out, moaning and mumbling his anxiety.

The horror of Black Hester's plot grew upon him as he hastened back along the lane. He must let Black Hester into the house that night, let her in to the corpse in the ground floor bedroom. At midnight she would come. And he must watch in the hall above to see that Lance Hadyn did not discover the intruder.

What Black Hester had hinted at was too terrible to believe. That his mother could become a zombie—a corpse that lived forever! And yet, if there was something to that old Creole superstition, what a hellish punishment Lance Hadyn would suffer!

Darrel could see cars drawn up in the vine-bowered drive of the old house as he drew near. It relieved him to see visitors. Lance Hadyn would be occupied with relatives. They would be glad Ada Hadyn was dead; another heir disposed of. He sidled through the front door and stole past the death room, unnoticed by the guests.

Dr. Jepson was in there preparing the corpse for burial. He was glad that the old doctor was in charge. He shuddered to think of strangers desecrating the body. For an instant he wanted to tell the doctor what he and Black Hester had planned, but she had sworn him to secrecy. He must tell no one.

Lance Hadyn was in the library with his brothers. Darrel heard them talking. Nora would be safe for a little while yet. He must see her, plead with her, try to make her understand her danger. In the hall above he hurried to Nora's door, knocked timidly.

"Who is it?" a fretful voice answered.

"Steve. I must see you, Nora."

"But I don't want to see you!"

"Please, Nora!"

He thought he heard an exasperated sigh before the irritable "Oh, well!"

He pushed in determinedly, shuddered as he saw that Nora was lounging carelessly in sheer negligee. Hadyn had given her that wanton garment. A strange book of life's secrets lay open beside her. His fists clenched at sight of that terrible book. Another of Hadyn's diabolical tricks, that obscene book in his sister's room; just another subtle method of perverting her nature.

"NORA," Darrel's voice was almost a prayer, "you're too beautiful, too sweet, to act this way."

"Oh, don't be silly!"

He steeled himself to endure her harshness. "I'm sorry if I bother you," he said, gently, "but I love you, Nora, and now that Mother's gone I'm the only one left to take care of you—to

save you from *him*."

Her eyes shifted nervously before his steady, imploring gaze. "What do you mean, 'save me from him'? Don't be such an old granddaddy."

He knelt impulsively beside the bed, drew the gauzy hem of the negligee to his lips. She twisted away. "Don't!" she husked. "Don't touch me—you toad!"

His face blanched at the cruelty, then he leaped up angrily.

"You've got to go away from here!" he cried. "You've got to let me take you away from this terrible house before it's too late!"

"Go away?" she laughed. "Don't be silly! Where could you take me? He will give me everything — money, clothes, jewels. We'll travel all over the world. He promised me—and you want me to go away with you! Get out of here, you fool, or I'll call Lance."

Tears of desperation smarted in young Darrel's eyes. He wanted to seize that dove-soft throat in his strong hands, choke his sister until those wanton eyes awakened to reality. Then he thought of the midnight mission of Black Hester and relaxed. Perhaps there would be another way to bring Nora to her senses; a more terrible way.

He turned to the door abruptly, hurried out without another word. In his attic room a little later he fondled the withered serpent's head that Hester Driggs had given him. Somehow it wasn't so hideous now. He needed faith; faith in anything to save Nora until—

The house was very still when he crept down into the hall past Lance Hadyn's door that night. All was dark in the rooms above, and below, as he stole down the stairs, phantom forms seemed rising and drifting through the gloom. His scalp crawled as he stood listening near the door of the death room where his mother lay. Was that a sound he heard? Could it be that his mother was rising from the casket, that he would see her gaunt body stealing toward him?

He gasped and his hands were bathed in horror's sweat as he turned the lock of the front door from inside and stole back upstairs to wait and watch in the

shadows. He must not look, Black Hester had said. It would break the charm if he interfered.

The clock downstairs was slowly chiming midnight when he heard the door creak open below. Stealthy, padded steps, a chilling draft of cool night air. Then the door of the death room opened and closed. Cowering in the dark hall, Darrel listened to faint clumpings, odd rattlings from the death room below. It seemed that Lance Hadyn must hear those awful sounds.

His heart froze as he heard sounds of movement in Lance Hadyn's room. His stepfather was up, stirring around. Had he heard? Darrel started toward the head of the stairs, looking back, ready to whisper an alarm if Hadyn's door opened. He could hear a slow dragging noise in the parlor. It moved toward the front door, out onto the veranda, and then he heard no more.

THE stirrings in Hadyn's room had ceased when Darrel crept down to lock the door after Black Hester. His blood congealed as he saw a shadowy bulk looming out of the darkness of the parlor as he reached the foot of the stairs. He tried to cry out, but his voice was a mere rattle in his throat.

"Sh-h-h!" A human warning was issuing from the dark hulk. And then he knew who it was—Dr. Jepson!

"Say nothing of this," the old doctor whispered.

"But I thought it was Hester," he quavered.

"She has gone. Now you must lock the door behind me."

Again Darrel heard the front door open and close softly, and then he was turning the ancient lock on the inside with icy fingertips. An appalling obsession was gripping him when he turned away from the door. He had to see! If it killed him he had to see if his mother was still there! His breathing seemed thunderously loud as he crept to the death room door, pushed it open.

His blood froze as he made out the black oblong of the casket, dimly outlined by the starlight that stole coldly under the low-drawn shades. Some power greater than his own will drew

him to the casket. He peered into it. A hoarse cry rasped from his throat as he saw the dead face. He turned and ran. His mother was still there. They had not taken her as he had feared—and hoped. As he scuttled up the stairs he heard heavy footsteps in the hall. Lance Hadyn! He strove to compose himself as he hunched along through the dark. He passed a shadowy figure, heard a low, scornful voice.

"The dead never return—never!"

He scuttled on past his stepfather, then turned impulsively, hissed out through the dark: "Zombies never die, Lance Hadyn! Remember—when she returns!"

Hadyn's cackling laughter followed him up the narrow stairs to his gable room. It was the laughter of a human fiend. How could anyone defeat Lance Hadyn, echoed despairingly in Steve Darrel's tortured mind as he flung himself on his bed, convulsed with tears.

Darrel lived in torment through the formal, hasty funeral. It seemed all a hideous dream that she could ever return. As he saw the sods thud down on the casket box, he resigned himself to the reality of his fears. An asylum for him, and for Nora worse—if Lance Hadyn lived.

Like a shadowy familiar, he was ever near when Nora and Hadyn were together. He had stolen a knife from the kitchen, concealed it in his clothes. It meant prison for life if he killed Hadyn, but prison was better than an asylum and the torturing knowledge of his sister's fate.

Worst of all he found Black Hester's door closed to him after the funeral. She talked to him through the door, told him to wait and pray. When Nora was actually in danger he must come and tell her. Before that, the charm could not prevail. As if Nora was not always in danger! Soon it would be too late!

IT was the third night after the funeral when Darrel knew that the worst had come. He hammered pantingly at the door of Hester Driggs' shanty at eleven o'clock.

"He's alone with her!" he gasped. "She's in his room. Help me, Hester!"

"More faith, Stevie." The voice of

the old Negress seemed to roll up from an open grave.

He didn't stop to hear more. There was no time to fool with Negro superstitions. He wished, as he scuttled back up the lane through the shadows, he hadn't kept his promise to tell Hester. Perhaps even in those few minutes he would be too late to save Nora—or die for her. He clutched the haft of the knife hidden in his clothes and ran as fast as his spindly legs would carry him.

Like a great, black beetle he horned his way through hedges on a short cut to the dark house. He could see one lighted window in the upper story. Lance Hadyn's room, he knew, and Nora was in there with him!

Quietly he stole into the front door, crept up the dark, bent stairs. The door of his stepfather's room was ajar. He heard wanton laughter, smelled the sickening odor of heavy wine. He flung himself through the door, panting, glaring.

Beside a taboret holding bottle and glasses lounged Lance Hadyn in a Morris chair. And Nora as he never had seen her before, even since she had changed. One white shoulder squeezed from the creamy crepe of her disordered gown. Her face was flushed, eyes wild. A bruised flower against that bony breast of Hadyn's.

Darrel's hand whitened on the haft of the hidden knife.

"Leave her alone!" he husked to Lance Hadyn's languid look of irritated inquiry.

A slow flush of anger darkened Hadyn's face as he thrust Nora aside, got up.

"What do you mean breaking in here without knocking?" he demanded. "Must I lock my own door to keep you in your place? Remember, a madhouse isn't a nice place to be."

Darrel crept forward. "I know what this means," he whispered. "Leave her alone or—"

Hadyn laughed derisively. "You half-witted ape! We were just having a glass of wine, talking over matters of the estate. My will must be changed, you know. Get hold of yourself, boy, and go to bed."

A red mist clouded Darrel's eyes. He

saw Nora passing a bare arm over her forehead, as if to brush away a web of damning confusion. Hadyn's blue lips thinned to a vicious line; his teeth bared whitely. Then Darrel hurled himself forward, the knife streaking a deadly glitter as he snatched it from his clothes.

But the knife did not complete its avenging arc. Hadyn grunted as he caught the lunging knife arm. Darrel moaned as his twisted hand let fall the knife. He saw Hadyn's devil soul unmasked as powerful hands leaped to his throat, bore him down as he struggled desperately. His senses swam blackly, then cleared a little. Hadyn's brutal grip had relaxed. Faintly he heard that gloating, hated voice.

"I'll teach you to draw knives on me! A little disciplining is what you need, and right now you get it."

LANCE HADYN held him with one hand and with the other snatched a sheet from the turned-down bed. Quickly he swathed Darrel helpless in the sheet, then crushed him into a chair. Strips of another sheet bound him to the chair. A gag was wrenched around his mouth. But his eyes and ears were free. He glared up defiantly, met the scorn of Lance Hadyn's stare.

"You'll not raise the neighborhood now," Hadyn was saying. "Let this be a lesson to you and your meddling. I'll let you watch Nora and me awhile. You might as well get used to it. After that my testimony will get you a short life in a good asylum. You can yammer all you like there. They'll never believe you."

Darrel closed his eyes, groaned. He looked again over the half mask of the gag. Lance Hadyn had reclined beside Nora. His boar-haired hands were creeping over her. Darrel closed his eyes, prayed for death to free him.

It seemed an eternity that he struggled against the awful temptation to open his eyes—to see the horror that had haunted him for months. Then something coursed through him like an icicle's chill. The front door had slammed below; slammed with a muffled, thunderous boom in the stillness.

There was a step on those dark stairs

up which he had climbed to the chamber of horrors. A stiffened, ponderous footfall quivered through the house. Was it the chill of the grave rising from the dark, ground floor?

Darrel's eyes bulged open. He saw Lance Hadyn crouching ghoulishly over Nora's form. A sickly pallor had bleached Hadyn's swarthy face. He, too, was listening. Nora sat up, as one half awakening from deep sleep.

And still that measured stride was mounting the stairs!

Hadyn was rigidly erect, stone-still as he listened as one who cannot believe his ears. Those slow, stiff steps were in the hall, coming toward the half open door. He thought he heard a distant muffled voice, half laughing, saying: "Zombies never die—zombies never die!"

Darrel's flesh shriveled as the faint odor of the grave wafted in through the room. Terror and triumph waged war in him. The thing was almost to the door. A grunt like that of a frightened swine grated in Lance Hadyn's throat at what he saw stealing in through the slowly widening door.

Then Darrel saw it too. Grey-green eyes, alive with a terrible vengeance gleam. Black cerements of the grave furled eerily from a taut, gaunt form. Gray Gorgon locks squirmed from that ghastly face. His mother—returned from the grave!

"Zombies never die!"

It was his mother saying that as she strode into the room. Her clawed hands reached out toward Lance Hadyn. He lunged back, snatched open a dresser drawer. His face was dewed with sweat, his chest heaving in terror. He had a pistol when he straightened up.

Darrel screamed behind the gag as he saw Hadyn level the pistol at that monster from the grave. Hadyn, who scoffed at guns and knives, who boasted a mind and power of will deadlier than steel, was standing with back to the wall, a pistol his last defense against that hellish proof of Black Hester's prophecy, of Steve Darrel's mother's last words.

SHOTS blasted in the still room, six shots in rapid succession at point-

blank range. Darrel closed his eyes, waiting to hear a body fall. But there was no sound save a gurgling gasp from Lance Hadyn.

Darrel's eyes stared open. His mother still stood unshaken. She was striding slowly on, clawed hands out-stretched toward Lance Hadyn.

The master of Hadyn house was swaying. His face was ghastly pale as he clutched at his heart. His eyes glazed as he reeled and fell.

Darrel knew no more; he had fainted. He aroused to feel Black Hester's strong arms around him, heard her saying:

"It's all right, honey. Yo' mammy's come back. Don't be afraid."

He jerked up from the bed where they had laid him free of his bonds. He gasped as an incredible picture formed before him. Nora in her mother's arms. Nora weeping. He twisted off the bed, ran to them. They gathered him in their arms.

"Steve," Nora was sobbing, "I never realized till now—after he's dead. It seems like a terrible dream."

His mother's arms were real, Darrel assured himself. He shuddered as he saw the dark body of Lance Hadyn stretched motionless on the floor, the empty pistol near one skeletal hand.

"But, Mother,"—Steve Darrel turned to her in awe—"how did you do it? How could you come back like this?"

Ada Hadyn smiled and Steve Darrel saw through smears of paint imperfectly wiped away, the face of the serene and loving mother he had known in years before. It was as if the crucible of the grave had divinely altered her.

"I can't tell you all now, Stephen," she said gently. "But Hester and I planned all this. We thought it would be a terrible lesson to your stepfather. We never dreamed it would mean his death. Hester is a *mamaloï* of the voodoo cult. Dr. Jepson helped us. Lance Hadyn knew all about zombies—corpses that walk after voodoo priests awaken them. He knew that Hester was a *mamaloï*, too, but he didn't believe in the supernatural.

"Dr. Jepson gave me a drug that simulated death for a few hours. When you let Hester in that night she carried

me away while I still slept and Dr. Jepson substituted a mummy and death-mask he had made. Hester kept me in her cottage until the time was right for my 'resurrection.'

"Dr. Jepson had studied psychometry. He knew the secret of Lance's powers and believed that his will power could be broken only by a terrible shock. If this failed the doctor would have helped me take you and Nora away. But he wanted us to have the advantages of the Hadyn wealth if possible.

"I never was as insane as I made believe toward the last, to deceive your stepfather. I was miserably unhappy, though—until my 'death.' It was like being born again. We didn't dare tell you, Stephen. You might have given us away in your excitement."

"But the pistol?" Darrel cried. "You're really alive? Why didn't the bullets kill you?"

Ada Hadyn laughed as she patted him. "Hester took care of that pistol long ago. The bullets were paper imitations, really blanks. Your stepfather didn't believe in ordinary weapons. He must have forgotten he owned that pistol until he faced me tonight."

DR. Jepson was coming in. He did not seem surprised. He knelt beside the body on the floor. They waited tensely for his verdict.

"A stroke evidently," the doctor said. "Fear—a horrible fear must have brought it on."

Black Hester crossed herself and muttered a prayer as the doctor arose.

"Ada," Dr. Jepson said gravely, "I might say you were the destroying angel, or the blackest devil that ever lived in human form—but I knew long ago that Lance Hadyn was due for a stroke. I didn't tell you because I was afraid you wouldn't go through with this if you knew."

He waved them out of the room commandingly as he turned back distastefully to the corpse.

"The mind can commit no crime," Lance Hadyn," was what Dr. Jepson muttered to himself. "You never dreamed that your game could be a boomerang!"

Wings of Horror



I felt a stab of pain where the ghastly thing had bitten me.

**Huge Vampire Bat Wings Conceal a Bloody Menace
Haunting the Rocky Precincts of a Danube Castle
Transplanted to a Craggy Caribbean Island**

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "Island of the Dead," "Blood of the Moon," etc.

OUR launch rounded the little rocky headland of the island, and the Castle Romagna loomed before me. I was only sixteen. This first sight of the old Castle of my dead father and mother sent a vague shudder through me.

The setting sun was behind it, a splash like blood on the tropic sky bringing the five mile island into dark

silhouette. The frowning castle was perched upon the upper brink of the cliff. Aloof and grim it stood there as though staring down, not on the Caribbean but on the fabled Danube. It was an Austrian type castle.

My mother, dead now ten years, had been an Austrian. My American father—a millionaire then—had built the place for mother, so that she might

have around her the trappings of her illustrious lineage.

"You like it, Babs?" My father's lawyer, Jacques Tarlton, asked.

"Yes—it's beautiful."

Tarlton who was now my guardian, sat beside me at the wheel of the little launch. We had come down from New York, where I had been in school. A 'plane had dropped us at San José, on the mainland only a few miles away. He had been down a month before. We had two servants here, who had been living here since father died. We would open the house—I would invite friends from the north—

Our family physician in New York had approved the idea of living here at least six months of the year. My guardian—administrator of my father's vast interests down here in the Caribbean—had decided to accompany me.

My doctor claimed I was neurotic—a queerly brooding type of young girl, just at an age when the nervous system can be most easily upset—when the stirrings of womanhood bring a conflict. Medical words. I did not even try to understand them. I only knew that I was beautiful, with a frail, pallid dark beauty.

Like my mother, perhaps—she whom I had never known, since she was estranged from my father, living here alone in this little Castle he had given her for several years before she died. Like her too, in my neurotic brooding, so that all my schoolmates laughed at me because I was queer.

We entered a little rocky cove, and over us the Castle frowned, darkly purple against the deepening sky. Lights had winked on in a few of its windows.

Groff, the man-servant here, was at the dock to meet us. A big, burly bullet-headed fellow—a German-American, I had been told, who with his wife were our caretakers.

"Miss Babs," he said. His voice was thick, guttural. "Why, you are beautiful—like your mother. You haf—her same gentle beauty—"

At the top of the steep ascending cliff-path, his wife met us. A little wisp of woman, with a pallid pinched face.

"The supper iss ready," she said.

A big iron lantern with a candle in it hung over the stone arcade at the Castle entrance. The yellow candlelight flickered down upon us—Mrs. Groff, wiping her hand off on her apron to take mine as I extended it; the tall, distinguished, stalwart Jacques Tarlton at my side; burly Karl Groff, burdened with our hand luggage.

In that instant, as we paused there, painted in the darkness by the flickering candlelight, suddenly I heard the rustle of wings. A dark blob encircled the lantern, swept off, came back, fluttered and was gone again. I heard the pale, pinched little Mrs. Groff give a low gasping cry; saw her big husband fling her an angry look.

A bat, beating at the lantern.

"Come, Babs," Tarlton said.

Premonitions, perhaps the product of my own brooding fancy, always had been strong within me.

AND as we crossed the threshold of the Castle, it seemed that outside behind us, the bat was hovering, as though urging us in. A bat with rustling wings.

With Mrs. Groff serving us, we sat at the big candle-lit table, in the shadowed paneled dining-room of the Castle. The room seemed very big; it echoed and muffled our low voices. The big windows were open. The warm salt breath of the sea drifted in. Moonlight drenching everything with the intensity of its pallor.

We talked of my coming life here.

"I want friends to visit here," I said.

"Of course you do, Babs," my guardian replied. "You are rich—you can pay their way down. They'll be thrilled."

His gesture and his smile reassured me. I wondered whether my doctor had told him how to handle me. The thought itself was frightening. Was I indeed what they called a nervous case? Despite my guardian's gentleness—or perhaps because of it—his obvious desire to hide from me any question of my normality—suddenly now the thing leaped at me almost with terror.

But I would not let him know it. The darkling grandeur of this Castle—that bat fluttering at the doorway with what

seemed to me wings beating a rhythm of nameless horror—not for anything in the world would I have admitted such thoughts now.

I tried to smile. "I want to have a dance out there in that big hallway—"

"Why not?" he said. "It would be good for you."

The candlelight flickered on his face. He was a big handsome man, with solid features, smooth-shaven. He was only forty—a man accustomed to command—but with me, for the several months now which I had known him, always very gentle.

Through the quiet somber meal, he talked only of my plans to have a gay time here. Was I indeed queer, that I could not keep my mind on what he was saying?

The tropic moonlight outside the window was like molten silver, steadily drenching all the world out there, so that it seemed that here in the Castle we were crowded with shadows that were alive—silently shifting shapes, restless, uneasy.

To me the shadows shifted and crawled. But I had felt the uneasiness everywhere in this big house which was mine. Twenty odd rooms—huge rooms all of them, spread over three stories and up into the two little towers.

Everywhere paneled walls, handsome somber drapes, tapestried furniture. The building was only about as old as myself. Modeled so it could have been the ancient original on a headland of the Danube, to my girlish emotional fancy, for it seemed that here in these musty rooms which the Groffs had kept closed for so long, frightening things of the age-old past were lingering.

"You are very quiet, Babs. What silly little thoughts are buzzing behind those big eyes of yours?"

"Nothing," I murmured. "What—were you saying?"

Even Mrs. Groff made me uneasy. Who can separate the real from the fancied in the thoughts of a young girl? Certainly to me, everything was real. There was a brooding restlessness here. Mrs. Groff's timid, furtive looks at me had something in them not to be explained. I felt that there was some-

thing very queer about her.

I was glad when at last the long meal was over. And then came the surprise. My heart leaped into my throat with a very real shock of terror as from down the long somber hall there came the sharp thumping of the knocker on the oaken panels of the main door.

Groff's stalwart, bullet-headed figure tramped to the door and flung it open, with Mrs. Groff peering from further away.

It was Tim Riley, there at the threshold with the moonlight drenching him.

I gasped, "Why—why—" Then I broke away and ran. "Why, Tim—you of all people—and I thought we were isolated here—"

FOR an instant I stood, gazing at his big broad-shouldered figure—his homely freckled Irish face with the mop of tousled red hair above it—stood and gazed—and then held out my hands.

"Tim—oh, I'm so glad—"

"Well, I'm glad, too, Babs—so here I am—welcome, for an hour or two anyway? I couldn't 'phone, you know—or send a telegram—so I just had to be walkin' in on you."

Dear old Tim. I turned to introduce him to Mr. Tarleton who had come forward.

"Welcome of course," he said heartily. "Heaven knows you surprise us—we've only been here an hour or two ourselves." He was smiling upon Tim quizzically. "I was just telling Babs, this place will be infested with young men in a month or two. It will do her good—"

Tim's grey eyes looked me over. "Good? You been sick, Babs?"

"No—no of course not," Mr. Tarleton said. "Come in, Tim—did you say you could only stay an hour or two? You'd think this was a suburb of New York, instead of the Caribbean. Such is modern life—"

He led us back to the dining room and insisted that we all have coffee. From the shadowed hall Mrs. Groff's pale face was staring.

There was no mystery about Tim's breezy, amazingly unexpected arrival.

"You sent me an airmail letter to Caracas, didn't you? You named today. Well, my firm cabled I was to take this morning's plane up to San José. I've got to go farther North on the night plane tonight. I just stopped over to see you."

His laugh was so cheery. All the crawling shadows of the somber dining-room seemed thrust back now.

"So what'd I do," he finished, "but hire me a little launch for this evening, an' here I am."

Mr. Tarleton got up to leave us alone.

"I'll unpack," he said. "When you have finished your coffee, go into the library. It's that little room at the end of the hall. I'll join you there a little later."

"Very good," Tim said, when he had gone. "He knows young people—that's the kind of guardian to have, Babs."

Presently we went down the hall to the study. On the heavy pile rugs of the floor our footsteps were silent. Tim was gazing with an awed interest at the tapestries and decorations of the walls. The study door was open; the candlelight from inside shafted in a yellow beam across the dim hallway. It was about twenty feet away; and suddenly I saw it break. A blob of darkness, in the midst of the yellow light.

My hand went to Tim's arm; we both stood stricken, gazing—Tim with a sharp startled intake of breath; and I with a rush of terror. All my vague uneasy thoughts—intuitions—climaxing now despite Tim's presence at my side.

On the hallway floor in the beam of candlelight, a dark blob was spread. Something within the room, moving before the candle so that the pattern of it was cast out here? Or was it something spread flat on the floor of the hall? A black shape, monstrous. Then as it moved, it suddenly took form. Gigantic wings, nakedly black, ribbed and pronged. A body, long as a human.

It shifted on the floor rug, all in a second, shrunk to a little thing and was gone, leaving only the unbroken, flickering yellow beam of the candlelight.

MY scream froze in my throat. Tim gasped, "Holy Mother o' Gawd," and dashed forward. The hall held a terror for me so I ran after him.

The study was empty. Rows of books from floor to ceiling; easy chairs; a table with a big silver candelabra in which half a dozen candles were burning; a big oblong window opening to a moon-drenched terrace.

"Well I'll be damned," Tim murmured.

"Haf you—called me, Miss Babs?"

Behind us in the hall where a moment before the ghostly black thing seemed to have spread itself, dwindled and vanished, the pallid timid little figure of Mrs. Groff appeared.

"No—no," I stammered.

Tim came and stared at her; and she said meekly,

"I thought you were frightened. If—efer you get frightened, Miss Babs—" She edged toward me; and as involuntarily I shrank away as she reached out a pallid thin hand to touch me. "There are—things that may frighten you—" Her voice was lowered. "Then you should come tell to me—you understand?"

"Thanks," Tim said. He waved her away; and drew me into the study.

"Somebody was in here," he added. "Now what the devil—"

"I—I thought it was wings on the rug out there," I murmured. "Wings—like a giant bat—"

Most certainly he must have thought so. Or had I imagined the wings? Was it just a man's shadow? We had both seen it. But now Tim laughed.

"Nonsense." Suddenly he was staring at me. "Babs, what's the matter with you?"

"N—nothing."

"You don't look at all the way you did in New York. You look—queer—"

"I'm—frightened," I confessed. "That's all—just frightened—" I was breathless: my heart was pounding.

"At what?" He drew me down into a big easy chair, holding me. "Afraid of what, Babs? I noticed something the minute I saw you tonight."

Then suddenly I knew what I really feared. My own sanity. A neurotic girl. A "nervous case." How easy to

slip from that, into the horrible abyss of dementia!

Tim tried to laugh, but the stark horror in my voice struck it away so that he stared, with his homely freckled face almost frightened.

"Good Lord, Babs—does your guardian know about this?"

"I guess he knows it," I said. "I think—my doctor frightened him. But he tries to hide it from me—"

My gaze must have been roving wildly. There is nothing more terrifying than the fear that one's mind is not normal. As I stared around the little candlelit room, I saw a crumpled white oblong on a bookshelf.

Tim followed my gaze. Then he jumped up, came back with a woman's small black handkerchief and a folded white paper. We opened it . . .

An old manuscript, handwritten, in English. It seemed to be my dead father's writing.

"Well, for the love of Heaven," Tim murmured. Breathlessly we read it—Tim, no doubt with awed wonderment; but for me it was a thing of grisly horror.

A tale of Austria. Things roaming which had seemed human—but at times they were black-winged. By day they slept in their coffins, for they were dead. But at night they flew, or roamed in human form, lusting for human blood, sucking, biting other humans who would then become like themselves. At dawn these hideous things always crept back to their caskets. And only with a stake driven through their heart would they remain at rest.

A step sounded in the hall. Tim shoved the manuscript into the chair beside us and leaped to his feet. Suddenly he stooped; picked something up from the floor, I did not see what it was and he shoved it into his pocket as my guardian entered.

"Is—anything wrong, Babs?" he asked quickly.

Tim seemed to come to a sudden decision. "Can I speak to you, sir?"

They stood in the hall, just outside the study door. I could not hear what they were saying, save occasional fragments. I heard my guardian exclaim with startled amazement: "Why, what

rot," he said.

Then they were whispering.

AND then Mr. Tarleton said, "Well I think you're right. This may well be a bad place for her. I think we'll leave tomorrow."

I was only sixteen—but still there was no reason for treating me as a child. They would say only that tomorrow I was to go to San José—perhaps never to come back here.

And then we talked of other things, until at eleven o'clock it was time for Tim to leave to catch the Northbound Clipper. Mr. Tarleton and I went with him down to the little dock.

As we parted, he stooped and murmured:

"Just two things, Babs—don't you ever forget. There's no such thing as a vampire! An' you're no more in danger of going crazy than I am!"

His little launch went out of the cove, a tiny blob in the moonlight. As my guardian and I went back up to the somber castle, I was more inwardly terrified than I had ever been before in my life. But I would not show it.

"You're tired, Babs," he said. "You must get right to bed."

"Yes, I guess I am."

Mrs. Groff was fixing my bedroom when we reached it. Again I was aware of that queer gaze from her. This time Mr. Tarleton noticed it. Was it something Tim had said to him that made him more alert now? He flung her a sharp glance and waved her away.

Then at the bedroom door he kissed me.

"You've nothing to be frightened at," he said gently. "My room is just a little down the corridor—" He gestured to its door. "If you call, I'll hear you."

He closed my door and left me. Quickly I undressed, blew out the light and crawled into the big four-poster. I had locked the room's only door. Its single window gazed out over the cliff.

I left the window wide for air; somehow the bedroom seemed stifling to me. For a long time I lay huddled, listening to my pounding heart. Of what was I afraid? Vampires? Even as young as sixteen, a girl of the 20th Century, born

in America, educated in New York, accustomed to traveling in airplanes—all the sophistication of modern life—certainly I could not believe in vampires?

Afraid of my own mental balance? Over and over again I told myself what I knew to be true—my mother and father, and all my relatives so far as I had ever heard—not one of them had ever gone insane. In my heart, I felt convinced there was nothing the matter with me.

Yet I lay petrified, watching the shadows and patches of moonlight in the room; straining all my senses with an horrible expectation.

Then at last I fell asleep. I was awakened by ghastly horror.

It came with a rustling of wings. I thought I was dreaming that something was flying over my bed. There was a rustling; a thump against the wall; a swish of air upon my face. In the heat of the night I had been lying uncovered; vaguely I reached, fumbled, pulled a sheet over me. Something was the matter with my hands; my feet felt queer.

There was a vague moment when I lay shuddering, in that twilight between sleep and awakening. A swish of wings—and then I knew I was not dreaming. The thing was too real . . .

With a scream congealing in my throat I found myself up on one elbow, staring wide-eyed about the pallid room. A considerable time had passed; the pattern of moonlight and shadows on the floor had shifted.

Then the rustling, flying thing went through the moonlight beam. A bat, here in the room with me, close against the ceiling over me; and then it swooped—

My senses reeled as my face went down against the pillow; but with a rush of beating wings the ghastly little black thing passed so close I could feel a swish of air. Then it was circling the room again. Two of them now, passing and re-passing each other as they fluttered.

FOR a minute I crouched, too terrified to move, with my heart wildly pounding. But I tried to master the terror. Bats of this tropic island were

flying the moonlit night; two of them had come in my big open window by chance; fluttering in the narrow confines of the room.

Abruptly they were gone. I told myself that they had flown out the window. I must have shifted my position in the bed. Suddenly there was a thump on the floor beside me. Something was lying there—something which my movement had knocked from the bed. The moonlight gleamed on a knife, a long, thin blade, with drying crimson smeared on it.

Drying sticky blood was on my hands. And my feet felt so queer. Trembling, I cast off the sheet. The moonlight gleamed on my pallid limbs. Dirt was on my feet; crumbles of wet earth were black smears down there on the white of the sheet at my feet.

Where had I been? A bloodstained knife—blood hot and sticky on my hands—

But my tortured, throbbing brain would yield nothing. Pulses were pounding in my temples with my terror. Thoughts, blurred, pounded at me. My window—a brink was out there, sheer to the sea. My door was still closed.

I crawled from the bed, struggling to stand erect. My pulses knocked against my temples. My hands went up to ease them. My bare feet touched the knife; I shifted as though a viper had stung me.

What had my disordered mind commanded me to do? Almost without knowing it, I crossed the moonlit bedroom. My hall door was locked. Had I re-locked it, when I returned after committing some grisly deed?

Then I heard a little noise behind me. I whirled. Stiffened. Stared, frozen, transfixed by a ghastly flood of horror that numbed my power of movement.

Against the paneled bedroom wall a huge dark shape was standing. An upright thing. A man? Legs—a body—a pallid heavy face. Arms outstretched, with black wings—a hideous, naked black membrane. In that second of silence I thought I could hear his breathing—a low panting breath, eager, lusty. The wings quivered—the legs

moved as he glided toward me.

I tried to scream, with every desperate effort of my bursting lungs and numbed swollen throat. I might arouse my guardian; bring him here to save me from this panting thing—but the scream was only a mumble on my icy lips.

Then the shape was there beside me. The sucking breath was audible. The horrible thing struck me. Its arms went around me—crushing me—

I felt my knees buckling; my body turning to ice as I fell.

I never reached the floor. Arms caught me. With swooping senses thrusting me half into unconsciousness, I was only vaguely aware that I was being carried. A face with sucking breath was over me. The wall yielded into a yawning blackness as we passed through it.

I was conscious only of the padding footsteps of the thing that carried me. Down a staircase. The air was turning fetid, dank. Wings were rustling suddenly in a vast abyss of darkness—wings of a myriad startled, flying things.

Then, as I felt the black monster's encircling arms lowering me down to a mouldering earthly ground, my pounding senses mercifully struck me into blankness.

I opened my eyes. Wet with sweat, my night robe clinging dank to my icy limbs, I struggled to one elbow. I was lying on the dirt floor of what seemed to be a cave. From a rift there was distant moonlight. The dark arched ceiling was visible—recesses of blackness—a black undulating floor, mouldering.

A bat cave. A thousand of the bats fluttered around me, with little squeaks and rustling wings.

I was on my feet now—still with the vague instinct of self-preservation that despite everything of this horror, I must defend myself—I must run—

I staggered over the mouldering ground—staggered and suddenly stumbled over a solid shape lying prone. I screamed—at last I could scream, with an eerie chilling burst. It was the body of the thin, timid Mrs. Groff lying there at my feet. A shaft of moonlight struck

upon her dangling head—her crimsoned throat, slashed with a yawning crimson gash—

THAT bloody knife in my bed—the dirt of the bat cave upon my feet. The realization, so hideous, struck me. My mind obsessed with fear of this woman—the brooding, damnable, deranged thing that was myself—obsessed by the timid glances of this Mrs. Groff—

So this is what I had done!

I found myself running, stumbling, laughing wildly, with all the world a black terror of rustling wings pounding at my temples. Certainly in that terrible moment I must have been upon the verge of insanity.

I was on the ground now. I had fallen again. New horror gripped me as the bats circled over me. A giant shape glided forward. It stooped, seized me. A pallid, lusting face came down—a face contorted with an eager frenzy so that all semblance of human aspect was gone from it.

Arms encircled me. I screamed wildly as the face brushed my own. The lips nuzzled at my neck. Teeth like fangs—

I felt a stab of pain, where the ghastly thing had bitten me. My blood welled out.

"Babs! Babs—"

Only dimly could I hear the distant voice—aware only that it was a voice I knew.

"Babs—"

Abruptly the monster cast me loose, its dangling black wings rose erect over me. Now another dark shape came with a rush. Another monster—two of them suddenly lunging at each other, fighting—for possession of me. I saw them reeling in the darkness across the cave, heard the thud of blows—the panting of their breaths.

Then they fell. One of them had the other by the throat. I saw one pounding the head of the other against a rock of the cave-wall. A knife was ripping and tearing. The cave rang with an agonized scream . . .

One of the black shapes stood erect, then spied me and came forward with a leap.

"Babs—Babs, dear—"

Tim's voice. Tim, stooping, raising me up, with his arms around me. The moonlight struck on his homely freckled face, his tousled red hair—

My arms reached up, gripping him tightly. Then I heard a low moaning. The black shape of the monster was struggling to rise. With an oath Tim thrust me from him and leaped to renew the combat.

But the quivering shape fell prone again. As Tim bent down, I staggered erect and joined him, with his arm around me as we stared at the dying thing at our feet.

It was Tarleton, my guardian. He lay garbed in black, with black fabric hanging like wings from his arms—trappings of his grisly plot. His head now had a ragged wound where Tim had bashed it on the rock. In Tim's hand was his little penknife with which he had ripped and torn Tarleton's throat. He looked at it, then cast it away.

"So you—got me—I had no idea that you even suspected me," the dying Tarleton murmured faintly.

"Yes—" Tim said. "I did suspect you."

Tarleton's pallid hand gestured toward us. He wanted to talk, but the blood gushing in his throat choked him. And then he gasped:

"I wanted—her mind unhinged. She is just the susceptible type—"

His dying, choking breath gasped it out the diabolical plot. The moonlight on his livid, blood-smeared face showed that he was trying to smile with a faint irony. In two years I would be eighteen. Mistress of myself — of my father's vast estate. I would marry—the money would pass from Tarleton's control.

BECAUSE my doctor was worried over my nervous condition, Tarleton had played upon it, subtly frightening me implanting in me the danger that I was mentally unbalanced. Only sixteen—still more child than woman. It had looked very easy to him.

"This bat cave here under the Castle," he was murmuring, "I saw it—when I was down here a month ago. I

planned this—with Groff—I bribed him to help me frighten you. We cut a secret panel in the wall of the bedroom where we would have you sleep—"

And tonight he crept in upon me—carefully he had placed the knife in my bed—put dirt at my feet. It was the smearing of the blood upon my hands that had awakened me.

His faint voice added, "I thought surely your mind could not stand the horrors Groff and I would contrive. I put that handkerchief—that manuscript in the study—to start the terror in you. You, Tim—I was glad you came—you would have been a good witness later that she was mentally abnormal. The murder of Mrs. Groff—she would have been blamed for it, of course.

"A sudden violent insanity. And I—always would have kept control of the estate. That—was necessary. I have stolen from it—I could never let anyone else investigate it—"

His hand tried to come up with a gesture. "Closer. I can't—talk so loud. I want to tell you—things you do not yet realize—"

A paroxysm of coughing choked him. "You—suspected me? Why?"

"We saw your shadow in the study," Tim said. "And then I picked up a cigarette butt. The same type you smoked—and it was still hot." Tim held me close as we knelt over the dying man.

"I got the idea you were trying to frighten her—the way I heard you talk, and what she told me. So I just took my launch, circled the island and came back later.

"This cave as you know has an entrance from outside. I was out there—I heard her screaming in here—" He shuddered as he held me. "But I had no idea you were planning—like this—"

Tarleton faintly gestured. "You did not find Groff?"

"Groff?" Tim murmured.

"I—met him tonight, after Babs went to bed. Mrs. Groff—she was acting queer—I was afraid of her—could not trust her. Groff and I had our plans. But he—acted so queer with me.

"So strange—and suddenly he leaped

on me—he—bit me on the throat. Then I killed him. And killed Mrs. Groff—she knew what was the matter with her husband, of course. He—never was around in the daytime. He only—came out at night. I thought that was strange, when I was here before—but she told me he was ill—he slept all day—”

Tarleton's hand weakly gestured again. “There he is—go look at him—”

Tim moved down the cave in awed wonderment he was hardly aware. I was close behind him. We came upon the body of Groff; stalwart figure, black bullet-head. The wound of Tarleton's knife was in his chest.

Frozen with horror, Tim and I stared at the wooden stake which Tarleton had driven through Groff's heart.

“You found him?”

Silently we went back to Tarleton.

“Yes,” Tim murmured. “We found him.”

“He—will be at rest now.” Blood was gushing from Tarleton's mouth. He was almost gone. He faintly gasped, “Groff—bit me—I don't know—”

The words rattled in his throat. His body twitched; the light faded from his glazing eyes. He was gone.

For a moment Tim and I stood numbed. Then he drew me away. As

we moved down the cave, we saw a sharpened wooden stake lying against the wall.

“You wait,” he muttered. “I'll be right back.”

Numbly I watched him as he seized the stake, and a loose rock from the wall. Then he ran to Tarleton's body. My hands went over my face, but still I could hear Tim's thudding blows as he drove the stake through Tarleton's heart.

And as I stood there a little pain at my throat forced itself upon my consciousness. Blood was trickling down my neck.

My anguished cry rang out:

“Tim! Tarleton bit me! He bit my throat here—”

That was ten years ago. Tim and I are married now, and we are very happy. We never talk of that night of horror. It was, we told each other, a reality of Tarleton's diabolic plot. But of course it was only his own obsessed imagination which made him think so hideous a thing of Groff.

The lust never has developed in me. But still there are times, when I kiss Tim, that I am conscious, not of my lips but of my teeth. And I never see a flying thing or hear the rustle of wings, without having shuddering terror sweep over me.

TWISTING DEATH

A Complete Mystery Novel

By WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

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ACCESSORIES OF DEATH



On the surface of the sea floated a skeleton.

The Touch of a Demon's Hand, and a Pleasure Ship Turns Into Cargo of Blood!

By
MILTON LOWE

Author of "High Pressure," "Highway Murder," etc.

IF Ina Brandt had not invited me personally I would have turned back when I reached Jim Pall's yacht, the *Hidalgo*. A feeling, a premonition of something fearful assailed me.

I liked Jim Pall but I loved Ina Brandt, and seeing her on his arm wasn't a pleasure. So I stayed for the masquerade party that night as though drawn by some magnetic force.

"Hello, Ray," Ina called to me as I stepped aboard. "I'm so glad you came!"

She was beautiful, charming, there on deck. Her lovely face was flushed with excitement and her wide brown eyes danced with pure delight.

Coming up the gangplank just behind me was Ed Brandt, Ina's cousin. May Warren was on his arm. My surprise at seeing him there was genuine. Solid as the Rock of Gibraltar, Brandt had never cared particularly for parties, least of all masquerades. But tonight he seemed supremely happy. And May Warren's small, oval face was radiant with anticipated pleasure.

At sailing time, Ted Wilson showed up with Grace Harmon, making seven guests in all. I began to feel uncomfortable because I had come stag.

Even the captain was in masquerade. He played King Neptune, and the two seamen who constituted the crew were cast as his subjects.

When I went below into the spacious saloon, I saw it was all decorated for the party. Lanterns, a profusion of flowers, all the paraphernalia to assure a merry holiday were in evidence.

Then I heard the throb-throb of the twin Diesel engines and felt the roll of the craft under way. One by one the guests entered the lounge. I laughed at Ina's pussy-cat costume. It was of tight fitting black lamé, with a long tail swishing from the low cut of the back, while a pair of high, pointed ears was perched on her well done permanent.

ED BRANDT was the Devil, and his sombre black eyes and rather pale face more than enhanced the illusion. May Warren had chosen to be a witch, but she was a poor one. She wasn't the type, though her attempt to portray the character deserved commendation. She had blackened two of her front teeth to make them seem missing. On her small head stood a dunce cap, and her tiny hands wielded a broom of straw.

Jim Pall sneaked into the lounge and uttered a blood-curdling howl, then whipped upright. We all wheeled and stared, registering first fright, then the silly expression of having been fooled. Brandt wore a phosphorescent skeleton, embellished with fake bones that

rattled as he walked. He shook them in the manner of a dog and they sang an eerie symphony of the grave.

Ted Wilson and his fiancé stood on the threshold. One look at Wilson, tall and thin, enveloped in a black cotton wrap, showed that he was a bit uncomfortable playing the role of Death. His high cheek bones and pointed chin abetted the makeup.

Gingerly he held on to Grace Harmon. She was swathed in a white shroud, her round face powdered a chalky white. It was easy to guess her characterization. On the arm of Death she appeared to be at home as a Corpse.

I wore a loose-fitting, patched suit, rumpled and ready for the ash-heap. A cap was tugged low to the side of my face, almost covering my eyes, while an application of greenish powder gave me the role of Vice. In my pocket I had a pipe to simulate opium smoking, a hypodermic needle for morphine injection, and ordinary snuff for sniffing "snow."

"All that is miserable," laughed Pall, "in this sordid world of ours. Costumes in compliment to your host's name."

I don't recall just why, but a tremor of dread coursed down inside of me. My heart pumped faster. In this ultra-mocking mood of ours, the presentiment of evil hovered. Unconsciously my gaze sought out the others.

But they were all behaving as one might expect at a masquerade party. Bosh, I reproved myself. There I was in the midst of a happy, joyous group, forgetting to have a jolly time.

The first warning of what was to occur came when Neptune beckoned to Pall from the threshold of the lounge.

"Squall a-brewing, sir."

He uttered the words in almost a whisper, but in the momentary lull of conversation, it seemed to be amplified a thousand-fold. My ears almost vibrated with its reception.

"That's all right, King Neptune," laughed Pall. "A perfect setting then. The wind howls and we, unwelcome, unwanted creatures, shall rule our little world."

He leaped to the center of the saloon, the bones of the skeleton on him grating and crackling as if trying to

convey a message of impending disaster.

"Hi, ye of this netherworld, a toast to King Neptune! Long may his beard tickle the waves."

We all accepted whiskeys; our first and last drink of the night. Pall ranted a pretty risqué toast in conformity with the occasion. Then we lifted our drinks to our lips.

FROM above, a wheezing, drawn-out moan froze our hands to our glasses. Instantly our eyes looked upward. Mine shot to the captain. Fright filled his watery eyes and his lips were parted in terror. May's glass clattered to the floor, smashing to bits.

"Wh-what's that?" demanded Ed Brandt, forgetting to be the Devil.

I rushed out of the lounge and up the companionway ladder onto deck. A stiff northeaster whistled into my face as it cut through the rigging. I glanced about and found both seamen busy lashing fast for the blow. They couldn't have been responsible for that moan.

I yelled to the stockier seaman. "You or your buddy trying to play tricks?"

He spun around, followed by the other tar. Both stared at me as though I were insane. Their eyes widened.

"Why, we ain't done a thing, Mr. Crane."

Thinking it better not to arouse their innate superstition, I smiled at them. But Ed Brandt and May had piled out on deck behind me. May blurted out what I had refrained from saying before I could stop her.

"You mean you didn't—didn't make that awful moan?"

Both seamen dropped their work and scurried toward the pilot house. The captain shouted for them to return to their posts. Cringingly, fearfully, they returned to their labors.

"It's nothing," Brandt laughed. "Somebody trying to play up to our outré costumes. All in fun!"

The stocky seamen mumbled incoherently and turned their backs on us. I thanked the Lord that Brandt had had the presence of mind to reassure them. Nothing I could have said to them would have done as much as his

simple declaration.

All in fun! For an instant I wondered whether Brandt was in on the stunt. I cornered him before we headed back to the lounge and asked him. He threw a negative glare at me and hunched his shoulders. Evidently he was too frightened to do anything more.

"Let's go home," I heard Wilson say in his rumbling bass. "I don't—"

An ear-splitting scream knifed the lounge. We stood petrified as the cry trailed to a sobbing groan. I jumped up and seized Pall.

"Is this your idea of fun?"

"No!" But I thought I detected a twinkle in his blue eyes. "I had nothing to do with it."

I whirled and found Ina shaking. Tears filled her eyes and her breast rose and fell with restrained emotion. It was getting us. Pall's answer had thrown fuel on our fears. The next instant another wheeze and a rollicking laugh rent the ship. My blood ran cold. Beads of sweat popped out on my face—cold sweat.

"Turn back," howled Wilson and encircled Grace with a protective arm.

We turned to him. I was rooted speechless at the uncanny, supernatural sight of Death holding fast to the Corpse. If this was somebody's idea of fun—

My thoughts went sailing. Out went the ship's lights; a roaring laugh swelled and echoed through the saloon. Ina screamed, Grace cried out in frenzy. Without seeing her I guessed that May had fainted.

"Put on those lights," yelled Pall at the top of his lungs.

I CLICKED the wall switch back and forth. But no lights! A rumble and a devastating whistle vibrated the ship. Footsteps converged on the threshold as everybody raced for the companionway ladder.

I saw Pall grasp Brandt. Both men looked at each other, startled and questioning. Then Pall leaped up the companionway to the deck.

"Think the captain's to blame for this?" I asked Brandt as I reached his side.

In the faint light from the night sky I saw the dilated pupils of his eyes. Then I noticed he was holding May on one arm while he strove to climb the steps. I helped him up on deck where we placed May.

He didn't reply to my question and I didn't wait for an answer. Something was wrong with the ship. A sudden gust of wind almost twirled it about like a top. A heavy wave spilled over the bow as an inhuman screech chilled me to the marrow. I plunged headlong forward, my brain reeling.

In the darkness something white, more like a white shroud for the dead than anything else, billowed up at me. I ducked instinctively. A shift of the wind carried the ghastly thing like a white bat over my head. It rustled ominously and I swear I heard a cackle of mirth.

A gasp caused me to pivot. There stood Ina, frigid as an iceberg, her eyes popping. I grasped her, shaking her back to sensibility. She buckled and dropped limply to the deck. God, what manner of insanity gripped that ship!

Stopping hurriedly I raised her and started back toward the pilot house. I saw the door of the place open and breathed a sigh of relief. Then I stared dumbly down at the sprawled form of the captain. Beyond any doubt he was dead, and his Neptune costume was torn to shreds.

With Ina burdening me and my thoughts racing madly, I cast about for assistance. Surely a madman was loose aboard. Who?

I forced the idea from my mind, hating to believe it. Was I, too, going crazy? Was I truly holding Ina? Was it all a figment of my imagination?

Desperately I chanced a look about to be sure my brain was still functioning properly. Ina, light as a feather, pale as a corpse, lay clumsily over my right shoulder.

Quickly I leaned over the prostrate captain. Blood was caked over his right temple. His wide, staring eyes were fixed in death.

Who had killed him? *What* was causing this havoc? No longer was it merely a madman loose—a murderer was aboard.

I dived into the pilot house and deposited Ina. Even in her faint she possessed a fascinating attraction for me. I had always loved her. But with her money and social position, who was I to woo her? The desire to kiss her dominated me and I crushed her close.

I was going insane myself. The touch of her lips, cold though they were now, flung me back to reality. Murder and the supernatural were afoot. My thoughts were sluggish, not clear. I was too befuddled, too fearful of what would happen next, to be able to think coherently.

A HARSH, chilling laugh raked the ship. It sounded below. Torn between Ina and the idea of manning the helm, I stood aghast in that small pilot house. Abrutely Pall's haggard face came into view. His eyes were bloodshot and a gun was gripped in his right hand. He almost fell over the captain. Then he saw me.

"You!" he gasped, leveling the gun.

"Jim!" I must have screamed his name. "I'm not responsible!"

Reason halted him from shooting me. He saw Ina on the couch in the cabin. Forgetting me he raced to her side. Words of endearment flowed from his lips and I felt hot with anger.

"No time for that!" I yelled into his ear. "Bring her around."

The next instant, as though answering my wish, Ina fluttered her eyelids. She screamed at the sight of the skeleton on Pall's masquerade costume. Her brain steadied when she saw me, and she controlled herself miraculously.

"Did you see it?" she whispered, and I knew she meant the white shroud. "I did!" Her words tumbled out fast and furiously. "It glided over me like a ghost, then sank into the sea!"

Jim Pall ripped off the bones of his regalia in a frenzy. His face was frozen with a hideous hatred.

"Where's Ed—the rest?" he demanded, fingering the gun.

I told him about Brandt and May. He dashed out, leaving Ina and me. Her hands sought mine and I held them tightly. That gave me more courage than I had ever believed I possessed.

Striking a match I sought the main

electric switch and found it in contact. The fuse box was situated under it, and I discovered that the master fuse had been blown. Luck or Providence was with me. Another fuse lay at the bottom of the box. I inserted it and immediately lights went on in all parts of the ship.

Until that instant the captain's body had been obscured from Ina's eyes. With the lights on she saw him. She cried out in dread and threw her arms about my neck, almost strangling me.

"It was an accident!" I yelled at her. "He must have fallen in the darkness."

It was a lie, but it served to calm the hysterical girl. The ship rocked and pitched. I disengaged myself from her to lash the wheel steady. Then taking her hand I started below.

Another piercing bellow thundered from stem to stern. Ina shuddered and dug her nails into my flesh in icy fear. Noises aft reached us when I started toward the companionway ladder.

Ina clung to me and I seized the rail. A huge wave churned the small craft. Torrents of green sea washed aboard and drenched us to the bone. I grabbed Ina but the force of the backwash ripped her from my fingers. In the darkness the cat ears on her head loomed like diabolical twin horns.

A sweeping wind brushed them off her head and sent them spinning out across the turbulent waters. Throwing myself forward, my right hand touched her lamé gown as she was hurled bodily over the railing.

With a choke of fear in my throat I strove to encircle her slim form. God knows what would have happened had she not outstretched her arms toward me. The ensuing seconds were nightmares.

BATTLING the angry sea that tumbled back across the stern, I seized her hands. Frantically her fingers curled and tightened convulsively about my wrists. In that manner we struggled against the elements. My feet slipped and everything looked black to us.

A pitch of the ship saved us. It flung us together, then flat against the wheelhouse. I grasped a hawser that lay at my feet and hung on for all I was

worth. That terrible moment passed.

Still, something was utterly wrong. The ship's lights went out again as I led Ina toward the companionway. Her arm wound about my own, she drew in a swift breath. Her free hand stifled the scream that surged to her lips.

Then she pointed—and my hair must have stood on end. For on the surface of the sea, not ten feet off the ship's side, floated a skeleton! It bobbed with the whitecaps, sinking and rising like a grotesque monster of the deep. And it was headed toward the ship.

From somewhere beneath us, sounding as though it came from the grisly form on the water's surface, rose a gurgling cry. It crescendoed, loud and commanding. Ina buried her head on my chest, stark with apprehension.

Hypnotized by the advancing skeleton, my eyes remained glued on the water. A shift of the yacht's course brought the chilling spectacle parallel with the ship. Choked by a gasp that I tried to kill, I gazed transfixed.

That floating skeleton was adorned with a face of flesh. The features were indistinct, but a face it was! And it seemed to leer up at me. Then it disappeared.

"It's gone!" I breathed huskily to Ina.

A spasm shot through her small body. It recalled me to sanity. This was all foolishness, I tried to convince myself. For I wasn't mad. Neither was Ina. Yet the horrible, unaccountable occurrences denied my logic. These things had happened!

But where were the others—Pall, Brandt, Wilson—and the girls? Ina sobbed brokenly and my heart was torn with her grief. Deciding abruptly, I lifted her and slowly descended the dark companionway ladder. I called out for the others, but only the echo of my hoarse voice answered me.

I thought of the two sailors and wondered what had become of them. Had they abandoned the ship? Hardly. I remembered seeing the yacht's sole lifeboat on the aft deck davits. At the bottom of the ladder I set Ina on her feet. I moved ahead cautiously, not knowing what I would encounter.

A form shuffled past me and I attempted to stop it with a short right jab. But my hand hit nothing but air. Again I feared for my sanity. After all, was I really imagining things?

A sharp cry from Ina swung me on my heel. I started back to her. My hand touched a silken robe. It was dry, and Ina's clothing was soaking wet. Mingled feelings stabbed my brain.

Something shot by me and the prick of a knife dented my shoulder. In the darkness I had been missed by a hair's-breadth.

THERE was no thinking now. I grasped for the thing with all my strength. But the silk twisted and ripped. Whatever it was, it was again free to strike! Ina's wet form materialized into my arms of a sudden. With a quick thrust I cleared her from the path I judged another knife blow would take.

The glint of a blade arced toward my chest at that very instant. I glided forward, low and hard. Both my fists beat a wicked tattoo on the body of a man.

The knife clattered to the galley floor. I embraced the Thing fitfully. But it fought with the strength of a giant. The enveloping silk of the robe suddenly thrown over my head handicapped my efforts to strike a vulnerable spot before I could tear free from the smothering silk. Then a heavy blow to my chin flattened me. When I arose my assailant had vanished.

"Ina, Ina!" I called softly, not daring to speak louder than a hoarse whisper. I was afraid for her. I can't explain why I felt that death had been planned for her; that my presence had thwarted the attack.

On all fours I crept about the narrow companion until I came upon her huddled form. She had been stunned to unconsciousness when her head had struck the door of one of the state-rooms.

Had I been alert I might have seen the dark apparition assuming form near me. Too late I sensed its presence. I pulled my body to one side as a knife

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 103)
hurtled through the air and imbedded itself deep in the flooring.

My hand closed about the handle. A sticky substance kept it there as though pasted. I jumped to my feet and stared crazily about me, when a deep groan riveted my attention near at hand.

Chancing a fatal blow from the dark I flicked my lighter. Its yellow, unsteady flare revealed Ina against the far wall, blood oozing from an ugly head wound. The light went out as I dropped to my knees at her side. Again that groan!

The lighter flared again in my hand, and I found Ted Wilson stretched on the floor, a deep gash in his side. His role of Death assumed a sinister significance at the moment. But a rapid examination under the bobbing flame from my lighter showed that wound not fatal. A sigh of thankfulness escaped me.

Not far from Wilson lay Grace. Her robe of white was gone, but she wore a slip. I leaned over her and listened for a heart-beat. There was none! She had played the Corpse—now she was one! Ironical and breath-robbing!

My lighter died out and I was once more hemmed in by darkness. Weird, pulsating drama of the vilest description reeled through my brain. My breathing came short and I realized I held the knife that had stabbed Wilson. The sticky substance on its handle was blood—blood from Ted Wilson's body!

With an involuntary gesture I threw the knife away. I crossed to Ina and shook her until I realized what I was doing. Then, in a half hysteria myself, I cuddled her, planting kisses on her lips. Once her lips returned the caress, and I knew that consciousness was returning to her.

THE *thud, thud* of footfalls on the deck above sounded ghostly. My gaze went ceilingward as if I were capable of seeing who walked there. I guessed that it might be the seamen. Where had they been while the captain had been attacked?

Added doubts assailed me. I wanted to dash upstairs and discover what all

this meant. But Ina, just emerging from her faint, lay tense, wondering. Even in the darkness I could visualize her drawn face and fear-filled eyes.

"Sh-h," I said softly. "It's I, Ray. Footsteps. On the deck!"

Her hand trembled, but she answered stoutly. "Let's get up there and see what's happening. I'm going mad!"

Bravery like that could only be emulated. We moved up the companionway ladder to the deck level where I peered out. The moonless night pressed in about us and the gathering fog swirled about the ship. Visibility was low, and afforded me a chance to dart forward.

"I'll be right back," I whispered to Ina.

Crouching low, hugging the side of the pilot house, I crept ahead. Noise of a scuffle reached me as I rounded the bridge. Blurred forms were battling. The white of the seamen's uniforms stood out. The next instant I discerned the Devil's makeup which Ed Brandt wore. He was being beaten by the two seamen. I rushed forward, leaping into the thick of the fighting.

Both sailors were armed with knives that were raised to be plunged into Brandt. My right fist changed the tide of battle. It cracked the heavier seaman on the jaw, sprawling him on the deck. A dull smacking sound told me his head had banged hard on the flooring of the deck.

My next blow was aimed for the remaining seaman's head, but it never landed. That ominous, forewarning laugh that had been heard before pervaded the ship. The three of us halted, petrified. We stood like the stop-motion of a movie film in posed action.

In answer to that deadly laughter the yacht dipped toward Davy Jones. The seaman fell against me, his knife ripping through my jacket to slice my forearm.

I grabbed his wrist and wrenched the weapon free. He blubbered unintelligibly, then pounced upon me like a savage ape. I kicked wildly with both feet and he tumbled off me. We leaped at each other, throwing punches.

Then a shroud of blackness encircled

us, drawing us close and hurling us toward the low railing. Instinct compelled me to entwine my leg on the rail as we started overboard. The seaman splashed below, but I saved myself. I glanced down to see what had enveloped us, but I saw absolutely nothing but the white shoulders of the seaman's uniform as he floundered in the backwash of the yacht.

My leg had been sprained terribly. Pain shot through my whole right side. The cut on my forearm bled profusely, but I ignored it as I tried anxiously to contact the railing with both hands. Finally, almost at the brink of exhaustion, I made it.

Shifting my weight and vaulting my body, I managed to pancake myself on the deck. That very instant Ina's pitiful plea for help paralyzed my nerves. My senses stopped, letting only my instinct function.

UNAWARE of the blood dripping from my wound, I raced aft. My sprained foot could not easily carry my weight. But these things were not in mind as I ploughed for the companion where I had left her.

There my heart almost burst!

Ina, held by the hair, was being dragged to the ship's side by some dark, unreal monster. She screamed as she fought to free herself. But the dark Thing pulled her unmercifully along the deck, a sibilant hiss of laughter coming from it.

I ran to Ina as fast as I could, forgetting all but her plight. The Thing whirled, releasing its grip on Ina's hair. A gun gleamed in the darkness, then spat a bluish, yellow flame. In the vivid flame of that shot I identified my assailant.

"Ed Brandt!"

I gasped as the slug ripped through my sleeve. With an unholy curse Brandt hurled himself at me. He fired again, but the bullet went wild. I grabbed his hand and fought as I never had, before or since. Sweat poured from me and my muscles bulged with the strain upon them.

I had gone to his rescue in his combat with the two seamen. They had

(Continued on page 106)

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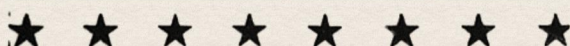
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been on the side of law and order. Yet I had fought them. This and many other thoughts raced through my brain as I twisted and turned on the deck, trying to get an overpowering hold on Brandt.

He was a madman. My strength was puny compared with his. He struck me with the gun butt and my head clanged like a giant bell. Still I knew it meant death to yield one iota; death not only for me, but for the girl I loved.

The thought urged me to the utmost. I slammed a vicious uppercut to his chin. It knocked his head back with a snap. Then he cocked the gun before my eyes. I looked into the muzzle, knowing nothing short of an act of Providence could keep me from getting that bullet.

His finger tightened on the trigger, and his eyes, mere slits in the mask that covered his face, were bright with victory. But he never fired that shot. Providence in the person of Ina Brandt saved me.

She flung herself at the gun hand, forcing it aside. The sudden attack from this unexpected quarter caused the madman to drop his gun. He belled fiendishly and clawed at me, pushing me against the railing. He lifted me off the deck and poised to hurl me through space, down into the frothing water.

He laughed in my face as he set himself for the last move. My fist shot up with all the power I could muster. It knocked him back. But he was up instantly, charging at me like an enraged bull.

I hobbled to one side, avoiding his rush to the railing. My good foot went out mechanically and it tripped him neatly. I jumped astride him before he knew what had struck him. Left and right I hammered at him. How long I continued to hit him I have no idea. It was Ina who brought me back to sensibility. She shook me as hard as she could.

“**R**AY, Ray!” I half stopped and looked dumbly at her. My mind reacted in spurts until her words began to mean something to me.

I told him that Jim Pall had planned the masquerade party aboard his yacht,
(Continued on page 108)

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20x14-50-20	2.85	1.32
20x14-50-20	2.90	1.35
20x14-50-20	2.95	1.38
20x14-50-20	3.00	1.40
20x14-50-20	3.05	1.42
20x14-50-20	3.10	1.45
20x14-50-20	3.15	1.48
20x14-50-20	3.20	1.50
20x14-50-20	3.25	1.52
20x14-50-20	3.30	1.55
20x14-50-20	3.35	1.58
20x14-50-20	3.40	1.60
20x14-50-20	3.45	1.62
20x14-50-20	3.50	1.65
20x14-50-20	3.55	1.68
20x14-50-20	3.60	1.70
20x14-50-20	3.65	1.72
20x14-50-20	3.70	1.75
20x14-50-20	3.75	1.78
20x14-50-20	3.80	1.80
20x14-50-20	3.85	1.82
20x14-50-20	3.90	1.85
20x14-50-20	3.95	1.88
20x14-50-20	4.00	1.90
20x14-50-20	4.05	1.92
20x14-50-20	4.10	1.95
20x14-50-20	4.15	1.98
20x14-50-20	4.20	2.00
20x14-50-20	4.25	2.02
20x14-50-20	4.30	2.05
20x14-50-20	4.35	2.08
20x14-50-20	4.40	2.10
20x14-50-20	4.45	2.12
20x14-50-20	4.50	2.15
20x14-50-20	4.55	2.18
20x14-50-20	4.60	2.20
20x14-50-20	4.65	2.22
20x14-50-20	4.70	2.25
20x14-50-20	4.75	2.28
20x14-50-20	4.80	2.30
20x14-50-20	4.85	2.32
20x14-50-20	4.90	2.35
20x14-50-20	4.95	2.38
20x14-50-20	5.00	2.40
20x14-50-20	5.05	2.42
20x14-50-20	5.10	2.45
20x14-50-20	5.15	2.48
20x14-50-20	5.20	2.50
20x14-50-20	5.25	2.52
20x14-50-20	5.30	2.55
20x14-50-20	5.35	2.58
20x14-50-20	5.40	2.60
20x14-50-20	5.45	2.62
20x14-50-20	5.50	2.65
20x14-50-20	5.55	2.68
20x14-50-20	5.60	2.70
20x14-50-20	5.65	2.72
20x14-50-20	5.70	2.75
20x14-50-20	5.75	2.78
20x14-50-20	5.80	2.80
20x14-50-20	5.85	2.82
20x14-50-20	5.90	2.85
20x14-50-20	5.95	2.88
20x14-50-20	6.00	2.90
20x14-50-20	6.05	2.92
20x14-50-20	6.10	2.95
20x14-50-20	6.15	2.98
20x14-50-20	6.20	3.00
20x14-50-20	6.25	3.02
20x14-50-20	6.30	3.05



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LEARN AT HOME FROM AN ENGINEER!

(Continued from page 107)

and that somehow Ed Brandt must have obtained permission to install a few hair-raising tricks to enliven things.

"You'll find an automatic phonograph hidden in the lounge somewhere," I explained. "I tumbled to the trick when the identical cries were repeated. Ed had arranged that at a given point the phonograph would short-circuit the ship's electric system, darkening everything aboard. When I replaced the blown fuse he pulled off the main switch in the pilot house. But Ed had a more diabolical reason than just to excite the guests."

"So it appears," muttered the officer dryly.

I hurried on. "You see, Ina Brandt had refused to marry Ed, her cousin, and he knew the family fortune was not to be his. He was nearly broke from his crazy inventions and tried to gain the fortune by getting Ina out of the way."

"But why should he have killed both the captain and Pall?" inquired Sanders with a heavy frown. "They were innocent."

"Yes," I agreed. "They were. As I see it the captain must have objected to any further hair-raising demonstration, because his men were growing panicky. In order to carry out his ultimate intention, Ed had to kill the captain. He had to silence Jim Pall because Jim was wise to what was happening, once things did start to happen. He flung Jim's body into the sea to frighten Ina and me."

LATER I reasoned it out that the black, enveloping shroud which had covered me when I was fighting was Ted Wilson's mantle of Death. Ed Brandt had employed it for his own ends. I decided, then, as I looked at Wilson and Grace Harmon, arm in arm, in silent communion, that the earlier ghostly apparition had been Grace's white costume. It had been blown leeward by the strong wind.

"Quite a nerve-racking experience," declared Lieutenant Sanders as he looked at Ina. "You had a narrow escape, Miss Brandt."

CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS IN

My gaze wavered from him to amidship, where two towering Coast Guardsmen flanked the cowering Ed Brandt. Everything, then, was under control. I glanced up at Ina's beautiful face as she replied to Sanders.

"I'll say it was a close squeak!" She looked full into my eyes and a quiver tingled through me. "Thanks to Ray, we'll all be able to tell our children about it. Won't we, darling?"

Being only a mortal man, what could I say?

"You're darn right!" I emphasized it with a kiss that shook the ship!

AT THE DOOR OF HELL

(Concluded from page 79)

those villagers would never believe it. The world outside—well, mused John Marlowe, he would tell them that he had found the remains of his friend, and would show the proof. But that was all that he would tell, because no one would believe him. The secret would remain in Orm.

Marlowe plunged through the mist of early dawn, following the rain-gutted road. He thought, as the village of Orm was left far behind him, that there would be such a road in purgatory as the one that led from the lonely railroad flag stop on the fringe of the world he knew.

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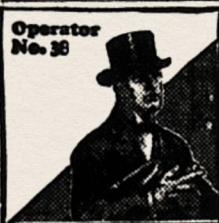
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HORROR-SCOPES

(Continued from page 12)

of hair and pulled up his unconscious son. The lad had been in the water for fifteen minutes, and was apparently dead. A doctor worked on the lad a few minutes. He smiled as the little boy opened his eyes and reached for his father. The strange part was the fact that there was no water in the boy's lungs at all. The only way the doctor could account for the miracle, was through some form of suspended animation.

Two hours later, the father was assured that it wasn't coincidence, for he received a telegram from Hollywood, California, reading: "Glad that your son has been saved to you. With love, Sondu."

The Elephant

EVERYBODY in the circus agreed that little Gus, the clown, drank too much and that he ought to be fired. But because he was such a likeable little man, and because he was the only one who could handle Tina, the big elephant, when she was mad, the owners overlooked his unquenchable thirst for alcohol.

It was nothing short of miraculous the way Gus could soothe the savage beast. Tina was old and a bit sour on life. Little things annoyed her a great deal. On such occasions she ranted and trumpeted and was apt to trample anyone who got in her way. But these tantrums were meat and drink to Gus. He would scramble up on the heavy back of the huge pachyderm, croon lovingly into the flapping ear. Presently Tina would be quiet, would squat down and then roll over on her side, blissfully content.

One night Gus drank too much and right in the middle of the show he toppled off Tina's back and broke his neck. In a pocket of his soiled uniform they found a note scribbled on ragged paper with a pencil: "Please bury me under the sawdust."

So in the middle of the night, contrary to health regulations and customs, they put Gus in a rough box and buried him under the big top that he loved. The circus owned the lot and they knew the secret grave would not be molested unless someone told the authorities.

It was three years before the circus played that town again. Tina was still with the show. Times were hard and elephants were expensive, so they had to put up with her difficult disposition.

Tina was in the middle of her act when a boy hit her in the eye with a bent nail fired from a sling-shot. The old beast bellowed with rage, shook off her trainer and charged the stands.

The crowd raced for safety. The lion-tamer fired six blanks into her face but it only infuriated her all the more.

But suddenly she stopped short and

CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS IN

cocked her big head as though listening for something. Her huge body trembled and she dropped to her knees. She rolled slowly over on her side and lay quiet, just as she used to do for little Gus. Then she got up and remained tranquil for the rest of the performance.

But the next morning they found her dead from a heart rupture. She was lying directly over the secret grave of Gus, the clown who loved her.

The Mysterious Room

SEVERAL years ago a Philadelphia housewife appeared at the breakfast table in an extremely nervous state. She seemed anxious to have her husband and grown son leave for work. The two men were too engrossed in the morning newspapers to notice anything amiss. But Rose, the daughter, became suspicious.

When the father and son had departed, the daughter confronted her mother. "Something has upset you, mother. What is it?"

"It was a dream, Rose. The strangest dream I ever had. I didn't dare mention it to your father or brother because I knew they would only laugh."

"What sort of a dream was it?" asked the daughter.

"I was walking through this house at night when suddenly I noticed a door in the hall that I knew I had never seen before. A strange force made me open it. When I did, I found myself in a little room completely bare and windowless. There was a red glow of light that seemed to seep through the walls. Tell me Rose—what can it mean?"

"Nothing, mother. Nothing at all. Dreams are merely a jumble of ideas that you have thought about before. No matter how crazy my own dreams are, I can always find that each part represents something I have thought about. Haven't you and Dad been thinking about adding another room to the back of the house?"

Nothing more was said about the dream until that afternoon when the police reported the death of the son. He had been struck by a car. The mother was frantic with grief and became convinced that her dream was a warning of death. From that day on she dreaded a repetition of the dream.

One night the daughter was awakened by a piercing scream. As she sat up in bed, her mother burst into the room, slammed the door behind her and turned the key in the lock.

"Mother—mother—what is it?" cried Rose. Then the father's fist pounded on the door. The father was shouting: "Open up, Rose—what's the matter with your mother?"

"It's nothing, dad," Rose called through the panel. "Go back to bed. I'll see you in a few moments. Mother is sick to her stomach."

Rose waited until she heard her father go (Continued on page 112)

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(Continued from page 111)

down the hall. "Now mother, stop crying. Tell me what happened."

"The dream—the same dream. The same room—everything. I know something will happen."

The daughter attempted to comfort her mother and finally persuaded her to take a tablet which soon put her to sleep. But the following morning upon awakening, the mother became hysterical. A doctor was summoned who ordered her to a nearby hospital for observation.

The woman has never recovered from a neurotic state. Her waking hours are occupied by ceaseless brooding over her dream. Melancholia, hysterics and even violence take hold of her at times. Every Sunday the daughter visits her mother, but the daughter has never had the courage to tell her that the father died of a heart attack on the very day she was taken to the hospital. The mother believes he is working out of town and will return shortly.

Revenge by Will Power

A VETERAN of the world war tells the following tale:

I had a fellow in my squad named Jerry. One day I saw him lift a huge girder off a wounded buddy, just by determination and super will power. The girder must have weighed over five hundred pounds. Jerry was the most determined man I ever met. He had an older brother who had been killed in action, crushed to death by a tank. Jerry brooded over it. The only thing he ever talked about was blowing up every enemy tank he saw.

The big push arrived and we jumped off. I kept my eye on Jerry, saw that he didn't take too many chances. Finally we had to advance on a line of trenches. There was a tank just beyond. We went forward and Jerry was just a few yards ahead of me. Machine-guns would spit at us every now and then. Suddenly I saw Jerry stumble and start to fall. A red stain appeared on his back between the shoulder blades. I reached him and grabbed his arm. I kept him on his feet.

"Did they get you, Jerry?" I yelled.

He did not answer, didn't even turn his head. He twisted from me and kept on going. When we reached the first trench the enemy had retreated. The tank was just in front of us. I saw Jerry throw a grenade which blew the sides off the tank. Then he pitched forward into the trench. I jumped in after him. I had heard no machine-gun. Why should he fall now? He was lying on his face and I rolled him over. He was out cold and there was blood on his coat. But he had a smile on his face and I figured he was happy because he had gotten that tank.

I called to a soldier who had been a medical student back in the States. He knelt down beside Jerry and unbuttoned the kid's uniform. "Hell, Corporal," he growled,

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Questions and Answers

To Horror-Scopes: Is it true that death usually strikes three times along railroads or highways? Are there many instances of this? D. K. C.

To D. K. C.: Yes, there are many instances of death striking in threes. Here is a clipping from a recent issue of the New York Daily News: "Three men died along the Bronx elevated lines yesterday—Patrolman Thomas Hogan, killed at 4:15 A. M. when his car hit a pillar at Jerome Avenue near 202nd St.; George Armstrong of 2178 Muliner Ave., dropped dead at 4:45 A. M. on a platform at Pelham Parkway and White Plains Ave.; and Patrick Keane, guard, fell dead in his train at Fordham Road and Third Ave. The same ambulance from Fordham Hospital responded to all three calls. And three times Dr. Oscar Palatucci was the interne who pronounced the victims dead. All three were taken to the Fordham Morgue."

To Horror-Scopes: Can a person be hypnotized against his will or without knowing that he is being hypnotized? H. D.

To H. D.: There are rare cases of this, but the victim must be concentrating on something at the time and the hypnotist must see the victim's eyes. One experiment was where the victim was looking into a mirror while shaving and the hypnotist sat behind the mirror which was so constructed that the hypnotist could see the victim, but the victim could not see the hypnotist.

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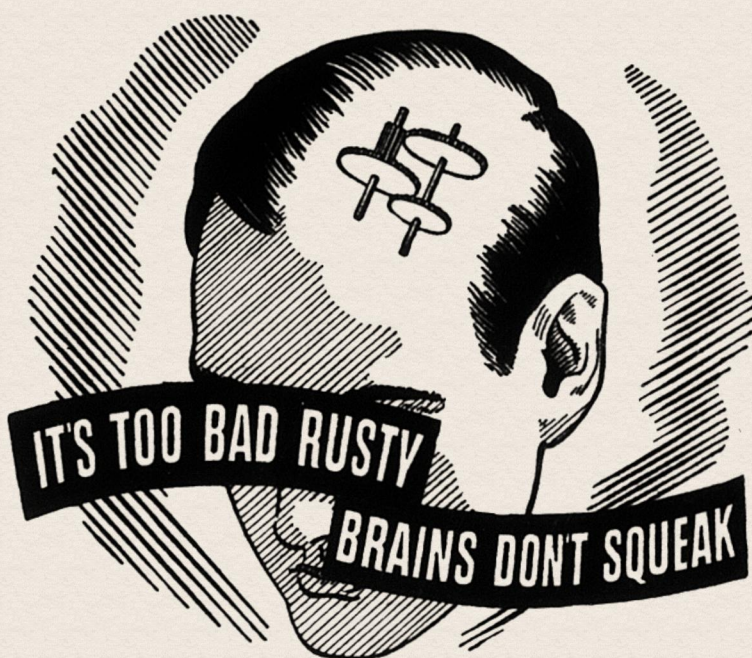
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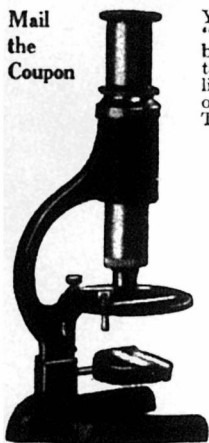
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