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Fingers of Fire and Destroy?

A Novelet of Weird Sacrifice

By **CARL JACOBI**

Author of "House of the Ravens," "Murder for Medusa," etc.

CHAPTER I

Strange Message

IT didn't look like the take-off for a round-the-world flight. There was no crowd. The sky was dark and overcast, with a threat of rain. And the huge trimotor, waiting on the con-

crete runway, resembled more a prehistoric bird than the latest in planes ready to carry Valerie Dennis over three thousand miles of open sea.

Valerie stood by the little radio shack, talking to Paul Lane, the pilot.

"Dave should be here in a moment," she said nervously. "He had some last-minute business to attend to, and it

A Holocaust of Hell Was the Welcome

must have delayed him."

Lane nodded. "I hope he hurries. Last reports give us an unlimited ceiling a hundred miles out of Oakland."

The girl glanced at her wrist watch, then across at the silver monoplane, and her lips set grimly. Would this globe-girdling flight end in disaster and horror as its predecessor had?

She could only hope that this time the gods would look more favorably on the venture!

The original flight had been conceived by her father, Henry Dennis, millionaire owner of the rich Dennis Plane Company. He had planned to fly nonstop to Teufoa, his own private island in the South Seas, then around the world, west-to-east at the equator.

"Sure it's been attempted before," Dennis had said. "But none of the attempts have been successful. The only round-the-world flights that have been made have been east-west near the Arctic circle. If I can make it at the equator in one of my planes, I stand a good chance of swinging that big government contract."

That was a year ago. He had taken off from Oakland in a blaze of publicity with one other man, Jennings, as co-pilot. The ship was a Dennis-Lane, partly designed by Paul Lane, experimenter and chief test pilot for the company.

All had gone well as far as Teufoa. The plane had landed on the island, reported back by radio and taken off again for Singapore. And then black horror had coiled about the speeding ship like an invisible shroud.

Lane was at the radio here at the firm's private landing field at Madera, California. Hour after hour he had listened to the faint signals from the ship, signals sent by Henry Dennis at



A scene of horror lay before him!



to the Island of the Flame God!

the key.

And suddenly, less than a minute after the island take-off, had come that terrified message:

"S.O.S. S.O.S. The fire demon! It's closing in on us! S.O.S. S.O.S."

Lane, alone in contact with the ship at that moment, pounded back:

"What's wrong? Repeat! Do not understand."

"S.O.S. The flame fingers are cover-

ing the whole sky! The fire god is closing in on us! It is devouring the plane! We're burning alive! For God's sake. . . ."

And then silence. The generator hum lingered for a few seconds in Lane's ears and died away. Henry Dennis, co-pilot Jennings, and the huge trimotor had disappeared into the unknown abruptly and completely.

And now another Dennis-Lane plane, a sister-ship, stood waiting to embark on the same flight!

TWO men came striding up to the radio shack, one short and thick-set with reddish hair, the other a loose-limbed rangy man, wearing a snap-brim gray hat and gray business suit.

Dave Rutledge gathered Valerie in his arms and kissed her. "Sorry I'm late, darling. Is everything ready?"

"Everything." She nodded and glanced at the red-haired man. "I see you've met my cousin, Ray Acker. We take off at once. Thank heaven, there aren't any reporters to hold us up. The flight's been kept a secret from everyone save the aviation officials."

Paul Lane shook hands with Rutledge, then shouted a last order to the waiting mechanics. Rutledge helped Valerie into the cabin. A humming drone went up as the electric starters turned the three motors. A moment

Two claw-arms were coiled around Acker's throat



later the blocks were pulled, and the big ship began to move down the runway.

Heavily loaded with gasoline, it rose sluggishly, clearing the wall of trees at the far end of the field by a narrow margin. Paul Lane's dark face was impassive as he played with the controls.

For a quarter of an hour, while central California rolled by far below them, no further word was spoken in the cabin. Then Rutledge turned to the girl he was some day going to marry.

"Listen, Valerie," he said. "Don't you think it's about time you told me what this is all about?"

She took off her beret and shook out her dark curls. Brown-eyed, slim and lovely, Valerie Dennis could have won fame in lines other than aviation, had she wished.

"You know as much as I do," she replied. "Father wanted to make this flight in one of his planes more than anything in the world. He died in the attempt, and I'm simply going to try and accomplish what he failed."

"But I'm only booked for halfway passage."

"Yes." A look of latent fear crossed her face. "We fly direct to Teufoa. There you and Ray get off and look around the island. You'll be picked up in two weeks by the regular inter-island steamer, while Mr. Lane and I continue the flight around the world."

Rutledge stroked his jaw. "I don't like it," he said. "It's too dangerous for you. Anyway, why is an investigation necessary? And what's all this rot about a flame god?"

For an instant Valerie looked at him in silence, her eyes dull with a strange terror.

"The flame god is real, Dave. Father, Ray and I have known about it since we first went to the island. Teufoa, you know, is near the Solomons, and the island is inhabited by Polynesians. The natives refer to a huge stone image on one of the mountain peaks as the flame god. They—"

"Man-carved?" broke in Rutledge.

Ray Acker shook his head. "No. I've studied some geology, and I'd say

the thing is nothing more than the result of countless years of wind erosion and volcanic upthrusts. The mountain is an extinct volcano, from which the superstition probably arises."

"The Polynesians believe," Valerie continued, "that the flame god is a living thing, that when its anger is raised, it has the power to reach out with fingers of fire and destroy everything near it."

Rutledge scowled. "And you actually believe that your father—"

"I don't know what to believe. I only know that an Australian ship found bits of airplane wreckage off the east shore of the island, wreckage burned, charred and practically destroyed by fire. Then that strange message—"

"I'll never be able to rest until I know the truth, Dave. For my sake, I want you and Ray to look over the island until the steamer comes. If all goes well—if you find nothing wrong—we should be together again in California in a few weeks."

RUTLEDGE gnawed his upper lip and slumped back in his seat. If he hadn't loved Valerie desperately, he would have said no to the whole affair. First of all, he didn't like the idea of Valerie flying around the world with another man. Paul Lane was a good enough guy, but even so—Second, he didn't care much for this cousin, Ray Acker. The fellow had a way of squinting and avoiding your gaze that went against the grain. And third and last, all this talk about a flame god was sheer poppycock!

"Me, a newspaper man, chasing ghosts," Rutledge muttered. "Phooey!" But deep within him he knew he would have gone anywhere for Valerie.

An hour later the plane was far out over the North Pacific, streaking through thin grayish clouds.

Brain filled with a hundred unpleasant thoughts, Rutledge watched Paul Lane fuss with the radio receiver. A half hour had passed now since he had pulled in the last weather report, and the pilot's face wore a hard frown. Abruptly he turned, beckoned to Valerie.

"Take the controls a moment, will you?" he said. "I don't like the way this radio is acting."

He adjusted the headset and slowly twisted the dials on the panel before him. For a long moment there was no sound in the cabin save the steady vibrating drone of the three motors.

Then abruptly Lane stiffened. Quickly he turned a tuning dial a fraction, clamped both hands hard against the headset.

"Rutledge," he said hoarsely, "come here and listen to this a moment. See if you hear what I do."

The man's face had gone white, and there was a look of bewilderment and terror in his eyes.

The headset was exchanged, and Rutledge, the drone of the motors cut off, found himself listening to the air waves. He heard nothing at first; then the crackling and sputtering of static sounded in his ears. But that was all.

He looked up questioningly.

"I'll switch to loud speaker," Lane said. "Maybe it'll come again; I'm not sure, but I thought I heard—"

HIS words clipped off. Like a wire jerked taut, Rutledge went rigid in every nerve and muscle. Faint and indistinct, yet audible to every one in the cabin of the racing plane a voice sounded through the static.

It was a voice hollow and low-pitched that seemed to come from the grave, and it said in slow measured cadence:

"The flame god rules Teufoa. Come, ye unbelievers, come and be devoured by the flame god!"

Twice those meaningless sentences were intoned. Then the voice died away, and the speaker sounded only to the sputterings of static.

Rutledge jammed his hands in his pockets, fought back a cold chill that was moving down his spine.

"Some people have a funny idea of humor," he said slowly. "I'd like to get my hands on the amateur that sent that."

"Amateur?" Ray Acker's red head looked like an inverted bowl of copper in the half light. "Do you think it was an amateur?"

"What else could it be? Some kid with a couple of dollars worth of apparatus must have learned of our take-off and is having the time of his life, choking up the air waves."

Even as he said it, Rutledge knew he was speaking only to calm the others. But Paul Lane shook his head.

"There's a Federal Radio Commission that prevents such things," he said. "Sending such stuff without a reason would make one liable to a prison offense. Besides, it came through on a wave-length higher than amateurs generally use."

Fists clenched, Rutledge looked at Valerie, saw that the girl's eyes were fastened on the navigation instruments as she deftly maneuvered the big ship. Only the taut whiteness of her lips told that she too had heard.

The hours snailed past. Since that inexplicable message the radio receiver had gone dead. They were cut off now, moving through a world that was ghostly and unreal, zooming over a trackless waste that seemed to view their passage hungrily. Scattered clouds gave way to thick fog. Rutledge, staring out one of the ports at the white mist, thought he saw curious shapes and figures vaguely outlined, peering in at him, seeking to penetrate the silver walls of the ship with grasping hands.

Lane was back in the pilot's seat, and Ray Acker was trying to read by a tiny wall light. Rutledge and Valerie sat close together, gazing out into the fog-filled night.

"Dave, I'm afraid," the girl confessed at length. "Horribly afraid. I know that something on the island is responsible for father's death. It's out there, waiting for us."

Rutledge put his arm around her. "Better get some sleep," he advised. "You'll forget it all in the morning."

CHAPTER II

The Island of the Flame God

THEY were over Teufoa. Straight as a bullet the plane had come, over

the Hawaiians, over Howland and Baker islands, over the South Pacific. Now, dipping out of the clouds into the brilliant sunshine, the tiny rectangle of land loomed before them.

As he peered out the port, with the plane circling slowly downward, a wave of foreboding swept over Rutledge. Even in the sunlight the coastline, ensnarled with a thick jungle of mangrove trees, looked dark and sullen. A coral reef extended some distance out to sea like a breakwater, and against this the waves boiled and creamed, forming a narrow lagoon on the lea side. Farther inland a series of three mountain peaks projected like the heads of three old men.

Lane swerved the plane and sent it zooming down toward a small open spot in the thick foliage. As if by magic a landing field sprang up to meet them. Settling to a graceful three-point, they taxied up to a low bamboo hangar at the far end.

The motors stopped, and Ray Acker pushed open the cabin door and leaped out.

"Teufoa," he exulted. "We made it."

The others followed slowly. Brooding silence, broken only by the distant roar of the surf and the moaning of the wind through the trees, greeted them. After the roar of the motors the place seemed like a dead world.

Valerie strode forward a few feet, shielded her eyes and extended her arm out before her, pointing.

"There it is," she said huskily. "The flame god."

Even though he had known what to expect, a feeling of awe and terror billowed over Rutledge. High up on the slope of the middle mountain peak a gigantic statue towered toward the sky. Crude, with no detail distinct, it was at first glance only a pillar of stone. Then arms and a colossal head came into focus, and he saw a gargantuan man, standing with feet braced wide apart, arms extended above it as in supplication.

But it wasn't the size of the image that held him there, staring. It was the face, the expression of which even distance failed to soften. A face of revolting hate and fury, of savage lust and

diabolic evil.

"Not exactly a pleasant-looking thing," Paul Lane said, "is it? Now where's your father's house?"

"Half a mile inland." The girl nodded to a path.

"Okay." Lane lit a cigarette and turned back to the plane. "You and Rutledge go ahead and open up the place, get some food ready. Acker can stay here with me and help me look over the ship."

FIVE minutes later Rutledge with Valerie's arm linked in his was moving down the path through the jungle. The vegetation here was luxuriant, the ferns and trees growing to immense size. They walked in silence, oppressed by the solitude that closed upon them. Birds chattered and scolded overhead.

A quarter mile forward and Valerie suddenly halted.

"Listen, Dave!" she cried. "Did you hear it?"

"Hear what?" Rutledge strained his ears, peered through the thick tessellation of foliage.

"That sound. Like someone—like a woman moaning in agony. It came from off there—"

Rutledge did hear it then. Hoarse but distinctly feminine in tone, a hideous burbling cry filtered through the silence. It ended on a note of excruciating pain.

Rutledge stabbed in his pocket, drew forth a revolver and plunged into the dense bush.

"Stay where you are," he called to Valerie.

But she didn't stay. With a low sob of terror she ran after him, clutching at his sleeve. Together they fought their way through the undergrowth, listening as they advanced for a repetition of that cry.

It came again just before them, and fighting through a last fringe of ferns, Rutledge sucked in his breath in horror.

A brown-skinned native girl, a Polynesian, lay in an open spot, writhing in agony. Once, but a scant few minutes before, she had been like a hundred other natives of the island, pretty in a

rough way. She was clad only in a short grass skirt, and her breasts and face were heavily tattooed.

They were more than tattooed. As if seared by a white hot iron the flesh from her throat to her waist was horribly burned and blackened. The wound was hideous, and it was amazing that the girl lived at all.

Stifling his horror, Rutledge bent over her.

"What happened?" he asked, forgetting that the native probably would have no knowledge of English.

But her lips were moving soundlessly in an effort to speak. Eyes bulging, sweat pouring from her brow, she rose up on one arm and gazed vacantly before her.

"The flame god!" she screamed. "The flame god! It kills!"

Her voice rose to a wavering shriek, then cut off abruptly. With a spasmodic shudder she fell backward and lay still.

Slowly Rutledge got to his feet. "She spoke in English," he said aloud, as if doubting what he had heard. "She—"

Valerie's face had gone white; her hands were trembling as they clutched Rutledge's arm.

"It's Lehira," the girl whispered. "The only native servant Father trusted on the island. She took care of the house while we were gone—"

Rutledge's first shock of discovery was swiftly passing, and a cold deliberateness seized him now. He pocketed the revolver, moved slowly about the little glade, studying the leaves and undergrowth as he walked.

There were no footprints, for the ground was a thick carpet of decayed and living vegetation. But to the left a trail of torn vines and broken ferns was plainly visible.

"The woman was coming down the path from the house," Rutledge deduced. "Something frightened her, and she took to the woods. It caught up to her here, and"—his voice lowered—"burned her to death. You can see the leaves of this bush have been seared by flame."

Valerie swayed, braced herself against a tree.

"Take me away from here, Dave," she pleaded. "Take me to the house. I—I—"

He gave one last look, then, lips twisted in a bewildered scowl, passed his arm around her and led the way back to the path. Five minutes later they emerged into the clearing and came upon the house.

HENRY DENNIS had spared no expense in building this South Seas retreat, that was evident. The house was a huge rambling affair, built of wood with a wide veranda running the full length. It was in perfect repair, but curiously enough, it had never been painted, and the walls and casements were weathered to a dingy gray by seasons of blistering sun and driving rain.

Fumbling in her pocket Valerie produced a key. She unlocked the veranda screen door and the inner door, and they stepped across the threshold.

Inside an array of white ghosts confronted them—furniture covered with white dust sheets. The house was steeped in ringing silence.

"Where's the kitchen?" Rutledge asked. "What you need is a good cup of strong coffee. I'll have it for you in a minute."

He went down the corridor in the direction she had indicated, found coffee, lighted the kerosene stove and brought a bucket of water from the spring just outside the rear door. Presently, with the steaming cup, he made his way back down the corridor.

When he returned to the main room the first person he saw was Paul Lane. The test-pilot was slumped despondently in a chair, savagely exhaling streamers of cigarette smoke. Ray Acker stood by Valerie.

"Of all the confounded luck," Lane growled. "Here we fly clean across the Pacific and then burn out a bearing for no reason at all. The oil line on the port motor broke. It'll take a full day to fix it."

Rutledge regarded him quietly for a moment, then crossed over and gave Valerie the coffee.

"I'm afraid we've got more to think about right now than a round-the-world

flight," he said. "There's been a murder committed." Swiftly he described the death of the native girl. "It's only a native, of course," he concluded, "but it's just as much a life as a white person's. There's a mystery here, and it seems to be closing in on us."

After that he and Acker removed the dust jackets from the furniture, attempting to make the house as cheerful as possible under the circumstances. It wasn't until their task had taken them away from the others into the library that Ray Acker slid the door closed behind him, looked about nervously and began to speak in low tones.

"Listen, Mr. Rutledge," he said. "I'm a lawyer by profession, and I don't know anything about this flame god or any other native superstition. But I do know this. I don't like Paul Lane, and I'd advise you to keep your eye on him."

Rutledge surveyed the red-haired man coldly. "Why?" he demanded.

Acker's gaze shifted under the steady gaze, and his lips twitched perceptibly.

"I don't know why. Except that when he found the plane wouldn't go on without repairs he swore and cursed and acted like a fiend for a moment. You'd better watch him, that's all."

CHAPTER III

Flaming Sacrifice

AS the day slowly waned, Valerie prepared a light lunch of canned potatoes, meat and grapefruit from stores she found in the kitchen. The meal over, a sudden babble of voices outside brought Rutledge onto the veranda quickly.

A dozen half-naked natives stood in front of the steps. Sighting Rutledge, their leader began to speak excitedly in his own tongue.

The jargon meant nothing to the newspaper man. He strode back to the door and called:

"Valerie. See what you can make of this."

Again the native began his tirade. He spoke hurriedly, glancing about him

uneasily, as if expecting an attack from some unseen direction. Valerie listened through to the end and nodded.

"They're the island natives from the village on the opposite shore," she said. "They say one of their number, Lehira, the girl we saw, has been killed by the flame god. One of the men, attracted by the plane, came this way and found her. They want permission to dispose of the body."

"Tell them to go ahead."

"But you don't understand. Disposing of the body means carrying it to the top of the mountain and placing it at the base of the flame-god image. The Polynesians believe that when the flame god kills, the victim must be given it as a sacrifice. Otherwise it will kill again."

Rutledge frowned, then shrugged. "We might as well grant them permission," he said. "It seems horrible, of course, not to give her a decent burial, but if we interfere with native customs and superstitions, we'll only have trouble on our hands."

He watched the Polynesians disappear down the path and return a moment later, carrying the seared body of the girl. As they strode past the house, the island people began a weird funeral chant. Long after they had gone, the dirge remained in the newspaper man's ears.

Paul Lane came out onto the veranda, his face haggard, still showing signs of the strain he had been under.

"I'm going back to the field and work on that plane," he said. "Better come along, Acker. I may need your help."

Acker hesitated. Rutledge nodded. "You go ahead," he said. "Valerie and I are going to take a hike up toward that flame god. I want to get a better look at the thing."

TEN minutes later, with the girl pacing white-faced at his side, Rutledge made his way down a vague trail toward the middle mountain peak. Although all of them had repeatedly referred to the three summits of Teufoa as mountains, they were comparatively low elevations, appearing higher because of the small circumference of the island.

"Have you ever seen the image at close range?" Rutledge asked as they strode along. The westering sun was a ball of fire over the palm trees, casting a blood red light about them.

"Once." She shuddered perceptibly. "The natives don't like to have white people trespass there. But two years ago when I was on the island I made the trip there. A storm swooped down on me just as I reached it, and I saw it by lightning flashes. It—it was horrible—"

The ground was beginning to rise beneath them, and the going became harder. Palm trees gave way to low thorn bushes and coarse undergrass. In places porous slabs of volcanic rock showed. It was evident, as Acker had said, that the mountain was an extinct crater, and it accounted presumably for the flame-god legend.

But if legend, what had killed Le-hira, the native girl? And why had Henry Dennis sent that strange radio message?

Daylight was fast fading by the time they reached the end of the trail. Fighting their way up a steep acclivity, the man and girl mounted a last escarpment and halted, staring above them.

If the huge image had sent a wave of terror coursing through Rutledge when he first saw it at the landing field, he felt the horror doubly potent now. There it towered into the glooming sky, a colossus of stone. The eyes were two black caverns in the rock. The mouth was a gaping orifice, the lips formed by two overhanging lava abutments.

But the face was a face of evil incarnate. Sensuous lust and obscene hate radiated from those wind-chiseled features.

Valerie's voice sank to a whisper.

"There's Le-hira," she said. "The natives have placed her on the sacrifice slab."

Rutledge looked and saw the nude form of the girl lying supine on a projecting shelf, level with the image's base. He shuddered. Was he wrong about all this, wrong in refusing to accept the beliefs of a race that was old almost as time itself? Did this figure

of stone have the power to reach out with fingers of fire and destroy as legend said?

Even as these thoughts came to him it happened!

A sudden sputtering hiss rose up from the base of the statue before him. And then with a dull roar a column of fire shot upward to engulf the rock slab and the body of the dead native girl!

Rutledge reached out, seized Valerie and yanked her backward.

"Run!" he yelled. "Run!"

The flame tongues were thirty feet high now and still mounting higher. A ghastly unreal light illuminated the hillside. Above, the face of the image, dyed a flickering scarlet, looked down upon them like Satan in malevolent fury. Then abruptly the flames died, and they were encompassed by the pitch blackness of the tropic night.

THROUGH the dead silence that followed there filtered a soul-chilling sound, low at first, gradually mounting the octaves; a booming deep-throated laugh of mockery. Twice it was repeated. Then the heavens were rent wide by a deafening explosion.

Fire, flame, clouds of dirt and rock debris catapulted upward. The image itself, outlined in white relief by the glare, seemed to tremble at its base.

With a frightened cry Valerie turned and leaped down the acclivity, began running in long strides toward the jungle trail. Rutledge wheeled, ducked a cascade of stones and rock fragments that showered down upon him and sped after her.

At the mouth of the trail he pulled her to a halt.

"Listen, Valerie. There's something funny about all this. I want to—"

"Dave, don't you see? It's the flame god, claiming the sacrifice victim. Oh God—"

He saw the fear and terror in her eyes then and nodded quietly. With a last look behind him, he took the girl's arm, switched on his pocket flash and led the way back toward the house.

All the way down that Stygian trail Rutledge moved as in a dream. He gripped the girl's arm comfortingly, but his mind was working like mad,

striving to find an answer to all he had seen. The flame god! He had seen it in action, had felt the hot breath of its attack. Yet, considered from all mundane angles, the thing was impossible. Rutledge was a newspaper man, trained to accept facts and facts only. These supernatural manifestations baffled him.

Reaching the end of the trail, Valerie stopped, and her voice sounded in alarm.

"There's no light in the house!"

Rutledge scowled. "Lane and Acker are probably still at the landing field, working on the plane," he said.

"No. There are no lights at the field. Father had the house electrically wired with a wind-machine generator, but the connections at the field haven't been installed as yet. They should be back."

For an instant they stood there, staring across the clearing at the hunched shadow of the big house. Starlight—the bright radiance of the Southern Cross—had appeared in the night sky now, and in the half light the Dennis sanctuary looked dim and ghostly. A wind was sighing through the trees. To the rear somewhere a shutter banged back and forth hollowly.

Cautiously the man and girl moved across the clearing, climbed the veranda steps and entered the central room. Contrary to Valerie's statement the electric lights were not in operation. The wind machine required batteries for operation, and these had not been charged since the last time Henry Dennis was at the island. But a quick tour of the house by lamp light revealed no sign of either Paul Lane or Ray Acker.

"Something's wrong," Valerie said. "I know it. We've got to go to the landing field."

They left the veranda lantern burning and hurried down the path they had taken earlier in the day. Again as he felt the blackness of the surrounding jungle close in on him, black thoughts began to race through Rutledge's brain.

THERE was a light at the landing field when they reached it. A gaso-

line lantern hung before the entrance of the bamboo hangar, casting monstrous shadow effigies on the turf before it. Beyond, the plane stood silently like a great bird ready to launch itself in flight.

"Lane!" Rutledge shouted. "Acker! Where are you?"

A low moan was his answer. Quickly the newspaper man moved around to the far side of the hangar, halted before a huddled shape. Ray Acker lay there, face down, hands groveling in the grass in agony. As Rutledge swiveled his flash and lifted the man to a sitting position, Valerie uttered a horrified cry.

Acker's hands and face were burned and blackened. His shirt was ripped open, charred, and the flesh from the chin to the base of the throat was a hideous white blister.

It was as if a blow torch had been leveled directly at him.

Bracing the man against the hangar wall, Rutledge took out his knife and cut away the sleeves from the festering wrists.

"See if you can find some water," he told Valerie. "He's burned pretty badly, but he's suffering more from shock than anything else."

A moment later, a wet handkerchief pressed to his forehead, Acker opened his eyes and fell into a violent coughing spell.

"What was it?" Rutledge demanded. "What burned you?"

"I—I don't know." The red-haired man stared about him with bloodshot eyes. "I was working on the ship. Lane was in the hangar getting some tools when suddenly the thing was upon me. It came out of the jungle, a big black shapeless mass, spitting fire. I grabbed up a wrench, but it closed in before I could move. Then"—Acker's voice wavered—"a sheet of flame struck me, and that's all I remember. But I must have been out a long time."

"Lane?" Rutledge snapped. "Where is he?"

"I don't know."

Leaving Valerie to nurse as best as possible Acker's wounds, Rutledge turned and entered the hangar. He found Paul Lane on the floor. He was unconscious, his left hand was severely

burned, and there was a jagged cut over his left eye from which blood was pouring freely.

Opening his eyes a moment later, his first words were:

"The plane! What happened? Did it explode?"

Later, after they had helped the two men back down the path to the house and treated their burns with olive oil, Rutledge sat alone in the library and mentally formulated the picture.

Three persons had been attacked by fire, one fatally. Lehira had babbled hysterically of a flame god. Acker's description of the attack upon him was virtually the same. And Lane had been knocked out before he knew what struck him. The pilot had been under the impression that there had been an explosion.

Yet in no case was there a clue as to the assailant's identity.

"Flame god!" Rutledge muttered. "I'm beginning to believe it myself."

He got up presently, joined the others in the main room of the house. With kerosene lamps the place was dingy and shadow-filled.

"It's getting late," he said. "All of you had better go to bed and get some sleep. Valerie, I'll sleep here, if you don't mind. And you had better lock your room doors."

CHAPTER IV

Attack

HALF an hour later, the house steeped in silence, Rutledge lit his pipe and watched the tobacco smoke eddy ceilingward. He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter past twelve.

He had intended to do nothing until morning, when in the light of day he meant to have another look at the flame-god image. But as the minutes dragged by and the solitude of the island closed in on him, he twisted restlessly, rose at length and moved out onto the veranda.

The moon had risen, spreading a cold blue light across the clearing be-

fore the house. Beyond, two royal palms swayed and rattled in the night wind.

He left the veranda and, pipe smoke trailing him, moved slowly down the flagstoned walk. Insects hummed, and fireflies flickered weirdly above the grass.

At the rear of the house there was a tool shed and farther on, the spring where water poured out of a natural fissure in the rock.

Rutledge got down on hands and knees, leaned over the little pool and drank the icy water thirstily. He was halfway to his feet again when he was struck from behind.

The blow stunned him. Lights whirled up in his vision, and his knees buckled. Then he forced himself around and stared at the figure that confronted him.

It was a thing out of hell. It was headless, a black shapeless mass around which an aura of greenish fire rose malevolently. Two arms, long and clawlike, were all that made it resemble a living body. And as Rutledge stood there transfixed, one of those arms swiveled upward and sent a blazing shaft of white fire toward him.

Blindly the newspaper man ducked. He felt the flame lance past his head with a searing hiss. He whipped out his revolver, snapped it to aim before him. But again the fire reached out wrapping itself about his gun arm with excruciating pain. The stench of burning cloth and flesh filled the air.

The weapon lost, Rutledge threw himself forward in a flying tackle. His outstretched arms struck something solid, and he slammed out both fists with all the power he could call to arm. Twice he struck. Then the monster gouged a claw deep into his throat, strangling him. An instant later the thing had slid free and disappeared into the jungle.

For several minutes Rutledge lay there, breathing hard, fighting to recover his strength. When he rose at length, retrieved his revolver, the placid stillness of the night had returned. Left arm dangling painfully, he limped back to the house.

He made his way to the bathroom,

washed and cleaned his wound, applied a mild disinfectant. Then he paced down the corridor, off which the bedrooms opened, thinking hard. He had made no attempt to pursue the monster. To do that through the jungle would have been foolhardy. But what in God's name was the thing that had attacked him out there?

THE door to Ray Acker's room was ajar, and hearing a movement, Rutledge paused and looked in. A kerosene lamp was turned low by the bedside. In its span of feeble light Acker was curled up like an ugly red-haired spider, reading a book.

"Couldn't sleep," he said as Rutledge crossed the sill. "That damned arm burns like blazes."

Rutledge nodded. "How long have you been awake?" he demanded.

"How long? Half an hour maybe. I dozed off when I first lay down, but woke almost at once."

"Did you hear anything outside?"

Acker looked at the newspaper man uneasily. "No, I didn't. Is something wrong?"

Rutledge shook his head and went out the door, returning to the central room. If he were a detective, he'd probably start in investigating now. But what was there to investigate? Up to now in spite of all that had happened, he didn't have a single tangible clue to begin on.

He lay down on the divan and waited for sleep. Morning at least would bring another day.

Paul Lane was in an ugly mood as the four of them sat around the breakfast table. His left arm, like Acker's was swathed in bandages, and his face wore a scowl as he drank in gulps two cups of steaming coffee.

"Damned island's filled with treacherous natives and rotten with superstition," he said. "Me, I'm going to get out of here as soon as I can. Our time record's no good now, of course, but I'm going to get that plane ready to take off by sundown or know the reason why."

Valerie nodded. "Whenever the ship's ready I am," she said. "I want to know the mystery of the island, but I

want to continue the flight around the world too. For my father's sake," she added heavily.

Breakfast over, they went out on the veranda. Ray Acker was smoking cigarettes chain-fashion, one after the other. Rutledge studied him shrewdly, filled and lighted his own pipe.

"You go with Lane and Acker to the landing field," he told the girl abruptly. Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out and handed her his revolver. "And take this. You may need it. If you see anything at all suspicious or if you want my help, don't hesitate to fire it."

"Where are you going?"

He hesitated a long moment before he replied. "Your father's ship went down in the water off the opposite shore. The native village is in that direction too, isn't it? I think I'll go down and look the place over."

HE was inclined to regret his decision as he strode down the trail Valerie had pointed out to him. In the light of what had happened he felt he should remain at his fiancée's side every moment of the day to protect her from the menace that surrounded them on all sides. Logic told him his worries were foolish. After all, faced with anything she could understand, Valerie was a very self-reliant young woman. And in the company of Lane and Acker—the latter of whom Rutledge still didn't like, but quite without reason—she should be safe enough.

The trail was barely discernible through the heavy jungle. Birds chattered around him; his steps were almost soundless on the heavy layers of decayed vegetation.

Almost before he realized it, he was across this shorter arm of the island, striding down the other shore toward the native village. The village lay sprawled almost at the water's edge, a rude collection of nipa-thatch huts, most of them on stilts.

A yell went up as he approached, and an instant later Rutledge found himself in the midst of a group of natives. Curiously, however, there wasn't the excitement he had expected. The Polynesians were startled, yes, but as a group they seemed overawed by some-

thing else, something unseen which was claiming their full attention. Their faces were drawn and strained. Fear shown in their eyes.

One of them could speak a smattering of pidgin English, and Rutledge plied with him with a few pointed questions.

Yes, the huge winged bird had flown over here. That was many moons ago. But the flame god had become angered with it and had struck it down. It had burst into fire and fallen into the sea. The flame god was all powerful.

Rutledge went on down the shore to where a tangled pile of wreckage lay, cast up by the waves. It was the remnants of Henry Dennis' ill-fated plane. The newspaper man knew that the bodies of Dennis and Jennings, his copilot, had never been found, though the Australian ship which had arrived on the scene a comparatively short time later had searched the wreckage. Both men had drowned apparently in attempting to extricate themselves.

Sudden gloom probed Rutledge as he stood there. Then abruptly he bent down, picked up a small lightweight piece of blackened metal shaped like a cartridge. It was capped at one end, open at the other. He turned it over and over in his hands, examining it closely. Suddenly he rocked backward as a thought struck him full force.

Thrusting the metal piece into his pocket, he wheeled, and without further regard for the natives who were watching him, made his way back down the trail.

He was half running now, eating up the distance while a parade of fears slithered through his brain. Valerie! In God's name why hadn't he stayed by her. If—if anything happened to her he would never forgive himself.

The way back seemed a thousand times longer. In harmony with his black thoughts the tree boles seemed to gather around him like shadow monsters crouching to block his path. The jungle was an endless nightmare through which he moved on a treadmill. On he ran. . . .

His breath was burning down his lungs, and he had reached the house when a sound from the direction of the

landing field brought him to an instinctive stop.

Clear and sharp through the warm air had come the report of a revolver shot.

CHAPTER V

Holocaust of Hell

ONE instant he paused there motionless while the full significance of that shot swept through him. Then with a low cry he hurled himself down the path. He ran in long distance-covering strides, terror lending wings to his feet.

And at length, gasping, he burst out upon the landing field.

The field was deserted. But over the roar of the surf on the island's lower shore there knifed into his ears a woman's scream. Twice it was repeated. And distorted though it was, Rutledge knew that voice.

He lunged across to the open door of the bamboo hangar, and stopped short with a sucking inhalation of breath. A scene of horror lay before him!

In the shadows of the far end of the building the same monster which had attacked Rutledge near the spring was locked in a death struggle with Ray Acker. The thing was headless, a shapeless blob of black, encompassed by an aura of greenish light. Its two claw-arms were coiled about Acker's throat, slowly bending the spine to the breaking point.

Beyond at the far wall Valerie Dennis lay securely bound by a heavy rope. Her eyes were closed in a dead faint.

Rutledge lunged across the intervening space and closed in. With both hands he seized the monster, whipped it around and delivered a hard blow with his right fist. It was the second time he had faced this nameless entity, and again, as before, he realized its fighting strength. He hit with his left as simultaneously something needle-sharp stabbed into his shoulder.

The pain was agonizing, and Rutledge recoiled. An instant later the

heavens seemed to explode on his skull. He felt himself falling into a bottomless pit of oblivion.

* * * * *

When he opened his eyes it was with the feeling that he was lying close to the open door of a furnace. His vision cleared slowly, and he lurched to his feet with a cry of horror. It was a furnace, a furnace of the flame god. The four walls of the hangar were blazing sheets of fire. In the crimson light a great cloud of black smoke was billowing inward.

Rutledge staggered forward, shielding his eyes from the heat. He made out the unconscious form of Ray Acker lying on the floor, but Valerie—Valerie was gone!

Terror seized him. He was trapped! The huge sliding door of the hangar had been pushed closed, and refused to move under his most frantic efforts. There was but a single narrow window which Henry Dennis had had stoutly barred to prevent thievery by the island natives.

Staring out that window, with the flames licking at him hungrily, Rutledge saw the plane at the far end of the field. Upon it the monster was crouched like some monstrous slug, laboring like mad to refuel the gasoline tanks.

A crackling roar went up as the fire ate its way into the tinder-dry walls. Three times Rutledge attempted to rip an opening large enough for him and Acker to pass through. Each time the heat drove him back.

He stumbled through the smoke to Acker's side, lifted the man and dragged him to the center of the floor. And now the inferno was closing in. Solid sheets of flame lanced out from the burning walls, reached toward him like a thousand scarlet fiends. Hot smoke crawled down his lungs. His heart was pounding, and the scene before him began to swirl madly.

And then as he stared into those hellish flames a last and final hope came. Beyond, ten feet away, his eyes had singled out a tall folding ladder lying on its side. Above him the nipathatched roof as yet had not ignited. There was still a chance. . . .

HANDS shielding his face, Rutledge leaped between the flame tongues, seized the ladder and fought his way back with it to Acker. He was choking and gasping, and his clothing was on fire in a dozen places. He beat the flames out and jack-knifed the ladder into position.

It barely reached the low curve of the drome roof. Mounting swiftly to its top rung, he tore at the thatch weaving. Black smoke, a lung-searing miasma of death, wrapped itself about him. Strange visions were flashing before his eyes now. He seemed to see long galleries stretching through the crimson flames, galleries whose floors were a sea of blood and at the end of each of which stood a flame god jeering at his efforts.

Then his hands penetrated the last layer of thatch and clawed open air. He ripped the opening wide enough for his body to pass and staggered back down the ladder.

A moment later with the motionless figure of Acker slung sacklike over his shoulder, he wormed and squeezed his way out onto the outer roof. But he still wasn't safe. Flames were licking up the bamboo walls into the nipathatch, beginning to devour the roof.

The branch of a near tree extended serpentlike over the eave. It was slender, and already the leaves were shriveling in the heat. Still gripping his burden, Rutledge swung himself onto the tree. A splintering crack sounded as the branch broke under his weight. But the limb remained attached to its thick end. It dropped like a slide, and the newspaper man found himself deposited on the ground.

With a lunge he dragged Acker's body out of reach of the flames, turned and sprinted across the landing field toward the plane. The monster tossed aside the last empty gasoline tin and ran for the cabin door. The three propellers of the ship revolved in a deafening roar.

The monster was leaping into the ship even as Rutledge reached it. Rutledge seized the thing, jerked it back and swung his fist hard and heavy. A cruel kick slammed into his groin, sent a wave of nausea surging within him.

Then they were down, rolling over and over.

As he fought, a thousand mad thoughts assailed the newspaper man's brain. Valerie! Had she been put to death, or was she in the plane cabin? He ducked a sledge-hammer blow directed at his face and lashed out with his left.

And then, without warning, an opening presented itself. The monster kicked back, sought to leap erect. For an instant it rocked off balance. Rutledge bored in like an enraged leopard, utilizing every ounce of power he had in his arms. He felt his fist grind into bone and sinew. With a hoarse cry the monster threw up its arms and collapsed.

Rutledge wrenched open the cabin door. A glance showed Valerie Dennis, bound and gagged, lying on the plane floor. He leaped to her side, quickly freed the rope and helped her to a sitting position.

"Valerie, darling!"

"I'm—I'm all right, Dave. But what—"

Outside on the hard turf, under the plane's wing, the monster still lay motionless. But as they stared down upon it at close range a curious transformation was revealed. The black shroud like cloak, smeared with some kind of chemical, had been ripped free. The face was in full view now, and it was the face of—Paul Lane!

LATER as they sat in the main room of the Dennis island-house, Rutledge smoked his pipe comfortably and explained:

"It all goes back to the original flight of your father and co-pilot Jennings," the newspaper man told Valerie, "and it was a case of cold-blooded premeditated murder by remote control. Lane had plenty of motives. In the beginning, you may remember, he expressed a desire to pilot the first flight. But your father mistrusted him. Robbed of his chances to attain fame and glory, Lane saw to it that the flight ended in disaster.

"But more than fame, he desired control of the company. With Dennis out of the way he was the next logical

person to fall into control, and the only person who stood in the way of his actual ownership of the Dennis Plane Company was yourself. Lane wanted to marry you, but he knew you were engaged to me."

"But I—I don't understand," Valerie broke in. "Paul was in California when my father was killed here at Teufoa. And the flame god—"

"The flame god had nothing to do with it," Rutledge replied. "Lane knew of the island legend and how great an effect it had made on you. He simply inserted a number of incendiary cartridges in the first ship, so arranged that when the landing wheels touched ground here on the island, they set off a time clock. After that it was just a question of time before the chemicals in the cartridge were ignited and spread over the entire plane. If I hadn't found the shell of one of those cartridges in the wreckage on the other shore I might never have known.

"As for the supernatural manifestations on Teufoa, Lane managed that too with a good deal of cunning. He knew, for example, that at least one of the natives would be attracted by the plane as it landed on the island. He left Acker alone for a moment at the landing field by some subterfuge which Acker at the time failed to suspect, ran ahead of you and me, Valerie, and by a matter of chance came upon Lehira.

"Lane even then was keeping the flame-god legend alive. He had put on an old aviator's helmet and goggles and this together with the black cloak, which he presumably found in the hangar, and which he smeared with phosphorous must have made him appear to the native girl like a reincarnation of the flame god. Which was just the impression he wanted to leave."

"But the burns," interrupted Ray Acker. "Lehira was—"

"Yes, she was burned to death. Lane probably didn't intend that originally, but since the girl must have seen the direction from which he was coming, she might have talked later. He simply used a hand spray pump through which he shot flaming gasoline. Later when he found Valerie and I were going to investigate the stone image on the

mountain, he attacked Acker and while Acker was unconscious, left the landing field again and circled to the site of the image ahead of us. He spilled gasoline about the sacrifice slab and ignited it without being seen. The explosion was caused by more gasoline in a small air-tight can, lit by a fuse. His own burns, minor enough, were self-inflicted later, to cover up."

Rutledge tamped the tobacco in his pipe bowl slowly. "Lane thought he could throw any investigation of the deaths of Henry Dennis and Jennings in the first ship off the right track by pretending to have heard that radio message and bringing in all that flame-god legend. A concealed recording hooked up to the loudspeaker explains

the strange message we all heard on our ship. When I began to put facts together on the island, he realized he had to get rid of me fast. Of course, he intended to, anyway, to accomplish his purposes.

"He came pretty close to doing it, too. In the end, he had hoped to destroy all traces of his crimes in the burning hangar, fly away with Valerie and, under the pretense of having saved her from the flame god, persuaded her to marry him. As it is—"

"As it is," Valerie interrupted, crossing to Rutledge's side and locking her arm in his with a smile, "as it is, I'm going to marry you as soon as we finish our round-the-world flight and land back in California."



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE DEVIL'S BROOD

A Complete Novelet of Monster Heritage

By HENRY KUTTNER

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LIVING DEATH of HINDUSTAN



He was rapidly being roasted alive in a box of flame

Death Seems the Only Exit for Tom Farrington and Ruth Carney,
Caught in Mystic Coils of Horror!

By CHARLES MITCHELL DODGE

"IF the Sahib and Memsahib," the bazaar wallah spoke very persuasively, "will step back here a moment you will see some of the things I dare not display in front."

For the first time Tom Farrington felt a sharp chill of foreboding as he followed Ruth behind the curtain at the rear of the smelly little stall. He loved the mystery of the East; always before, the occasional sense of danger in it had been a lure calling him on.

But it was Ruth Carney's first adventure. With her beside him he felt strangely uneasy.

On the boat he'd promised to show her Calcutta from the inside. Ruth's instinctive liking for the lean-hipped, tanned six-footer had deepened to genuine admiration in the two weeks since they had landed.

"Now I get kicked again," she laughed over her shoulder at him. "Or no: I should say 'I get a kick from this.' Right?"

Farrington grinned at her enthusiasm. "You're learning fast" he assured her. In all his wanderings no woman's company had given him such an enjoyable kick as hers. She was so responsive. When her dark eyes flashed at him so warmly he knew that here was a real man's woman. . . .

"Right here please," the bazaar *wallah* interrupted his thoughts. "Sit here. I will bring some of my special items."

Again Farrington felt a definite wave of suspicion as Ruth took the solitary chair in the center.

The Hindu disappeared into another dark recesses, returned immediately with a small perfume bottle through whose tiny neck strange pictures had been painted on the inside—a replica of the Taj Mahal, beautifully carved in ivory; and one of the world's few "Seven Balls," the smaller ones carved inside the larger. According to the legend of the bazaars, he said, these cost the eyesight and finally the lifetime of the Chinaman who creates one.

As he laid these treasures on Ruth's lap and turned back for more, he beckoned Farrington to follow.

It was just as he stepped toward the second rear curtain that Farrington heard Ruth scream, wildly. He whirled in time to see the floor tilt downward under her chair. Something crashed heavily on the back of his head. The horror on Ruth Carney's face as she slid helplessly into the black pit yawning suddenly at her feet was indelibly stamped on his tortured brain. Dimly he saw the floor swing back into place as he sprawled beside it. Then consciousness fled.

When he opened his eyes again it was dark. Slowly the swirl of troubled thought took shape once more in his aching head. From the narrow, twisted alley barely wide enough for one man, a native boy led him to the street. He recognized the old native section of Howrah, across the river from Calcutta.

From this boy he realized with a shock that two whole days had gone by since that luckless visit to the little stall in the Sir Stuart Hogg Bazaar. He made his way painfully back to the hotel, trying to reconstruct what had happened from scattered bits of the experience.

No, the clerk at the Great Eastern Hotel had not seen Miss Carney. Farrington hadn't expected he would. He ascended to his own suite there—and as Farrington Sahib, stayed there. A high caste Babu by the name of Abinash Mukerji came out instead, and headed straight for the big Bazaar.

That particular stall had vanished, of course, and their friend, the bazaar *wallah*, with it. None of the other bazaar *wallahs* could tell him whence it had come or where it had gone, so suddenly. Stranger things had happened in this East, where time means nothing. He searched on, through the twisted streets he knew so well, through the Chor Bazaar, and finally back through native Howrah for some trace of the beautiful English girl.

LATE on the fourth night a *Guru* stopped him, in an alley off the Strand.

"Abandon the quest," the Holy Man urged the one he knew as Mukerji Babu. "Agankh Gundranath has taken her for himself. You know, as all Hindus know," the *Guru* spoke very respectfully, in a low whisper, "that what the Fire Eyed One decides is absolute. To interfere with the plans of Agankh Gundranath means unthinkable torture."

Farrington hurried back to the Great Eastern Hotel. He had heard weird stories galore of the insidious Gundranath. "Agankh" in Hindustani means "Fire Eyes." He had always disregarded the wild stories whispered in the bazaars about this character's cruelties, as arising from the credulous superstition of the Hindu coolie. Now, he grunted to himself as he changed back to Ameri-

can clothes, he'd damn well see what Agankh was all about.

Weaving fingers of early morning mist clutched around Gundranath's mansion as Farrington walked up the drive. The cold chill of a long forgotten tomb swept through his body when he stepped inside the walls of the compound, just off the Red Road.

His vague sense of danger crystallized as he glanced at the ornamental stone dog on the front lawn. He touched the image curiously; it felt smooth, almost slippery under his hand. Every detail was perfectly reproduced—almost too perfect. The eyes were strangely glassy, seemed to have greater depth than artificial ones. The feeling of impending disaster gripped him again as he looked into the deep, unblinking eyes of this watcher in the silence.

"Salaam, Sahib; kya mungta hai?"

Farrington whirled upright and around at this hollow Voice in his ear. Not a person in sight. Yet the sound had not come from the dog, nor from any distance. In pure Hindustani that "What do you want?" had been spoken quietly in his ear out of nothingness.

"Ao, Sahib. Gundranath dekna mungta."

The Voice beckoning him to follow, dwindled away as though the speaker walked toward the huge portals at the side of the palace. He followed slowly, hesitated at the open entrance.

A uniformed *Jemindar* saluted him there silently, ushered him into a large hall. On either side were two enormous elephants' heads, mounted with trunks upraised. A cluster of electric lights was supported by each trunk above wide mouths and tusks.

He started toward the reception room at one side to await Gundranath whom the invisible Voice had said wanted to see him, then stopped short. The cold chill of unreasoning terror clutched again at his chest as he looked again at the elephant directly in front of him. The eye in that stuffed

head on the wall was alive. Not glassy and staring like the dog's but a very live scrutiny, and it blinked as he stared back at it.

His hand closed around the warm little automatic in the pocket of his Burberry as he strode into the room ahead. There another strange statue commanded his attention.

Like the watchdog it was made from smooth, slippery stone, startlingly true to detail. A Hindu woman, head thrown back with terrified expression as though calling down the curse of some Pagan God. Farrington reached toward it curiously when a deep voice spoke beside him.

"Good morning, sir."

THE impeccably dressed figure of Gundranath had appeared silently from nowhere. Tall, with the olive skin of the Kashmiri, his English riding habit fitted him to perfection. The large *pugri* or turban wound tightly around his head gave him an air of strange dignity. Farrington quickly discovered the reason for his name of Fire Eyes.

As this untamed pair of eyes blazed back into his, they seemed to grow slowly larger. Instantly he felt the pull of hypnotic power so strong that he had to exert strong effort to resist it.

"It is indeed a real pleasure to welcome you here," Gundranath went on suavely, "I have heard of you many times, and expected you before. You are the student of my countrymen whom they know as a native, are you not?"

The faint suggestion of irony in this polished fellow's tone suggested a certain contempt for the outsider. Farrington came to the point at once.

"Now get this, Mr. Gundranath, if that's your name," he said shortly, "I'm not here to interrupt your activities, whatever they are. There's a girl missing by the name of Ruth Carney. She's been gone nearly a week. I've

traced her here. What you want with her I don't know, and furthermore I don't care a hoot in hell. But I want her out of here, and damn quick about it. Just turn her over to me, right now. That clear?"

The tall Hindu eyed Farrington impassively. Again he felt the tremendous pull in those fiery eyes.

"My dear Mr. Farrington, if that is your name, which I've no reason to doubt," this time his words carried an unmistakable sneer, "I'll be glad to show her to you since you inquire so courteously. First I know you'll want to see my laboratory, as a fellow student of human nature. Come this way."

The graceful figure stalked slowly across the room, pressed against an apparently solid wall which opened silently at his touch. The Hindu led him down a long corridor which seemed endless. He noticed it descended gradually, wound around like a long ramp deeper and deeper into the earth.

The tall wooden door to which it finally brought them opened of its own accord, as soon as Gundranath approached it. A sharp, skin-creeping terror swept through Farrington as he stepped inside the tomblike hall.

It appeared half full of people. An assemblage of Death, with some thirty or more ghosts seated around the large room. All were of different nationalities, all stared silently back at him. The flesh crawled on his scalp as the thirty odd pairs of eyes burned agonizedly into his. Each one of them bore a number. Each was made from the same grayish, slippery stone, *but with live, human eyes*. Toward the end of the hall an old hag of a white woman beckoned to him with obvious effort. A faint smile curved Gundranath's lips as he watched the inwardly terrified American.

"What in God's name is it?" Farrington demanded. "Who are these people? Are they dead or alive?

What kind of a hell hole is this, and where is Ruth Carney?"

"It is rather a long story, my friend." Unhurriedly and coolly Gundranath answered him. "I will acquaint you with it as briefly as possible. I was sent to your country some years ago for my education. I graduated from one of your largest universities. My skin was brown"—his face grew suddenly dark as he spoke—"and I was treated as an outcast, a pariah if you please, among you."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"YOU lordly Westerners who looked down on me were all my inferiors. I resolved then to give the world a museum, in which the nations of the white man will be shown beside those of the brown. Mine is a Caucasian race too, you know; and my language goes back to the original Aryan. Groups of figures will show the vices of your so wonderful civilization—so meaningless before the age-old legends of the Indo-European."

"Very melodramatic," Farrington said with an outward calm he didn't feel, "but I'm not interested in your sculptural sideshows. I want—"

"You'll find no melodrama here." Gundranath's voice dropped to a whisper. "There are no bats, no rats, no gazing-crystals or any other props of the faker. This is my laboratory, in which the human body undergoes a transformation. Although darkness is a necessity, it is conducted under scientifically sanitary conditions. You'll understand better when you realize that these shapes you see are not sculptured. They are all living human beings, in various stages of transension into the perpetuity of stone."

The casual contempt with which Gundranath turned his back and walked toward one of the groups gave sinister conviction to his words.

"No, I am not insane," he continued

evenly, "and you'll find no mystic signs, or abracadabra or the twaddle in any of your story book ideas."

This remark bespoke his own thoughts so accurately that Farrington felt a wave of utter helplessness sweep over him. Could this weird scientist then, look so easily into his very mind?

"Yes."

Farrington jumped at the prompt reply to his unspoken question.

"You will do well to keep your thoughts hidden even from yourself. I can hear them as surely as when you speak."

"Just what do you intend doing with all this—" Farrington was sparing for time, trying to think, while this inhuman being talked.

"When they've completed their journey from the animal to the mineral transmutation, these groups will depict the many vices of the white man."

Gundranath's eyes blazed again as he waved toward a group of three seated at a low table.

"Here," he pointed, "sit three gunmen from your underworld. They plot the crimes so prevalent in your country. Murders, which your police cannot stop. Here is a human derelict who will be a drunkard."

"And where does Miss Carney fit into this crazy picture?"

"You'll note I don't intend to qualify the effects of your civilization with any merciful veil. This next group will show the horrible acts committed by your race on its own members throughout history, unknown in mine. This museum will be a mute tableau of the things you have given the world. It will be shared by my people, too. At the end will be a group of them with myself at their head, looking down on the rest. It will be my legacy to the peoples of the earth."

"You say they aren't sculptured," Farrington tried not to speak hurriedly as a slow nausea crept through

his whole being, "and they look partly alive. What do you do with these people whose bodies you steal? Cover them with some sort of liquid stone?"

"Certainly not." Gundranath's terrible eyes glowed balefully in the gloomy darkness. "The completed ones are not made from stone at all. They are all turning their own bodies slowly into bone, solid bone. When finished, and the surface lightly treated, they will be imperishable statues of themselves to go down through the ages, exactly as they lived during their short lives."

FARRINGTON gritted his teeth as he touched one of the silent figures beside him. A clammy sweat broke out on his body, despite the chilling horror. With an effort he kept from screaming aloud as the full import of this living death swept through his numbed brain. The figure of a young girl was smooth, hard, almost slimy under his cold hand. . . .

"The dog in front was my first experiment," continued Gundranath coldly. "I have a perfect formula for turning any living vertebrate into bone. I—"

A quick hiss sounded through the underground chamber. Suddenly a sharp white light shot through the murk, flashed on the wall over the door through which they had entered. It flickered several times, flashed on and off twice, then took the form of a smaller square. In it Farrington saw as on a moving picture screen his two faithful Gurkhas walking slowly up the front drive of the compound.

"I see your bodyguard is on time," Gundranath remarked casually. Farrington stared fascinated at the new apparition.

"You see, I have television working for me. The eyes in my stone dog are twin lenses, and a photo electric cell at the gate warns me when anyone comes through." He glanced down at his wrist watch. "Evidently you told

them to call for you in an hour if you didn't come out. A very pretty precaution. Almost too bad that I must make other arrangements—"

Before Farrington's amazed eyes Gundranath threw another lever beside the doorway. Instantly the picture in the little square changed, showed one of the elephant's heads at the entrance. In the immediate foreground of this picture clustered the electric lights held by their trunks. The big head across from the one which had startled him with the spying eye was wired similarly to the tell-tale dog.

He held his breath and watched with pounding heart as the two unsuspecting Gurkhas stepped inside the opening, looking around them carefully.

When they came in line with the gaping mouth of the elephant head on the opposite wall, a cloud of greenish yellow smoke vomited from it, covering them from sight. It wafted slowly through the large portal. The two men lay together on the floor, both twisted in agony, both deathly still.

"That," explained the Fire Eyed one in the same contemptuous voice, "will eliminate your friends from now on. They will not recover. They—"

Blind rage born of frantic desperation seized Farrington. He jerked the automatic from his pocket, pointed it straight at Gundranath.

As he did so a sheet of solid flame shot up from the floor four feet in front of him, behind and on both sides. The heat was unbearable. He was rapidly being roasted alive in a box of flames seething up from four pipes in the floor.

He rushed blindly through, pistol in hand; felt himself going up a steep incline; crashed finally into a stone wall which gave under his impact. He slid headlong into a small, brightly lighted room.

As he hastily picked himself up he heard a dull swish from behind. The opening through which he had pitched

so suddenly, had closed. The room was left without window, door or opening of any kind in the unbroken walls of white stone. On a low divan in one corner sat Ruth Carney.

"Hello Tom," she said vacantly. "I've been expecting you. I told the Fire Eyed One you would come. You must go away again—forever. I am to remain here. I will become part of the Great Scheme. I am to be Goddess of the Living Dead. I—"

THE blood chilled to ice in Farrington's veins as her flat, dead voice droned on. Gone was the bubbling laugh. The sparkling eyes of the Ruth he knew and loved were cold, lifeless. She stared straight ahead blankly, at nothing—the ghastly uncomprehending stare of the mindless. She did not look up as he approached with sinking spirit at this new and unforeseen disaster.

He could combat physical evil—but how to remedy a ruined mind? He knew it was useless to interrupt her, as she went on:

"I want you to go now. This is my Destiny. I will be the Destroyer Goddess Kali reincarnate. Leave me in the peace of my Nirvana. You have no place in my share of this Great Reward. I will be History—"

Endlessly the dull voice went on, obedient to the power that had put her into this spell. He tore his eyes away, sickening at the thought that she might never be made normal again. Even though he succeeded in rescuing her body, would her mind go with it? Or would it stay behind, a perpetual slave to the diabolical mentality of the Fire Eyed Agankh?

His automatic was still in his hand as he looked quickly around the room. The four walls, floor and ceiling were all of the same color, a dull, grayish white. The clear white light which filled it seemed to come from one of the walls itself. The whole wall, as he gazed at it glowed with this light. Un-

der his touch it felt the same as the others.

"You must go away. You have no place in my life. I am immortal. I—"

The toneless voice of the English girl droned on. He jumped suddenly at a shadow on the floor. But for the impending disaster that made itself constantly felt he would have smiled grimly as he recognized it as his own. Yet—the shadow moved again as he looked squarely at it—and *he stood perfectly still.*

He remained rigid as the shadowy figure on the floor crept around, snake-like, seemed to concentrate in one corner. It grew blacker, then assumed a shape of its own. A faint smell pervaded the little room, like the stench of a long unopened sepulchre.

The black shadow arose from the floor in a shapeless mass, writhed to the ceiling like smoke, billowed down in a dark cloud, gradually took the transparent form of the living Gundranath.

Farrington backed against the wall in desperation. And well he might. The ungodly phantom grinning at him now so devilishly was ethereal; waving, as though made of smoke, though no breath stirred in the room. His own shadow stayed black, on the floor—yet *this figure cast no shadow of its own.*

"Now my inquisitive Sahib," from the face of the apparition came the same cold tones of the living Gundranath, "there are writings among my people that were old when your race was young. Fifteen hundred years before the cleverness of your race the Yarjuveda taught us the blessings and the curses of the Hindu Scriptures. Of all the Vedas, the Upanishad of the Yarju-veda yields to the student believer the astral power of leaving his own body. Ego is impelled into space by the unconquerable power of will."

"You crazy fool," Farrington gritted through his inward terror with an assurance he tried hard to make sound real, "if you expect me to believe—"

"My earthly body is elsewhere for the moment. I am an astral being now, so—save your bullets. I have decided you are useless to my Plan. I must therefore kill you. Siva, the Destroyer God will disintegrate your body, bit by bit. Not a trace will remain. Your soul itself will be projected into our Great Nothingness. Not even Vishnu the Preserver can save you from this force. Your friend here"—the spectre wafted a slight bow toward Ruth—"as she has told you, will stay to contribute her valuable part in the pleasant heritage I will leave. Your puny efforts are futile against the immortal Hindu Triad. I—"

FARRINGTON'S finger tightened, the automatic roared. The spurt of smoke and flame toward the ghostly Gundranath had more effect than the bullet which whined viciously around the room. The billowy figure blew apart into smaller clouds, then vanished completely.

Where the bullet had ricocheted against the lighted wall, a large crack appeared. Farrington felt the wild hope that this wall might be made of glass. He stood back, fired three more times straight at it. A big hole widened suddenly as the wall crashed. He saw welcome blue sky, the green lawn immediately below and the compound wall a short distance beyond.

Ruth offered no resistance as he seized her swiftly and jumped to the ground. He started to run with her over one shoulder, the gun in his other hand.

Unmindful of the trees under which he ran, he made for the small opening in the wall ahead. Within a few feet of it, a full grown python dropped out of a banyan directly in front of him. He fired at it recklessly. On the second pull of the trigger he realized too late that the gun was empty. As the enormous snake slithered toward him, he fell.

He felt the slimy coils of this killer serpent, one of Destroyer Siva's many emblems, tighten around them both as everything grew dark before his eyes. A vision of a native horde swarming over the wall danced vaguely in his whirling brain as he lost consciousness.

* * * * *

THE sober face of his good friend Dr. Bannerjee Bhose looked down into his when he opened his eyes again.

"I have told you before, Farrington Sahib," the good Doctor scolded him, "that you'd get into trouble if you go everywhere foolish curiosity leads in the East. You're all right now. Let me help you up."

"But Ruth — Miss Carney — where —"

"Here and top hole too, Tom, thanks to the Doctor."

A Gurkha stood coolly wiping blood from a *kukari*, favorite weapon of his tribesmen. The mangled and chopped remains of the python lay at his feet. Farrington held Ruth close. He looked over her shoulder at the grimly smiling Doctor.

"Hypnotic trances, of course, are commoner than some other things about this place. Happily I could bring Carney Memsahib out of hers with no trouble. Your Gurkha friends brought me along, knowing I might be needed. Tell me now what happened here."

Rapidly Farrington outlined his weird experiences since only that morning.

"Can you believe he brought his actual soul from his body?" he demanded. "I saw him do it. Voices spoke into my ear from thin air."

"Who am I to refute the Four Vedas? The teachings in those ancient Books would sound strange to you. Even I, who know the skill of the white man, shudder at many philosophies in the Scriptures of the Hindus, although it is my religion too. Yes,

undoubtedly this Gundranath, whose power of will was limitless, found the secret of leaving his fleshly body, returning to it as he pleased. Stranger things, as you know, have been done in this Hindustan."

"I know, I know. But his body shouldn't have been visible. I tell you I saw his ghostly form—"

"I'll look over that room where you saw the vision later," returned the Doctor. "That probably had nothing to do with his application of ancient power."

"Those living statues I told you about," said Ruth. "They were real enough—frightfully real—"

"I happen to know they were nothing occult either, Memsahib. It is a disease called *myositis ossificans progressiva*. Gundranath inoculated victims with its isolated germ. It upsets metabolism, increasing calcium in the muscles and bones. The parathyroid gland regulating the body's use of calcium and phosphorus becomes overactive. The repeatedly inoculated patient actually turns himself into solid bone in the end, just before death. It is a horrible—"

An unholy, piercing wail, ending in a screech of terrified agony, slashed suddenly through the air. It came from close by, inside the palace. Farrington shouted at the Gurkha to guard Ruth with his life, then dashed toward it. Dr. Bhose trotted after him as fast as he could.

"Your Gurkha friends," he puffed as he ran, "have been anxious about you. They told me about the two who followed you. Now about fifty of them are—"

Around the corner by the palace entrance the cold, implacable fury of the Rajput in action confronted them. As Farrington and the Doctor drew closer a dozen *kukaris* flashed, silently—razor sharp. The completely dismembered body of the *Jemindar* piled in a dripping heap on the floor.

The elephant's head with the watch-

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THE heavy, curved knife sloughed through his neck in a single swing. His head toppled off, started to roll down the incline as his body dropped soundlessly, spouting blood.

"Here's that room where I saw Gundranath's living ghost, Doc," cried Farrington. "Let's have a quick look at it, now. I hate to think I was a complete *ulluk*."

In addition to the hole through which Farrington had leaped, another passage stood open in the room this time. The Doctor went through, returned almost at once.

"Look here," he beckoned Farrington to follow. Outside the wall near the floor stood a small electric projector in front of a tiny slot in the wall itself.

"Simple enough," the Doctor grunted. "Children use these to throw pictures on a wall. When Gundranath bent over it so his face was upside down his image was reflected through that aperture on the smoke he released into the room. The black smoke reflected it in spite of the daylight. All you really saw was his face looking ghostlike; your imagination did the rest."

Relentlessly the little men from Nepal and Rajputana had pushed through the secret panel opening and de-

scended. Now another blood-chilling scream tore through the air. Then ominous silence.

Farrington's eyes met the Doctor's as he motioned toward Ruth outside. They turned back to meet her before she could reach the blood-spattered scene.

"*Ata hai, Sahib, nichu se—*"

The muffled commotion from inside grew as Ruth's Gurkha guard warned them the others were coming. He joined the crowd of Gurkhas which swarmed out and through the compound gate without stopping. Each one carried a dripping, red *kukari* in one hand. And each, Farrington noticed, carried something in the other which they kept furtively hidden from sight.

A lone Gurkha remained by the gateway as the trio passed through. He muttered a few words in Hindustani, and Farrington stopped abruptly.

"What does he want, dear?" Ruth asked.

"They all keep a souvenir of their enemies. He wants to know if I'd like his, myself. All the others have one, you may be sure, but I—"

The Doctor, who had overheard the Gurkha's words was trying to lead Ruth gently away. She cried out suddenly as Farrington spoke.

He turned hastily to follow her horrified gaze.

In the palm of the Gurkha's hand lay a human eye. Even in death it glared mercilessly at them. As they gazed down, a Satanic fire seemed to shoot up from it; a message of undying hate from the Great Beyond. . . .

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THE FARING OF THE WOLF

A Complete Novelet of Satan's Slaves

By ROGER HOWARD NORTON

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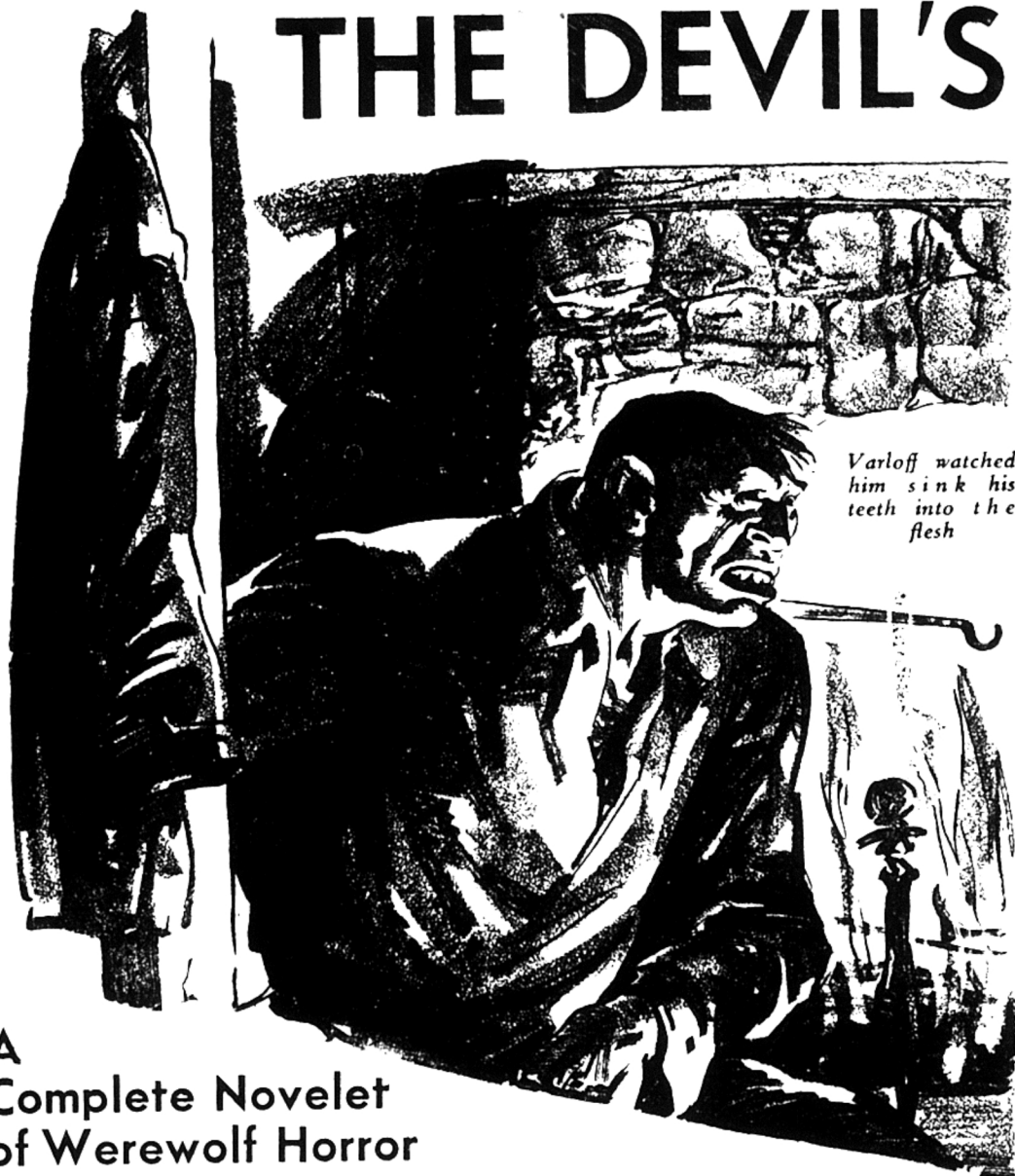
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THE DEVIL'S



Varloff watched
him sink his
teeth into the
flesh

A Complete Novelet of Werewolf Horror

CHAPTER I

A Wolf Howls

VARLOFF felt a quick shudder go through his powerful body as the mournful ululation of a wolf drifted across the bleak Canadian wilds. He lumbered out of a pine thicket, his black pipe wobbling with the chatter of his teeth, then paused uncertainly.

Late fall had brought a sharp bite

to the air, and the almost leafless limbs of a giant tree, gnarled and gouty with age, rattled over his head. A watery moon was but a pale yellow glow in the milky mists that were rising up from the dank lowlands in ghostly, writhing convolutions.

The Slav cut chips off a black plug with a long-bladed knife and tamped them down in his evil-smelling pipe. He struck a match, cupped the flame between his calloused palms and inhaled the strong acrid smoke.

Fear Drove Peter Lumb on—an Unearthly,

HERITAGE



By

JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Death Takes First Prize," "The Swamp Thing," etc.

The light suffused his face, betrayed the growing fear that showed in his widely spaced porcine eyes. His face was square and his nose was flattened against its surface. Coarse-skinned and pock-marked, it was a stupid countenance accentuated by an abnormally receding forehead and heavy thick lips.

When the wolf cry came driving against Varloff's ears again, the burning match dropped from his clumsy fingers. The sound was closer this

time. Varloff knew that famine was driving the packs down from the north and deep into the Champlain Province. There would be little enough even there for them to eat.

With his pipe gripped hard between his broken yellow teeth, the Slav struck out. The rugged, mist-blanketed terrain dropped away from him, leading him down into a small valley edged with tall pines. Once across the valley he would pick up the rough trail down to Lac au Diable. The thought

Haunting Fear that He Could Not Understand

of a warm iron stove in an old farmhouse quickened his steps and he crossed the valley at a rapid pace to the opposite slope. Having climbed that, Varloff came to a ridge from which he could see a little cluster of lights blinking far ahead in the murk.

The mist was not so thick there and landmarks became distinct as he progressed. Varloff tramped on, his rifle held in the hollow of his arm. Half-way down the side of the rocky tor he became rooted in his tracks. Greenish eyes blinked at him from the dark shadows near a patch of shrubs. Dim shapes moved there and the stillness was broken by a low, menacing snarl.

THE man saw the flash of a wolf's white tusks. A big shape moved toward him and the short hairs on his neck lifted. In the lurid light from the gibbous moon, laid bare by moving clouds, the beast looked half as high as a man. Its lean flanks and bulging ribs told of prolonged hunger and Varloff knew that there would be madness in its brain.

The brute crept slowly toward Varloff, eyes glittering, jaws slaverling. Behind it, four other dark shapes milled uncertainly. The Slav backed away, his trembling hands getting his rifle into position to shoot. Then the big gray wolf stopped, half turned away from Varloff. It wheeled and lashed out with its teeth at the shapes hovering in the rear. An eerie howl rolled out of the animal's throat and it shot away into the timbers, its mates fleeing in its wake.

Varloff fell against a boulder; his rifle fell from his hands. Sweat burst through the giant Slav's low forehead. Fear had not gone from him as a result of his miraculous escape. Instead it swept over him, wave upon stronger wave, until he was submerged in a flood of abject terror. On the back of the wolf's gray head there had been revealed a white spot the size of a man's heel.

"*Vrkolak!*" Varloff croaked in a dry, hollow voice, and sank to his knees, uttering a prayer. His square pitted face was grayish white as he looked out over the wilds, thick lips moving.

"Master! You are hungry—you are starving, yes," he muttered. "Varloff will feed his master."

The Slav forgot his rifle. He stumbled down the rocky, timbered slope, his eyes dilated, his mouth half open. Once he tripped and sprawled to the ground, got up and began to laugh in short, jerky bursts of mirth. Slow, eerie laughter that would chill a man's blood. Varloff knew the kind of food his master had to have. Perhaps it would bring him back. Varloff crashed through the trees, low-hanging branches ripping bloody streaks in his leathery face, but he did not feel their sting. He plodded on, muttering:

"Varloff will feed you, Master. Varloff knows—"

Two miles away from the spot of his encounter the Slav came to a halt. He stood in a small glade ringed by giant hickory trees and hard pine. Tendrils of disintegrating mist swirled around him. At his feet was a mound of stones which forest undergrowth had been slowly obliterating. A crude board jutted up from the cairn and, although it was somewhat weathered, the name that had been painted upon it was still readable:

HENRI DAMIEN.

The makeshift headstone was slightly awry now. It had been upright the last time Varloff had visited the spot, as upright as when he put it there. But that was months ago. Varloff stared at the lonesome grave, his massive hulk trembling as with age. From somewhere out of the stillness came the long-drawn-out howl of a wolf. There was a plaintive timbre to the cry.

Varloff had made it a ritual—his coming to the burial place of his master—for weeks after the death. There came a day, however, when he no longer felt a presence while standing by the grave. It was that way now. Nothing was there but the headboard, the cairn of stones and Varloff's own stark loneliness. At last he turned away from the place, his sluggish brain comforting him with wild, medieval thoughts as he stumbled through the

woods to where the little farmhouse stood in a tangle of neglected bushes, weeds and dead grass.

THE farmhouse had been in that same sort of surroundings many years before Henri Damien died. Damien, after tragedy had descended upon him with terrifying suddenness, stayed within its four drab walls and was seldom seen by the townspeople of the little hamlet of St. Pierre. He became a recluse, and the loneliness and his bitter thoughts did things to his brain.

Varloff, the farmhand, stayed on like a faithful dog, satisfied to eat the scraps that fell from a poor table. He looked to the needs of his master, took beatings at the master's hands, but, like a dog, stayed on. Perhaps he had no other place to go, for the villagers had warned him to keep beyond the limits of St. Pierre. Varloff, they said, was an evil thing.

Varloff went into the house and rummaged left-over food from a wall cupboard. He took his foragings to the table, sat down and began to wolf it ravenously. With every swallow he thought of his master out there in the bleak stretches. His master—hungry. The Slav's beady eyes flitted around the squalid room. There was the shabby bureau where Damien had found the letter his wife left for him. The lamp, that had shed light on the paper which Damien had picked up with gnarled fingers, stood where it had stood then.

Damien had read the contents of that brief message to Varloff as though speaking the words aloud were the only way he could make himself believe what had happened. Varloff could still see the Frenchman's great sunken eyes black with fury that was soon to be tempered by the master's sense of loss. He could still feel the air vibrate with Damien's voice as the master had read aloud in a strangled thunder of disbelief:

"I'm taking the boy and going away. You are more like a wolf yourself than a man. I am afraid of you, terrified of that brute, Varloff. I am afraid of everything here. The wolves that howl at night—you would think there were no other houses but ours for them

to prowl round. People look at you and show their fear—"

Yes, Varloff remembered. He remembered Damien's savagery when the rage got the better of him. The window he had thrown the chair at still lacked panes of glass. Old burlap had been crammed into the openings and it was rotting there now. Varloff remembered the night the master had said to pretty Antoinette, his wife:

"The wolves, eh, *ma petite*? Ha ha, they are our frien's. They not touch Henri Damien. This afternoon I have almos' reach out an' touch one an' he does not run away, *non*."

Varloff remembered how the man's eyes used to shine of a winter's night when wolves were howling their hunger cry across the wastes.

Varloff sat at the table now, small eyes aglow. Shards of moonlight came through the window and whitened his wooden, pocked face. The Slav knew the kind of food his master had to have, the food he had to get. Perhaps he would come back from the shadows. . . . Thoughts like these were made of the stuff he had been told long ago at his mother's knee. Children of the Steppes never doubted the truth of them.

Varloff thought of a man who walked past the farm every Wednesday night. He was a strong, healthy man. The meat would be thick on his bones. Louis Rousseau could throw any man his weight in the province. Every Wednesday night Rousseau went into St. Pierre to take butter he had made to Langlois' store. Varloff got up and went to the window when he heard underbrush crackle at the edge of the dark forest. He saw dim shapes running through the night and his heart pounded against his ribs when terror struck through him again.

"Be patient, Master," he whispered. "You will have food. Varloff will feed you."

He moved away from the window, a word unuttered but hovering on his thick tongue. *Vrkolak!* A dread word in far-off Russia. Half beast, half man. He looked for his rifle, searched for it for fully fifteen minutes before he recalled that he had lost it out there in

the wilds. Then he cursed, looked around for a cruder weapon. His hands, groping in a heap of debris in one corner of the room, clutched at a rusty short-handled axe.

His thick lips twisted into a gargoyleish grin, the Slav stole out of the place. He waded through matted, mist-dampened weeds and briars, and the fog hanging low at the edge of the forest soon enveloped him in a clammy embrace. A wolf howled and it seemed to make the unearthly quiet even more numbing.

VARLOFF reached a narrow gravelled road on the far edge of the woods. He followed it for a quarter of a mile, then angled toward the black shadows beneath the low-hanging limbs of a giant pine. There he waited. From his crouching position he could see the crest of a boulder-strewn hill half a mile off. Eerie shapes appeared there, then vanished. A wolf's ululation broke the stillness and the man in the covert trembled.

"Patience, Master. Soon you eat."

He held the axe close to his body when he heard the crunch of gravel under the tread of heavy boots. A man began to whistle. The Russian waited at the edge of the road and soon he saw Rousseau striding through the night, a rifle in the crook of his arm, his burden of butter swinging in a basket in his other hand.

Louis Rousseau never knew what hit him. Varloff came up behind him with all the stealth of a woodland creature. He crashed the axe blade against his victim's skull and the big man dropped to the ground. Varloff dragged the warm body out of the road, his thick lips oozing unintelligible sounds. Then he was speeding away from there, fleeing as fast as his bulky stature would permit. A mile distant he paused to listen. A wolf's wavering cry broke and ran across the night-shrouded terrain. The Slav babbled and laughed as he struck out again. He knew that his master would have a full stomach before morning. . . .

A great gray shape stood trembling on an overhanging rock at the edge of a ravine. It sniffed the air and its

jaws began to slaver. Red-rimmed eyes gleamed like glowing coals as the scent of warm blood crept into its nostrils. Up went its great head and from the throat went the blood cry out over the darkened landscape. A dozen other hunger-maddened beasts came out of the night and formed the pack.

The leader in the van, the pack swept down the bank of the ravine and followed the scent. The great gray brutes found the feast that the Russian had made ready for them. They ripped and tore at the flesh of Louis Rousseau, lashing out at one another with frenzy. Blood smeared their muzzles, flecked their hackled fur. They gorged themselves and were still unsated when there was nothing left but the scattered bones of that which had been a man. Gory fragments of the clothes he had worn spread all over the ground. Before the dawn the wolves sped away, the taste of warm blood on their long tongues, their stomachs warmed from the feast of human flesh.

In the farmhouse near Lac au Diadle Varloff heard the long-drawn out ululation of one of the pack and, sitting in the thinning darkness, he smiled a warped, unholy travesty of a smile. He got up and went to the stove which glowed red from the fire that had burned in it all night. He brewed a pot of strong tea. The master liked tea to be strong—and he might be coming back from the shadows soon. . . .

CHAPTER II

Mark of the Loup-garou

PPETER LUMB sat on a rickety stool in a cheap lunchroom in Shamokin in the States, his cavernous dark eyes fixed upon a greasy bill of fare. Lumb's angular face was covered with a three-day growth of beard and his hair, from which he had pushed back his battered hat, was dirty and unkempt. The fingers resting on the counter edge trembled slightly.

"What'll it be?" asked the counter-man.

"Hamburger."

"Listen, mister, you look like a vag to me. You got dough?"

Lumb's angry eyes seemed to leap at the counterman, wiping the scowl from his ugly face. The man stepped back in alarm, said hastily: "Okay, okay, mister—"

"I got dough, see? After six hours trampin' your filthy streets!" Peter Lumb ripped out, his big white teeth flashing. "I finally stopped a guy that had a heart. Ever out of work, shrimp? You ever roam around, sleepin' in louse-ridden flophouses, eatin' swill out of garbage pails? I have—see? So shut your trap an' make me that hamburger!" His face was white under the dirt. His hands were held clawlike out in front of him as if they itched to get at the counterman's throat.

"Y-yeah, m-mister. H-how'll you have it? Well done or—"

"Just make it warm, see? I like it red—as red as blood!"

It was raining outside. The drops striking against the panes sounded like blows from a hammer. The counterman nodded, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth. He wished the cop on the beat would come in for a cup of coffee.

Peter Lumb looked at himself in the mirror behind the counter and his lips twisted ruefully. He sensed the fear he had instilled in the man who was clumsily taking a cake of raw meat out of a small refrigerator.

"Don't get worried, feller," he said. "Maybe I ain't so bad as I look." He took off his battered hat and slammed it against his knee. On the back of Peter Lumb's head was a patch of white hair.

"That's enough!" he shouted at the counterman. "Don't burn it up."

"I just put in on the grill, mister. I—"

"It's the way I want it. Who's eatin' it—me or you?"

The counterman slid the warmed raw meat between two slices of bread and shoved it toward Lumb on a thick white plate. Lumb attacked the sandwich ravenously and crumbs of bread and chunks of red raw meat sprinkled on the counter. Before he had finished he mumbled out of a full mouth: "'Nother. The same—"

Peter Lumb ate two hamburgers, wiped his wide, thin-lipped mouth with his sleeve. New life seemed to have sprung into his sunken eyes. They burned brightly as if a raging fever had started to overheat his body. He tossed a quarter to the counter, his gaze still fixed on the glass door of the cheap refrigerating plant where cakes of raw ground meat were on display.

"Take the dough quick before I commit murder!" he cracked. "I could eat that stuff up, ice-box an' all. Let me get out of here."

The man behind the counter moved fast. Fear palsied his hands and he dropped the nickel change to the floor twice before he finally managed to push it across the board to Lumb. The customer's avid, blazing eyes frayed his nerves and when Peter Lumb laughed at him, white teeth bared to the gums, the counterman showed his fright.

LUMB went out of the lunchroom, lips twisted into a sardonic grin. No wonder the man had been afraid of him. He was a sorry-looking sight. His hunger had turned him into an animal but he felt better now with the food warming his stomach. Hunger can break a man's mind.

He walked on, looking for a cheap bed. He still had enough for that. It seemed always to have been that way since he was old enough to remember. Roaming and looking for any kind of work. Eating some of the time; sleeping in dark doorways, cellars, damp woodlands—anywhere he could lay his head. He went by the name of Peter Lumb but he could not even be sure of that. The thing that had kept him going through dreary years was a small gold locket he carried around his neck with the picture of a woman in it. The smile on that woman's face was the only thing he had in the world. He had worn the locket ever since he could remember. During those days in an orphanage that still had their brand on his soul he had looked upon it as a guardian angel.

Peter Lumb walked through the rain, thinking of the terror on the counterman's face. He laughed to himself and his big white teeth flashed in the dark-

ness. "It scared him because I like my meat raw," he ruminated. "They burn meat up, most people. All the goodness goes out of it."

Lumb bent his head against the rain and turned down a dimly lighted street. Up ahead was a sign with a light burning over it, offering beds for twenty-five cents. He laughed jerkily. Beds. Filthy mattresses stuffed with straw and laid on a hard wooden floor. No pillows. But there would be a stove in the place—a roof over his head. Tomorrow night—Peter Lumb fought the thought of the day ahead.

A few moments later Peter Lumb looked down upon his miserable pallet, brought a dilapidated boot down upon a crawling thing on the floor, then started to take off his wet, ragged clothes. Stealthily he removed the gold locket from around his neck. He knew that the men who were to share the squalid common bed chamber would cut a man's throat for less.

The man's fingers were still a little shaky and the locket fell to the floor. A battery of hard eyes drove at the thing as Lumb knelt quickly. The locket had broken open and the picture inside of it had come loose. It lay face down on the dimly lighted floor but through a yellowish film of dried court plaster Lumb saw a woman's writing.

He got up quickly, shoved the locket and chain into his pocket. He finished removing his outer garments, folded them into a neat pile on which to pillow his head, then sat down on his bed. In the dim light he studied the writing on the back of the oval-shaped faded snapshot.

Antoin....Damien. St. Pierre,
Cham...l. n. 1913.

Peter Lumb lay back on his bed of straw, tired brain shuffling myriad crazy thoughts. Damien. Perhaps that was his name. That woman whose picture he carried—she had been his mother—perhaps she still lived. Damien. He had hair as black as that which wreathed the face reproduced on the tiny piece of thin pasteboard. The eyes which had looked out at him for years were like his own.

All that night Lumb slept fitfully.

His heart pounded with audible thuds in the fetid air of the room that was filled with the smell of unwashed bodies. Peter Lumb was a friendless wanderer no more. In the morning he would thumb a ride north. Peter Lumb was going home.

DUSK was settling over the little village of St. Pierre. Few lights burned in the houses as yet but mothers brought small children indoors and kept them close. Fear seemed a tangible substance in the milky mists. Horror was attending a grim ritual out on the hillside back of the village. Men worked there in the lurid light of sputtering pine torches, worked with feverish haste. The clink of shovels against stone, the rattle of loose gravel against a pine box accentuated the terrible quiet. The eyes of everyone in the burial party kept shifting from the grisly task at hand to the dark shadows gathering beyond the old graveyard.

Suddenly a tall, bearded man gasped with fear and let his shovel slip out of his gnarled hands. He pointed and croaked shrilly to a man standing guard with a rifle. Beyond the range of wavering light a great gray beast stood watching the interment of the remains of Louis Rousseau.

The eyes shone green against the torch glow.

Shaking hands lifted a rifle. The wolf whirled when the roar of the weapon pulsated across the drab countryside. Before the brute leaped into the dark shadows a man caught a flash of the spot of white on the back of his head and he sagged to his knees, mouth open wide. He crossed himself.

"*Bon Dieu*—the loup-garou!" he uttered and his words were fairly squeezed out of his throat. From the forest came an eerie wavering cry that froze the burial party motionless. It seemed to strike against the roof of the world and come ricocheting back again and again. Dirt was thrown upon the pine box frantically as the workers suddenly galvanized into action. In a short time they were speeding down the hillside into St. Pierre where they joined a white-faced group

of men who were gathered in front of Langlois' store.

Someone spoke what was in the minds of many.

"Louis Rousseau was murdered. No wolf lives what could smash ze head lak zat, *non*. A werewolf ees out there in ze so great dark. He have eat' human flesh an' maybeso he turns into a man again. Somewan feeds thees werewolf, I tell to you!"

"*Oui, oui, m'sieu*. We have see' the loup-garou with the spot on the head. The devil ees not dead, *non*! We mus' hunt heem down, destroy heem, or more of us mak' the dinner for heem!"

The mournful howl of a wolf drifted down into St. Pierre again and numbed men's tongues. Their silence betrayed their dread. After awhile all the windows in the town were darkened but the people who huddled behind them were not sleeping. They would still be awake at dawn when a little of the terror would have left the isolated hamlet with the vanishing darkness. The news had spread. Henri Damien had come back from the grave to run with the wolf pack!

CHAPTER III

Home of the Accursed

THE lupine dirge that came intermittently from the hills met the ears of Peter Lumb as he plodded across the lonesome land. It struck no fear in him. Rather it warmed his blood, gave him a feeling of companionship in his loneliness. Once he had thought a pair of eyes looked at him from a clump of bushes alongside the rough road and he stopped to peer into the shadows. He had thought there was a stealthy movement there but had immediately told himself that imagination was playing tricks with him.

One uncanny fact that brought wonderment to Peter Lumb, however, was his apparent familiarity with the country which he had never traversed before. Certain landmarks did not appear strange to him. He felt as if he had seen them many times. Once, as

he turned a bend in the road, he knew that he would come out on a serrated hogback where a giant twisted tree trunk stretched a single etiolated dead branch toward the misty moonlit sky. When the landmark materialized, Lumb stopped and brushed his hand across his eyes. He had never been here before, he was sure of that; yet how had he known?

He shivered a little and plunged his hands deep into his pockets and drew his ragged garments more tightly around him. As he did so his toe caught under a bared tree root and he fell heavily to the ground. His teeth bit down hard against his tongue. Lumb scrambled to his feet, mouth open against the pain, and soon he felt warm blood oozing around his teeth. Walking on toward St. Pierre, he spat blood out of his mouth until the wound in his tongue stopped bleeding, leaving behind only swollen soreness.

Dawn began to suffuse the eastern sky with coral tints. As Peter Lumb progressed along the road the sky became crimson and his hunger began to gnaw inside of him. The bloody glow above the horizon reminded him of meat, red meat back there in Shamokin. Saliva trickled out of the corner of his mouth as he pictured himself feasting again.

At last he came in sight of a tacky farmhouse at the edge of the forest and he paused. He drew the hairy back of his hand across his steaming brow once more. The place seemed to draw him as if it held hypnotic power and he found his steps dragging a little as he circled it and went on toward the village.

In front of Langlois' store heavy-lidded eyes swung toward the bend in the road where a tall, ragged, unshaven man shuffled into sight. They widened slowly with every heavy step the stranger took. Peter Lumb's sunken dark eyes caused a ripple of suppressed sound to course through the knot of villagers. A woman who had stepped out of a small house ducked back inside and slammed the door behind her.

"Look! By all the saints!" croaked a French-Canadian native. "Look, he has the face of—"

"Don't be afraid, my friends," Peter Lumb said, doffing his hat, as he shuffled toward the group of men. "I have come far—I am not pretty to look at, I know. But if I could have food—if—is this the town of St. Pierre?"

There was no answer. Lumb saw stark horror on the faces in front of him. He could not see the dried blood on his own unshaven chin or the burning eyes with which he gazed at the villagers.

"It—it is—the werewolf! Mother of God! Damien! Blood on his mouth—the blood of Louis Rou—"

Peter Lumb stood before them bewildered, barely conscious of the terrible menace that threatened him. Blood of—who? He choked out:

"I—don't understand. I—I have seen the name, Damien. That is why I am here. A picture I carry—Antoinette Damien—"

"Wh-where did you come from, m-m'sieu?"

"Everywhere—no place in particular. Any place I could find a spot on which to rest my head," Lumb replied wearily and he yawned. His gleaming white teeth showed momentarily, then clicked together.

LUMB fell back a step as horror thickened in the eyes of the villagers. He saw a man slip away from the group and disappear inside the store. The man's legs seemed to be on the verge of buckling under him with every step. It was then that Peter Lumb saw his danger. Hard, trembling lips muttered meaningless things as the villagers began to withdraw, spreading away from where he stood as rings draw away from the spot where a stone has plopped into a still pool. Lumb thought he heard something creeping up behind him and he swung his head around. A frightened croak tore loose from a man's constricted throat.

"See—there on his head! The mark! It's him—it's that devil! The loup-garou—kill him! Before he feeds on more of us. Quick, LaGrange—the gun!"

The innocent cause of the unnatural fears was startled to see the terror-

stricken man, who had disappeared into the store, appear again in the doorway with a rifle. Another wild-eyed native villager was coming toward Lumb slowly, a wicked-looking knife gripped in a trembling hand. Peter Lumb gathered what remaining strength he could muster in his weary limbs and ran raggedly down the street.

A rifle cracked and the bullet ripped the wind close to his head. The human pack was hard on his heels, screaming crazily. He angled off the street between two shabby cottages and another bullet splintered the corner of one of the houses not six inches from his ribs.

Terror gripping him, brain numbed by shock following upon exposure, Peter Lumb clambered over a fence and dashed toward the woods a short distance from the village. His lungs were ready to burst when he reached the shelter of the trees, and a bullet burn at his shoulder was dripping blood. He kept on going, crashing and floundering through the dense woods, until he reached a part where the sun scarcely penetrated. He burrowed deep into a pile of rotting leaves and pine spills and lay there gasping like a jaded beast that has outrun the hunt.

Soon, from the forest, came sporadic sounds that told the fugitive that the search was continuing. Dry branches crackled not fifty feet from his hiding place and Lumb tried to stop his labored breathing. Fear possessed him, fear of something he could not understand, and his starved, bedraggled body trembled with nervous chills. They thought he had eaten someone—those superstitious natives of the village he had tramped so far to reach. They had called him a werewolf.

Somewhere along the dim past Peter Lumb was sure he had heard about such a beast. Some of the superstition, that had been bred deep in the souls of the parents who had conceived him and which had lain dormant within him for years, was stirring to life. Those villagers had looked upon him as if he were a foul beast, had pursued him as they would a foul-legged foe.

Peter Lumb did not leave his hiding place all that day. Merciful sleep over-

came him around midday, and his weary body gained rest until darkness had settled down once more. Then he crawled out of his hiding place and stumbled along through the darkness. From out of the night came a wolf's eerie howl and Lumb stopped, involuntarily calculating the direction from which the sound had come. He went that way, groping his way blindly, his stomach screaming its emptiness.

Again the wolf howled and Lumb swung toward the sound. For what seemed hours he plunged through the forest until he saw a flicker of yellow light. It showed through a dirty window of the farmhouse he had passed hours and hours before. Had he ever passed it? Was he asleep on a squalid flophouse bed writhing in this nightmare?

THE light beckoned Peter Lumb, drew him toward it like a flame attracts a moth. He ploughed through the slimy vegetation that seemed bent upon swallowing up the bleak abode. He came to a weatherbeaten door and knocked three times, then leaned against the jamb, his body numb, his brain filmed by fear and bewilderment. When the door opened, he lurched inside and nearly fell against a wide-eyed, pock-marked man who uttered a strangled cry.

Varloff dragged him into the radiating warmth, slammed and locked the door. Peter Lumb fell into a rickety old armchair, his head drooping, his hands dangling helplessly so that his long, dirty nails almost touched the worn floor. A voice penetrated his fading senses, a voice that turned his blood to ice and brought him back from oblivion with a start.

"The master—I thought it was the master! Instead, it is his son!"

Peter Lumb lifted his head with difficulty and his deep-sunken blood-flecked eyes saw the Slav kneeling in the middle of the floor.

"How do—you—know who I—" he managed to utter in a spent voice.

"Varloff knows. You are the master's image." The Slav's hollow voice boomed through the squalid room. "Varloff will take care of you. When

you are—not here—when you go out on nights filled with the moonlight, Varloff will see that you are fed. Like—before. I expected the master, but his son—he has the mark on his mane, the same mark of the *vrkolak*! The blood, it is on your face. Come, Varloff washes it off. Varloff remembers *le petit enfant*. Once you bite Varloff—yes—it draws the blood!"

Peter Lumb was gripped by a nauseating terror now. In his horror he screamed:

"Shut up—stop that blitherin'! You speak of blood, too—as if I were a beast. I am but a poor, starving man. This 'master' you speak of—who is he? His name—what's his name?"

Varloff's gimlet eyes looked upon Peter Lumb with the expression one sees in the eyes of a worshiping dog.

"Damien," he mumbled. "The master is buried not far from here. They would not let him be buried in holy ground. He was of another world—his soul was not—"

"Stop, you crazy fool!" Lumb screeched. "They called him a werewolf. They saw in me—my father! The mark on my hair. Wh—who are y-you?"

"The master's slave, Varloff. These many years I served him. I will be faithful to his son, too. You are starved—like when I see you out in the hills—master. Varloff will give to you man's food now. He has the rabbit on a spit—a nice fat rabbit. You smell him, yes?"

Peter Lumb's nostrils were already distended as he breathed in the aroma of searing flesh. He saw the meat swinging over a heap of glowing coals in the crumbling fireplace and he got up, eyes wild, hands stretched out in front of him. Hunger overcame sanity and sent him to the hearth to rip the scarcely seared carcass of a rabbit from the spit. He sank his teeth into the flesh and the blood was warm against his teeth. He wolfed a chunk of it from the bone and almost swallowed it whole.

Varloff watched him, stupid face expressionless for several moments. Then the Slav said in a tight voice:

"Eat your fill, Master. Then you sleep. Nobody will find you here if they

come. Varloff know where to hide the master. The woman—she think she take you away from this country, eh? The country where wolves run, Damien? Ah, she was one big fool! I say one time to your father, Damien, that you maybeso are somewhere out there all time. But he laugh at me—he beat Varloff. His son, he say, have nothing wrong with him. He is like any man. But something bring you back, eh, Damien? The smell of blood, maybe? Born in him—the *vrkolak*! He cannot be man again without having the human flesh. No?"

PETER LUMB threw the mangled carcass of the rabbit into the coals and whirled to stare at the hulk of a man who was squatted near an iron stove. Food, such as it had been, had brought new life to Lumb, had cleared his senses enough to recognize the hellish import of Varloff's babbling. A vague terror thinning his voice, he cried sharply:

"You're mad, Varloff! You live too much alone. What kind of gibberish is that you talk? Look, I am a normal man, Varloff. I am not a beast!"

The Russian grinned. "The other night, Damien—out in the hills, you not see me, eh? You not taste of man's flesh, no? But you come here, Damien—you find the way through this wild country very well, no? There was blood on the face, too. You can trust me, Master."

Ice seemed to be forming on Peter Lumb's clammy skin. It was as if there were mockery in Varloff's eyes. The man's thick lips were curled in a benignant smile as if he were looking at a protesting child.

"Varloff, he know the devil get the soul of some men. The master—your father—he act very funny when the moon come full. He go out—he stay many day sometime—and when he do that, something terrible happen. It is after his woman run away from him—one night Langlois, the storekeeper, he find his little child with the throat tore, and she die. She come from school when the day is done and the road is dark. That night your father, the master, come home and his hands are

bloody. He tell to me he kill the buck out in the hills. But Varloff, he know—"

"You're crazy, Varloff!" Lumb countered desperately. "He could have been telling the truth. He kept to himself, wandered in the hills to forget about—his wife. The people here are living in the dark ages. Just because a wolf with a white spot on its head—bah! You've seen horses with a spot on their mane. It could've been a mad dog—a real wolf that killed the child—"

Varloff smiled slowly, shook his head. "I know, Damien. Varloff much older, much wiser. I bury the master. Long time I go many times to stand by the grave. Varloff feels him near. Then one night—and there is nothing. The master was gone from the grave. Out in the hills somewhere—maybe you have met him, yes? You are his son. Tell Varloff! Don' be afraid. Varloff hide you—feed you—"

Peter Lumb wondered if he himself had gone mad. He held his head in his hands and rocked from side to side.

"Ah, you are tired," Varloff said with the tenderness of a parent for his child. "You must sleep, Master. Upstairs there is a bed. Go, rest—Varloff will watch close."

CHAPTER IV

The Hunt

SICK from the fear growing stronger within him and weak from his deprivations, Peter Lumb stumbled wordlessly toward the rickety stairs and dragged himself aloft. He saw a door ajar and through the opening an iron bedstead upon which a shard of moonlight, spearing a rotting window curtain, rested like a silver band. Dust and cobwebs were thick, for he could smell them.

A brief, wild laugh jerked from his throat. This was the haven he had sought! This was home! He sank down on the bed and his head hung disconsolately. Varloff's movements in the room below came up to him. From

out of the night came the howl of a wolf, and Peter Lumb shivered as it was followed by other sounds at the edge of the wood. Ghostly light, stronger than that shed by the moon, flickered against the windows of the decaying farmhouse. The bloody red light from torches. Dry underbrush crackled and there was an angry thunder of mixed voices.

Lumb got up and ran to the window, looked out. Then he scurried away out of the room. Fear pursued him along a darkened hall to the opposite end of the old farmhouse where the opaque eye of a dirty window showed against the lesser darkness outside. He lifted it with a mighty heave and saw that the ground was not more than ten feet down at that end of the house. Sweat pouring through his skin, the trapped man dropped to the lush earth and crawled like a wild beast into the shelter of a thicket of scrub oaks. There he lay still, panting with his exertions and with an all-absorbing panic.

The villagers were screaming at Varloff now, dragging the Slav out of the house in an access of murderous frenzy born of fear.

"Where is he?" they cried. "Where is the werewolf, Varloff?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" screeched another, whipped to high frenzy by the mob instinct. "He hides the werewolf here! Keel him!"

"*Non,*" yelled the leader of the man-pack, "we do not keel him before we find Damien. Did he not keel Rousseau so the werewolf could feast on human flesh an' take human form again? Ah, *oui*, Varloff," he said, "we know the tracks you leave. They were out there where the wolves—"

Varloff struggled, Lumb knew, for he could hear the scuffling of many feet and the grunts of fighting men.

"You are crazy men," he heard the Slav rage. "I have seen no one since the master die. Varloff has not kill—"

"Burn this accursed place!" another high-pitched voice cried. "Burn the loup-garou out an' we fill heem with lead! *Mais oui*, bring the torch, Langlois. Damien, he mus' be keeled—the last one of the accursed race!"

Peter Lumb, soul sickened, heard

Varloff laugh insanely, heard the Slav scream like a maniac as flames began to lick at dry boards and shingles:

"You want Damien, fools? Look—there he is! You think he run away from you on two legs? Four are much faster! There—near the woods. See? Run, Master, run!"

"*Mon Dieu! Sacre!* The wolf—the big gray—Shoot quick, somewan! He ees the beast again. He—" The man's voice, vibrant with terror, broke into a meaningless shrill sound.

Varloff wrenched himself loose and ran into Peter Lumb's range of vision. He was yelling hoarsely as he stumbled on through the weeds. Lumb saw the big gray brute then and it wheeled with incredible swiftness and plunged into the mists wreathing the timber. A shot rang out. Another. Varloff threw up his hands, swung halfway around, then fell face downward in the weeds.

"He keel no more—thees Varloff!" quavered a voice in broken English. "No more he keels to feed the werewolf."

"We will hunt him down—this Damien. Until dawn we search—"

THE crackling of flames grew louder, submerging all sounds save the derisive ululation of a great wolf which came drifting out of the timber. Blood-red sparks geysered toward the sky. The light from the fire revealed the frightened faces of men who drew back from the clearing, then turned as one and sped away swiftly. When they had gone, there was nothing left in the terrible stillness but the sounds of the fire consuming the place that had been accursed in the ignorant superstitious minds of the people of St. Pierre.

Peter Lumb lay prostrate in the underbrush, his harassed brain striving to think clearly. The natural instinct of both man and beast—self preservation—became stronger than his terror. Somehow he had to get away even though the woods would be alive with hard-eyed, desperate men. They would be armed and would kill him on sight. There could be no reasoning with the primitive folk of St. Pierre. Superstition was too much a part of

their whole makeup.

Hiding in the wilds like an animal, Peter Lumb yearned for the cities. They were cold places, but they were civilized. The devil had not warped the minds of the people who swarmed into them.

The hunted man crawled out of the thicket after awhile, got to his feet and fled toward the deep woods. From time to time he heard men signaling to one another. At long intervals came the mocking cry of a wild beast, and Lumb stopped each time as if shot. He angled away from alien sounds, changing his direction every time a voice sounded perilously close. The cries of the hunters echoed in the dark night and gave Lumb the false impression that their numbers had increased tenfold.

Human quarry, he kept stumbling along, scurrying into hiding when sounds hemmed him in too closely. It became a nightmare that ate at his sanity. Once long ago he had seen a play—Emperor Jones. The beat of the drums came back to him again to mock him. But they were not drums—the terrible haunting tom-tom was produced by the hammering of his own heart.

After a century of alternately running and hiding, Peter Lumb plunged out of the thick woods and staggered along a rough trail a few feet. Finally he could go no further and he fell exhausted against a boulder that was partially hidden by jackpines. Fresh, sweet air made its way into his seared lungs and gradually the tempo of his breathing abated.

His eyes darted here and there for a familiar landmark and he saw none. At last he summoned courage to move away from the natural screen, but he had not taken ten steps before a man loomed up in front of him. The man carried a rifle. Lumb recovered from shock first and lashed out frantically with his fist. It struck hard against solid flesh and the man rocked on his legs. Lumb kept hammering, then ducked his head and drove it with terrific force against his enemy's stomach.

Peter Lumb stumbled on through the low bushy ground with a rifle

clutched in his hand now. Sobbing bursts of laughter jerked from him, for he had an even chance now. If they ringed him about, he would pump lead into them until the weapon was empty. His steps soon brought him to a solid rocky wall and, cursing, he plodded along its base for nearly fifty feet.

A snarl behind him flung him against the rocky obstruction with a new terror. He turned his head and saw a large gray shape creeping through the diminishing darkness, its greenish yellow eyes fixed upon him, gnashing teeth bared!

SUDDENLY an inexplicable feeling flooded Lumb's trembling body. All fear had gone out of him. The animal came closer, lifted its head and howled mournfully. Its head turned slightly, and Lumb saw the white spot on the back of its gray head. Out of the mists then came the warning cries of men. They were not far away. Still there was no fear in Peter Lumb's heart.

He had the rifle cocked by the time other shapes began to materialize in the mists. An unseen hand seemed to press down upon the rifle barrel and Lumb, for a moment felt a sensation worse than a thousand terrors. He cursed and shook his head. A sudden gob of light moved beyond the stretch of bushes. Another. A man cried out.

The cornered man pulled himself together by desperate effort. Sane reasoning told him that he could escape this benighted land. If he could show the villagers a great dead beast, marked with a spot of white, they would believe. They could not then believe that he, Peter Lumb, was in human form and in the shape of a dead wolf at one and the same time.

He raised the rifle again and became conscious of a great aversion for the thing he had to do. The wolf was wheeling away now. The white spot bobbed up and down in the darkness. Lumb aimed the rifle and fired, and the sound of it tore the stillness to shreds. A terrible animal-like scream rode on its persistent echoes and there was a wild threshing in the bushes not far from Peter Lumb. To the last of the

Damiens there was a human quality in the mortally wounded beast's death cry.

Peter Lumb dropped the rifle from nerveless hands. He was overpowered by a horrible feeling of remorse. It was as if he had killed someone of his own flesh and blood. A nameless terror had him in a viselike grip. It dropped him in a heap near the wall where white-faced natives of the region found him, his eyes staring blankly in the direction of something that lay inert in the brush.

To the men who approached him cautiously Lumb muttered: "He's dead—your werewolf is dead! Go get him—look for the spot on his neck. Then kill me, too, if you want too—I don't care. I don't care what you human devils do!" He turned over on the ground and buried his face in his hands.

Men's voices blended in a confused jargon of broken English in which there was a queer mixture of blasphemies and prayers. Torches spread a wavering, ghostly light over the bleak scene and there was a stir toward the brush. Soon two men came out of the shadows dragging the body of a large gray wolf. With a final heave they landed the carcass in the center of the lighted area, and there was an olio of superstitious exclamations. Then someone's shocked voice was distinguished clearly from the rest.

"The keed—the keed what Antoinette Damien take away. He have come back—he shoot his—he shoot the werewolf! But he is still here—he is still human being jus' lak the res' of people in St. Pierre."

"*Mais oui*," breathed a bewhiskered and bent Canuck, crossing himself reverently, "we have judge' thees man wrong."

A long silence pervaded the eerie place as the awed group of superstitious natives gazed down at the white spot on the back of Peter Lumb's head. When he stirred and got up slowly, his cavernous eyes lifting to meet the combined gaze of the horror-stricken men of St. Pierre, there was a general shifting of positions and clearing of throats as though the spell had been broken. The man who had been hunted like a wild beast got up slowly and made an

appeal to them.

"Will someone show me the way out of these hills? You have nothing more to fear—but I have. I must get away from here. The last of the Damiens does not wish to stay. After what happened here tonight—" He broke off in a state of consuming horror, raised shaking hands to the chain from which a locket was suspended around his neck. With a jerk he yanked the thing loose and flung it as far out into the bushes as his weakness would permit.

"We are ver' sorree, m'sieu," a giant of a man ventured to speak for his fellows. "It ees terreeble thing for a man to have to do. I—we understand, m'sieu. Me, Henri Mercereau, I show to you the way out."

Peter Lumb lashed out in disbelief: "Y-you still believe that—that wild tale—that the dead wolf there was my—" At the look of confirmation on the group of illiterate and simple faces he clamped his jaws together and stumbled out into the darkness, his hysterical laughter drifting back to where a big gray wolf lay dead upon the rough ground.

"*Tres bien*, Mercereau," said some one, "I go also to show heem way over the tor. We have the rifle in case—"

THREE hundred miles from St. Pierre, toward the close of another day, Peter Lumb staggered into a tacky roadside tavern that was deserted save for a drab-looking woman who stood behind the counter. He banged down a quarter that he had wheedled out of a truck driver and flashed his white teeth.

"A hamburger—just barely singed," he bit out. "The goodness goes out of meat when it's—" Lumb's face was white and his hands were shaking.

"What's the matter—you sick?" the woman asked.

Lumb was looking at his hands, at the thick black hair that grew on the backs of them. In a strange voice he said:

"There's nothin' wrong with me. I'm all right. A lot of men must have hairy hands—big white teeth—there's nothin' wrong—"

The woman's ruddy face was sud-

denly drained of color and her voice shook as she said hastily:

"Yeah, I guess so. Sure—" She turned quickly and took a cake of raw hamburger out of an old-fashioned ice chest.

Peter Lumb wanted that food more than a berth in heaven but his craving terrified him and he suddenly dashed out of the place. The door slamming behind him sounded like the crack of that rifle he had fired at the great gray

wolf up in the Champlain country. That uncanny sensation of remorse that had gripped him then was sweeping over him again with tremendous force.

Peter Lumb hurried aimlessly along the road, his long, hairy hands shoved down deep into the pockets of his ragged coat. Fear was driving him on—an unearthly, haunting fear that he could not understand, and that he did not dare to probe.



SCULPTOR OF CORPSES

A Complete Novelet of Weird Cadavers

By RAY CUMMINGS

—and Many Other Thrillers in the Next Issue of THRILLING MYSTERY

College Humor

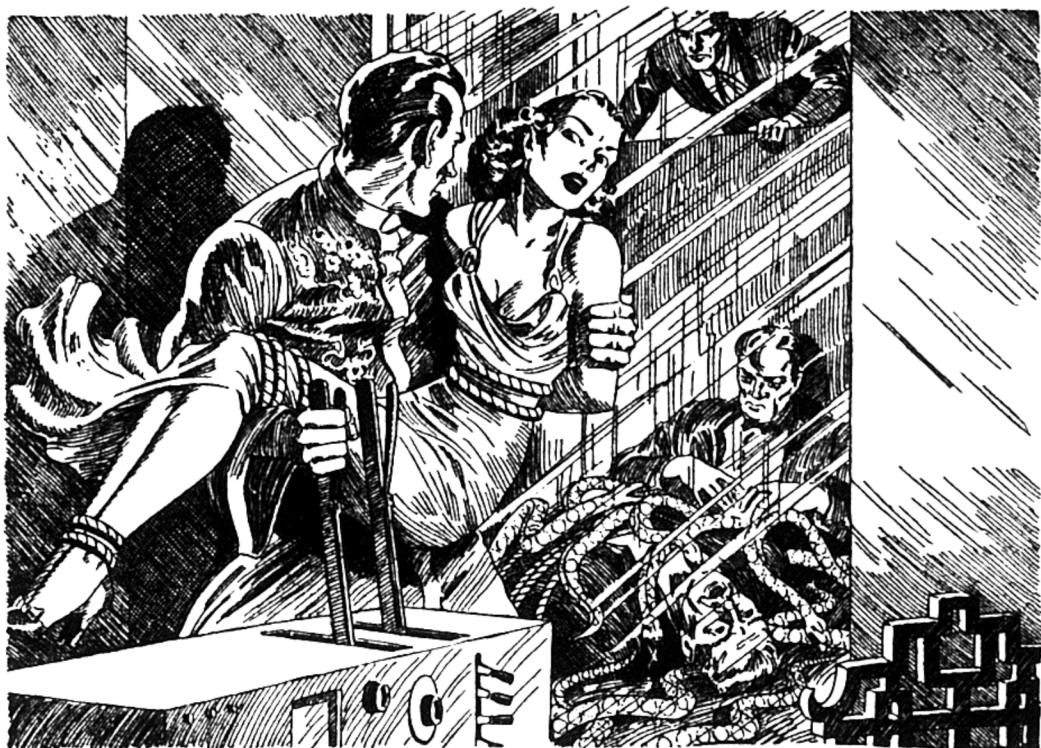
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CENTS

THE BEST COMEDY IN AMERICA

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Slaves of Kismet Wage Battle in a Boiling Pit of Unspeakable
and Perplexing Horrors!



He lifted Norma

DEATH IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

By HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Four Frightful Men," "Invaders from the Fourth," etc.

FOG hung over San Francisco. As I swung off the Powell Street cable car I jammed my fists into my overcoat pockets and looked around, shivering a little.

There was an old brownstone mansion across the street, with a panel on the door that said "PAX, Inc.," in gold letters. I didn't need to look at the address in my notebook to know this was the right place.

It was funny, in a way—me, Steve Harding, private dick, working for a man I didn't know, on a job I knew

nothing about. But McEgan, in his letter to me, had offered a fee I didn't want to turn down, unless I had to. So I went up the steps, rang the bell, and was let in by a wiry little Chinese houseboy.

I gave him McEgan's letter.

"Yes, sair," he said, glancing at it. "Come in, please." And he took me into a bare anteroom and left me, to reappear in a minute with cigarettes and a Scotch-and-soda.

"Mist' McEgan will see you pretty soon. You wait, please?"

I said I would, and he went out. I drank the whiskey and looked around. The room, while comfortably furnished, had the indefinable dankness and gloom of many old San Francisco houses that had stood since the fire. Fog pressed grayly against the windows. There was a door just across from me. Voices sounded from beyond it.

"I wish I could find some other way, John," a man's voice said. "It means giving up everything." The tone was high-pitched, and there was nervous tension in it.

Then another voice, calm, low, yet penetrating:

"You are wrong, Felix. Our Eastern philosophy would aid you. One does not battle kismet."

There was a harsh laugh. "Well, I don't like being a slave to Fate. If I did, I'd never have started this—job."

"A task you cannot finish."

The high-pitched voice got louder. "I can trust you to finish it for me, John, till I'm well. Can't I?"

"If you cannot trust your brother, whom can you trust?"

Silence. Then:

"Nobody. I'm afraid to—but this is your job now. You've got to carry on for me. If you don't—"

There was a pause, and I heard chairs being scraped back. I got up as the door opened.

A MAN came into the room. He was thin, tall, with oddly luminous blue eyes. Strangely cinnamon-colored hair tonsured a bald, gleaming skull. His face seemed all pouches and hollows; a worn, worried face. He put out a cold hand and gripped mine.

"You're Harding? I'm Felix McEgan. No, don't talk—I've no time now. I've got to pack and catch a boat to Hawaii in a few hours. Just listen."

He lighted a cigarette and drew on it nervously. "I've a company which needs a strong hand to run. And I'm ill—very ill. My doctor has ordered me to take a complete rest. If I don't, it will mean death. So I have left my brother, John McEgan, in my place.

It will be your task to protect him."

"You want a bodyguard," I said. "I'm not—"

"I know your reputation, Harding," he broke in. "The man who runs Pax is always in danger. There have been attempts on my life. There will be similar attempts to kill my brother. You must protect him. Before you give me your answer, look at this."

He drew out a billfold and handed me a check. I looked at it and swallowed.

"Okay," I said. "But get this: I work inside the law. If there's any shady stuff involved, just reach for your check and I'll scam. Well?"

The worn, haggard face twisted in a smile. "You need not worry about that. Keep the retainer, Harding. I must go now. You'll take your orders from my brother from now on. And"—he came closer, the blue eyes blazing into mine—"Don't let him surprise you. He may seem odd, but he has lived in China for many years, and has absorbed many of its customs. Just—protect him!"

Without another word he went out into the hall. I sat down again, pondering. What was this business—"Pax, Inc."—anyway?

The Chinese houseboy came in again, with another drink.

"You wait, please," he said again.

I waited.

After awhile the boy came back, opened the inner door, and pointed. I got up and went in.

A big room, though sparsely furnished, and chilly. Through the open window gray fog coiled in mistily. One thing drew my eyes immediately—an intricately carved Chinese screen, rich with reds and golds. The room seemed empty. I heard the door close behind me.

A voice behind the screen—a quiet, passionless voice—said, "Sit down, Mr. Harding."

I felt intent eyes probing me, and a little crawling of uneasiness wriggled up my spine as I relaxed in a chair.

"My brother has too many fears for my safety," the voice said. "He is Occidental to his soul, while I, despite my race, am Oriental. I spent years

in China, and in Tibet. I learned many things there. So I have no fear of assassination."

"It's hard to dodge a bullet," I told him.

"I have—certain powers," he said oddly. "However, Felix has employed you, and though I need no guard, it would be unfair for me to discharge you now. Do you know the Follmer House?"

SURE I knew it. The show place of the peninsula. It had been built by an old millionaire who had played with an ouija board till he got dizzy. The spirits had told him he'd never die while there was the sound of hammers in his home, and for eight years he'd kept a crew of builders working day and night, filling the place with secret passages, fake doors, stairways that went nowhere, and elevators that didn't move. But the joke was on him. He died anyway, and the Follmer House became a show place for anybody who wanted to pay the admission and wander through it.

"I know the place," I said.

"Good. You will go there tomorrow night at eight-thirty. I will have other guests."

There were a lot of questions rattling around in my mind, but I didn't ask any of them. I just said:

"Don't you think I ought to know something about this business, Pax, Incorporated, if I'm to—"

"No," the cool voice said. "That is scarcely necessary."

Then a man came around the screen, a big man, tall, moon-faced, with a skin brown as dark amber. His hair, black as his eyes, was combed straight back. And there wasn't a trace of expression on his face. He wore an embroidered Chinese robe.

"You will pardon my use of the screen," he said. "I learned that in the Orient. It is often helpful. Good afternoon, Mr. Harding." He made a choppy little bow, and I felt the houseboy touch my arm.

"This way out," he said, and I took the hint.

But all the way home I could feel John McEgan's glacial black eyes

probing into me—searching, passionless, inhuman eyes!

I drove my coupé along a twisting, tree-bordered road, my headlights sending slanting beams into the gloom. Just ahead a huge building reared up against the night sky. As I parked, a hulking, bulldog-faced man in overalls came up with a letter in his hand.

"You're Mr. Harding?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Who's this from?"

"A guy who looked like a Chinaman gave it to me," he answered as he handed me the letter. "Same guy that bought the Follmer House. 'Night." He swung off, climbed into a jalopy, and rattled away.

I opened the envelope and scanned the note inside.

Dear Harding:

Conduct my guests to the room at the end of the entrance hall. I will join you later.

John McEgan.

That seemed simple enough. A key fell out of the envelope into my hand, and I climbed out of the car just as the glare of headlights fell on me. With a roar a low-hung sedan braked to a stop and, blinking dazzled eyes, I made out a man and a girl sitting in it.

"Mr. Harding?" the girl said.

"Right," I told her. "You're guests, eh?"

They said yes, and got out. I led them on the porch, unlocked the door, and ushered them along a brightly lighted hall to a big room at its end. There I turned to look them over.

The girl was cute—small, with brown eyes, and chestnut curls tumbling down to her shoulders. The man was a big husky, with iron-gray hair and a bristling moustache that looked small in a ruddy, beefy face.

"I guess we just wait," I said. "Mr. McEgan will be along in awhile."

"Right." The girl nodded. "I'm Norma Hough. This is my father, Dr. Morley Hough."

THE man grunted, but didn't offer to shake hands. He let his big body down in a chair and glared

around angrily.

"Dragging us out here," he rumbled. "What's it for? I'm not used to—"

A bell rang. I excused myself and went back to the front door. Three men were there. I told them where to go and stayed on the porch, looking things over. I had a hunch that something was going to happen.

I felt a touch on my arm. The girl was there — Norma Hough. "Mr. Harding," she said, "do you know what this is all about?"

I figured there was no harm in telling her what I knew, so I did. Norma's brows drew together.

"It seems meaningless," she said. "When Felix called a conference, it was always at his house in San Francisco."

"His brother may do things differently," I told her. "Just what is this Pax, Incorporated, anyway?"

"Didn't you know?" she asked quickly, then as swiftly explained: "An organization for world peace. Felix got together four men who had invented new and powerful weapons, and formed a company to outlaw war. It's something of a secret, but there's no harm in your knowing it, I guess."

"Weapons?" I said. "They'd be pretty valuable to certain people, wouldn't they?"

Norma nodded. "Of course they're not perfected yet, but they will be. Dad has a ray that will stop any engine. Hyde has a radio detonator that will set off explosives at a distance. Then there's a new poison gas, and a radio-guided aerial torpedo—"

"Norma!" Hough yelled from inside the house. "Come here!"

I followed her in, thinking things over. The four men were sitting quietly, but I noticed a curious tension about them. Norma sat down beside her father, and then I heard a little clicking noise. I turned.

The door had swung shut. I went over and turned the knob. But I couldn't open the door.

"What's the matter?" Norma's voice was tense. "Is—"

Then I saw another door, in the far wall, opening. An oblong of black-

ness widened. And, in the distance, a faint glow grew brighter.

The four men were on their feet now. We were all standing on the threshold, staring and waiting.

Suddenly a man was standing beyond the door. It was John McEgan. I saw the rich, embroidered robe, the sleek black hair, the dark, plump face. Black eyes watched us coldly.

But the man was ghostly! I could see through his body! It stood there, real enough, but like a transparent figure, so that I could see the wall beyond it. He seemed to be only a few feet away. I stepped forward, but stopped as McEgan raised a warning hand.

"**H**ARDING," he said, "I regret that I must kill you, as well as the others. I have no personal animosity against you, nor against Miss Hough. But I am determined to wipe the slate clean."

"What is this?" Hough snarled. "A joke? If it is—"

"No joke," McEgan said. "My brother is an idealist and a fool. I know what is behind Pax, Incorporated. He planned—and you plan—to outlaw war by creating an oligarchy of science. With the weapons you have, you will make yourselves all-powerful. There will be no nations, and no war. One race and one people, under your rule."

So that was the motivation of Pax, Incorporated! A mad, quixotic scheme, but one that had a hundredth chance of succeeding, provided the company really had the weapons of which Norma had told me.

"Man's regeneration must come from within," McEgan went on. "I have lived in the East long enough to know that. You are mocking and battling kismet, and so you must die. I can see the outcome of your plan, and it is death and horror. So you must die, as I killed my brother."

I caught my breath. McEgan's cold black eyes turned to me.

"Yes, Harding. I poisoned him slowly, so that he would be forced to retire and give me the necessary authority. Before he embarked for Ha-

wail, I made sure that he would die on the boat. With my own hands I mixed a drink for him, and in that drink was his death. Now I shall kill you. You cannot escape. Unless Fate decrees it. By the law of Karma, I must give you your chance to escape your destiny. That I have done. Under this house is a vault, filled with enough explosive to destroy you utterly. It will be set off tonight. I give you a few hours' grace; if you can find the vault within those hours, it is kismet, and I may not battle Fate. If it is decreed that you are to live, I must bow to that decree. So I give you your chance."

"You're crazy!" Hough growled. "Let us out of here, or you'll regret it!"

Ignoring him, McEgan went on.

"There is an Occidental game called a treasure hunt. You are given various clues, I believe. Well, your treasure is life—if you find it. And if you fail—death. Here is your first clue: Bring light into the shadow!"

The misty figure of John McEgan faded; the icy black eyes dimmed and were gone. A blank wall faced us. I sprang forward, and the door crashed shut in my face. Cursing, I hurled my body against it, only to fall back with a bruised shoulder. The panel had been reinforced with steel.

"This is a joke, isn't it?" Norma asked. But her lips were white.

Hough suddenly took command. "Hyde," he said, turning to a short, stocky man with a receding brow and a mouth wide as a frog's, "guard the door! Got a gun?"

Hyde shook his head. This was the man, I remembered, who had invented the long-distance radio detonator. He went to stand beside the door.

"Reeder!" This man was a gangling skeleton figure, gaunt and sallow, with an incongruously luxuriant black beard. "You armed? No? Krull?"

KRULL was short and fat. His round face sagged now in ludicrous folds of apprehension.

"Hough, he's mad!" the man yelled. "He'll kill us!"

"Keep your nerve," Hough said, and

swore at the other. "We can get out of this. We've got to." He glanced sideward at his daughter, then at me. "Harding, what do you know of this?"

I told him all I knew. Glances of suspicion were directed at me.

"Got a gun?"

I shook my head.

"Think McEgan's serious about this—this treasure hunt?"

"It's possible," I said. "If he's willing to murder his brother, he won't stop at killing us."

"But it's so fantastic!" the fat Krull broke in.

"John McEgan's a hybrid," I told him. "He's half Oriental. You've got to remember that."

Norma touched my arm. "Look!"

A door in the wall, one I had not noticed before, so cleverly was it disguised, was swinging open. Beyond it was a brightly lighted room, luxuriously furnished. Hough stepped forward, but I shoved him out of my way and went over the threshold, my skin crawling with expectation of an attack.

But nothing happened. There was just this big room, silent as death, with another door in the far wall. I went to it, opened it.

Another room, slightly larger. Norma and the rest crowded in behind me. A Chinese screen cast a shadow on the wall.

Krull, the fat man, cried out. He scuttled past me into the shadow, pointing. On the wall was an electric fixture, with an unlighted light bulb in it.

Krull swung to face us. "He said bring light into the shadow! This—"

He reached up, touched the switch. And—died!

A flaming, crackling blaze of light blinded us. I saw Krull's pudgy figure, a black blot against the electric glow, writhing and arching; then he was down, silent, motionless. I reached him in time to hear a rasping exhalation of breath from his twisted lips. Then he lay still—electrocuted.

"My God!" Hough was whispering. "My God!"

I saw Norma's face, paper-white; the frightened, terrified faces of the

other two men. Up to now I had felt that this might all be some far-fetched joke, but it was different now. Death isn't funny.

And there lay Krull, his round face sagging, eyes glazed and staring. I felt his wrist, held the crystal of my watch before his lips. The man was dead.

I said so as I got up. Reeder, the gaunt man, came closer, his black beard bristling. He was looking up at the wall.

"See that?" he said quietly. I followed his gaze.

On the light bulb, as though traced by India ink, letters had appeared. A message was black on the frosted glass, brought into visibility, no doubt, by the action of the electric current. I peered closer, and read it aloud:

TWO GUARD BUDDHA'S EYES

"No sense to it," Reeder said. He looked down at Krull's body, then glanced away quickly. "But—Well, there's no use staying here."

HE turned to a door. We followed him. Norma stayed at my side and, as I felt her shiver, I put my arm reassuringly around her waist.

"Buck up," I said. "We'll get out of this. Keep your chin up."

She flashed me a grateful look. "I—I can't help being afraid, though."

"I'm scared down to my shoes," I told her. "But I've been in worse jams than this." Which wasn't exactly true.

I don't like to remember that nightmare search through that madhouse, up stairs that ended in blank walls, through twisting corridors that doubled back on themselves, watching—always watching—for some means of escape.

No windows looked out on freedom. There was only the cold, electric brilliance glaring back from the walls, and the deadly stillness that hung over the house. Stillness broken only by the harsh breathing of Reeder, Hyde, and the others.

But at last we solved the riddle. Two suits of armor stood facing each

other, battle-axes raised, on either side of a niche in the wall where a fat golden Buddha squatted, with eyes of gleaming emerald. We stopped, staring.

"Buddha's eyes," Reeder said softly. "If we press the eyes, eh?"

"Press them yourself," Hyde snapped, his stocky body swaying slightly. "I'm not going to."

Hough pulled at his bristling moustache. "Wait a minute. We've got to stand between those two suits of armor in order to touch the Buddha." He looked warily at the sharp battle-axes. "Or do we?"

Reeder barked a harsh laugh. He pulled two pencils from his pocket, stepped behind one of the armored suits, and extended his hands toward the Buddha.

"No danger here—" he started to say—then it happened.

My eyes were fixed on the battle-axes, so at first I missed the premonitory shudder of the floor. I hurled myself back, but I wasn't really in danger. Two trap-doors opened suddenly. Each was behind one of the suits of armor, and Reeder was stand-above one of them.

I saw his body plummet down, his arms waving frantically, black beard flying. From his lips burst an ear-shattering scream of abysmal agony. I saw Reeder's torso above the floor level, his head thrown back, his face twisted into a Gorgon mask. Something spattered on my wrist, and I felt a burning pain.

Shrieks cascaded from Reeder's twisted lips. He held himself up with his arms, one lean hand gripping a suit of armor. A choking stench filled my nostrils, an odor that made me go sick and dizzy.

Norma caught her breath in a sob. Her father caught her as she fell.

Hyde and I jumped forward together. We were too late. Reeder, in a last convulsion of agony, began to beat the floor with his hands. Then, quite suddenly, he slipped down and was gone. There was one more scream, but it was uncompleted.

I jerked to a halt at the edge of the trap. Down below something was

bobbing blackly in a sulphurously turbid liquid. Clothing and flesh and bone were dissolving as I watched. The horror sank out of sight and was gone.

MY stomach was churning. From immense distances, it seemed, I heard laughter, mad and terrible. It died away, and the flat, toneless voice of John McEgan murmured!

"So you have found the secret of the Buddha's eyes! Good. And the next clue is—listen carefully—the tongue of the basilisk!"

The soft voice ended, and deadly silence closed around us. Hyde and I looked into each other's eyes, horror in our faces. He moistened his lips, tried to speak, and failed.

Norma stirred in her father's arms. I glanced down at the pool of acid at my side, nodded meaningly at Hough. Understanding, he lifted the girl and carried her into the next room at my heels, putting her down gently on a couch.

Her eyes opened, wide with terror. Silently I watched Hough soothe the girl, noticing that Norma was on the verge of hysteria. Well, no wonder!

Hyde touched my arm. "That clue—tongue of the basilisk. What d'you think—"

"Another murder trap," I grunted. "Wait a minute. I've an idea."

I was remembering the hazy, ghost-like apparition of John McEgan we had seen. A chord of memory stirred in my mind. Something. . . .

Hyde's shout broke my thought. He was pointing to a great gilt image in a corner; a replica of a dragon, with curved, barbed tail and forked, protruding tongue.

"The basilisk," he said unsteadily. "That's it."

He took a step forward, and halted. His swarthy face was sallow. The broad mouth hung half open, and I could see beads of perspiration on the low forehead. He took another step, and expelled his breath noisily.

"Oh, my God!" he whispered.

I could see that every atom of his body cried out for the one chance of life that crouched, golden and gleam-

ing, before him. And fear held him back—deadly, frightful fear!

"Don't touch it, Hyde!" Hough, one arm supporting Norma, called. "Don't!"

The man drew back as though recoiling from the blind face of horror. His eyes probed the room, searching frantically, as though hoping to find some means of salvation.

"I'm not going to touch that damned thing," I said. "It's another trap. And I'd advise you not to touch it either, Hyde."

He wasn't listening. A curious, incredulous look had come into his face. I followed his gaze—and gasped.

A crack showed in the wall, a crack through which dim light crept. Moonlight! Before I could move Hyde had sprung forward, wrenching at the wall. A concealed panel slid open.

Beyond it was a short passage, and at its end, ajar, was a door, through which faint moon rays glowed. A chill breath of fresh air blew in on us, and the rumble of traffic sounded from the distant highway. Hyde cried out inarticulately. He leaped forward.

I was at his heels. Some indefinable hint of danger made me alert, and so when first I noticed something wrong I was able to halt in time. But the floor slanted and dropped away beneath my feet. I flung myself back, my heart hammering, with Hyde's scream throbbing in my ears, and tottered for a moment on the brink of an abyss that yawned below me.

I GRIPPED the edge of the panel, steadying myself. The door at the end of the passage had closed. The moonlight was shut out. But it was not dark—no!

From the pit at my feet yellow, lambent radiance crawled up, revealing pitilessly the score of twisting, rope-like things eight feet below. They were snakes. I don't know what kind—coral snakes, perhaps, or something even more deadly. I dropped flat on my face, reaching down into the pit as far as possible.

"Hyde!" I yelled. "Jump! Quick!"

Then I saw it was useless. Hyde's squat, bulky figure lay crumpled on

the cement floor, unstirring. Nevertheless I shouted at him.

The snakes were roused to activity. They glided toward the unconscious man. I looked away quickly, to meet the cold stare of Hough.

"Find a curtain," I said. "Something to use for a rope."

He started to answer, and then paused. A sound had come up out of the pit; a sound I don't like to remember. Hyde had recovered consciousness.

The next few minutes were sheer madness. I found a curtain strong enough to sustain a man's weight, but by the time I lowered it into the pit Hyde was dying. The snake venom worked swiftly. Those frightful reptiles were all about him, and the poor devil's body was swelling and blackening before my eyes.

"You're not going down there," Hough said. It wasn't a question.

"Not much use now," I told him.

"I didn't think you would." He tugged at his scrubby moustache. "Look!"

I followed the direction of his gesture. I had not seen it before, but in the wall of the room below a glass panel had lighted up. Through it I could see a man seated at ease before a table cluttered with wires and switchboards. It was John McEgan.

He waved a negligent hand at us. His voice, amplified by some hidden loud-speaker, sounded.

"So you have found the next clue," he said. "Good. You are clever—very."

I didn't say anything. There didn't seem much to say. But Hough, standing beside me at the edge of the pit, snarled down: "Let my daughter go, damn you! She isn't—"

"Yeah," I broke in. "You've got nothing against her."

Hough turned on me viciously. "Shut up!" he snapped. "You needn't keep it up any longer. I know you're his spy!"

He nodded toward the man below. And McEgan's laughter rang out, grimly amused.

"So you fight among yourselves! Harding is working for me, eh?"

"You're crazy," I said in an undertone to Hough, but he shut me up with an angry gesture.

"Why didn't you fall into any of the traps? What motive has he for killing you?"

"You are wasting valuable time," McEgan said. "The next clue—"

"The devil with your clues!" Hough swung about, went to Norma, who stood beside the couch, her face paper-white. "Come on. We'll find a way out of here."

THE girl hesitated, her eyes intent on me. I made no move. What was the use?

They went out of the room. Shrugging, I followed. There was no point in arguing with Hough right now, but I could at least keep an eye on Norma.

So I thought. But I failed. I realized, suddenly, that I had lost the pair in the maze of passages and stairways, and after a time I went back to the room in which the golden basilisk stood.

Hyde's body was still in the pit, but scarcely recognizable. The snakes were whipping about with surprising speed. And now I saw there was another body there.

Hough's! I recognized the bulky figure, the stiff, bristling moustache. The man lay among the snakes, tightly bound, his eyes glaring up at me.

I called his name before I saw he was dead. McEgan's voice came, sardonically amused.

"They are racers, Harding. African snakes, which attack a man without provocation, and which can run down a swift horse. Hough made the mistake of discovering my little retreat down here. He found a concealed spring, opened a panel, and visited me without any weapon, except an improvised club made from a chair leg. I was forced to shoot him."

The figure stood against the glass panel, brocaded robe gleaming in the yellow light.

"I did not kill him, no. He was merely wounded. So I let the snakes finish the task for me."

"Where's Norma?" I asked, with a restraint I didn't know I possessed.

He moved aside. Beyond him, tightly bound, Norma lay huddled on the floor, her wide eyes fear-filled.

"The game has not worked out entirely well," McEgan smiled. "So I shall kill you all, without continuing our treasure hunt. After all, you broke the rules by refusing to play. So—" he turned, lifted Norma, a slim, pallid figure against the flaming scarlet of the robe—"she shall join her father."

He had one hand on a lever. I felt my skin crawl. If he put Norma out there among the snakes, I knew I'd jump down, and with those lightning-swift, vicious reptiles I'd have no chance at all.

"Wait a minute, McEgan," I said.

"Yes?"

"Put the girl down. I've something to tell you."

He hesitated, shrugged, and obeyed. "Well? Are you playing for time? If so—"

"No," I told him. "I've figured out your little scheme, that's all."

I hadn't. But it seemed the only way to stop him. Yet as I talked, my brain, keyed up to high tension, seemed to work out the pattern by itself, building itself up into a coherent and almost incredible whole. Yet it was logical, diabolically so!

"That ghostly figure you showed us—an old trick," I said. "Magicians have used it on the stage often. A sheet of plate glass and mirrors reflecting your image onto it from below."

He smiled. "Is that all? Surely—"

"It isn't all," I said, and now I knew the answer, knew I was right. I didn't hesitate. I staked everything on one sentence.

"You're not John McEgan," I said.

THE man stood perfectly motionless for a moment, but I could feel the shock and the cold, deadly hatred within him. When he spoke his voice wasn't quite emotionless.

"I am not?"

"There never was a John McEgan. Just Felix McEgan, the head of Pax, Incorporated, one of the biggest insurance swindles I've ever run across.

It all fits in. A corporation to promote world peace, eh? The whole thing's fantastic! How could a few men battle all the powers? Especially when their super-weapons weren't even proved? A man starting something like Pax, Incorporated, would insist on seeing those weapons tested, and Felix McEgan never did. He just gave the thing a big build-up, with the idea of showing how important and valuable the weapons were. He did it for just one purpose. Insurance."

Norma's face was a mask of amazement as she looked up at me beyond the silent figure. I went on.

"Mutual insurance. If one of the men in Pax died, the others would collect on the premiums. If they all died but one, that one would get it all. You planned from the first to get the insurance money, but you needed a scapegoat. So you created John McEgan, supposedly your brother.

"There never was a John McEgan. I met Felix McEgan, sure, and a little while later I met John. That's what I thought. But I didn't see Felix and John at the same time. I couldn't, for they were the same person. With make-up, a wig, painted shells over Felix's eyeballs, he was John McEgan. I thought I heard John and Felix talking together, but what I heard was a man talking to a phonograph record he'd made himself. The whole thing was just to make me certain there really was a John McEgan. So that when I escaped from here . . .

"That's what you planned, wasn't it? That I could swear John was the murderer. And John, presumably, would have been killed in the explosion when the house blew up. Felix would have turned up, miraculously recovered from the poison his 'brother' fed him, and he'd have got the insurance."

The man in the room below nodded slowly. His hands lifted, slid over his face. Glass shells glittered. The glacial blue eyes, no longer black, stared at me mockingly.

The left fingers flew. Bits of wax were removed from the plump cheeks, and they became cadaverous and hol-

low. The wig was taken off to reveal a tonsured, gleaming skull. Even the voice, when he spoke, was shrill and piercing, instead of low, emotionless.

"Clever of you, Harding," Felix McEgan said. "But now, even if I had not intended to before, I'll have to kill you as well as the others. With you all dead, and the house blown up, I'll take my chances with a jury. But I don't think it'll come to that. I'll simply lack a witness now. Well, if necessary, I can hire one."

He turned to Norma. "The snakes for you, a bullet for Harding—and a match to the fuse. Then it'll be over."

My gaze went down to the serpents, and the two motionless bodies beneath me. If I could only get through the snakes safely—

The idea flashed into my mind without warning. Of course! Right under my hand had been a safe way of reaching McEgan, and I had not realized it. Now it was, perhaps, too late.

NEVERTHELESS it was a chance, and I took it. I whirled, sprinted back through the silent rooms and twisting passages, till I saw the fat, golden Buddha squatting in its niche in the wall. Guarding it were the two suits of armor.

There was no time to don a complete suit. But I had to protect my feet and legs, and it did not take long to slip on the steel shoes and greaves. I gripped a battle-axe and turned to race back.

Once the slippery metal betrayed me, and I fell heavily. Breathing heavily, I got up, picturing Norma bound and prostrate, with the snakes writhing toward her.

I reached the edge of the pit. Norma lay near the glass panel. Through it I could see McEgan, his gaunt face twisted with evil delight, watching. The reptiles were coming toward the girl, and coming fast.

I jumped. The shock almost broke my ankles, but by some miracle I stayed upright. With one leap I was at Norma's side, bent and lifted her as the first of the racers struck, its fangs clashing against the metal that protected my legs.

Through the glass I saw McEgan's jaw drop, his eyes widen. He whirled, went racing away. I lifted the battle-axe in one hand, smashed the glass, reached through and pulled the lever that opened the door.

I stepped over the threshold in the midst of a boiling, hissing hell of scaled death. The snakes surrounded me. I held Norma higher.

McEgan was just turning, a gun gripped in his lean hand.

I threw the axe.

Metal clashed on metal. The revolver clattered down, and blood showed red on McEgan's hand. He made a dive for the gun.

I heard him scream. He sprang up, something black and ropelike coiling and twisting about his arm. He slipped and went down, and then the snakes found him.

I got a glimpse of mad, blazing blue eyes glaring into mine. Then a sinuous coil whipped about the man's face, and he went insane. Already the swift, deadly poison was coursing toward his heart, and he knew it.

I do not like to remember what happened next. There was a madman clawing, biting, snarling inarticulate oaths, battling the black tide of death that trapped him. And soon there was only a still and silent body, already swelling and blackening, with thin lips writhed back from the teeth in a snarl of undying hatred.

Luckily Norma had fainted. I went swiftly to a door in the wall, opened it, and went through, taking care to shut out the snakes. I reasoned that McEgan would have a convenient means of egress from his hideout, and I was right. A dozen steps, and I felt fresh air cool on my hot face.

In my car, I unbound Norma, put a pillow under her head, and started the motor. Then I shut it off and reached into the dashboard compartment. There were a number of things I wanted to do in a hurry. Get Norma to a hospital. Telephone the police. All of them important.

But there was something I needed much more just then, and, reaching into the compartment, I got it.

Yeah—a drink!

What Are the Ghastly Living Sounds that Rise Up to the Ears
of John Torg from the Lips of the Woman He Killed?



He had flung aside the spade and leaped down into the grave. "Damn you, be quiet!"

The SECRET GRAVE

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "Corpse Magic," "Fortress of Horror," etc.

THE body of Anna Claire wasn't heavy; it weighed only a hundred and ten pounds. Big John Torg carried it slung across one of his shoulders, balancing it like a sack of meal. The underbrush crackled under his tread. But he couldn't hear it because all the dark forest glade seemed echoing with Anna's last, frantic plea: "Don't kill me, John—"

She had seen his hands coming for her throat. She had known then that

nothing could stop him. She had gasped, threshed and twitched on the ground for quite a while. But now she was dead—forever.

Through tangled underbrush John Torg staggered with his still-warm, lifeless burden. He didn't have far to go; he had hidden the spade nearby in a bush beside a patch of leafy mold where the ground was soft. The grave would be easy to dig. He needed to go down only three or four feet. A

shallow hole would be enough.

Though it was midnight, the pale rays of the moonlight illuminated Anna's still face. It seemed that she was watching him, her ghastly face interested, her glazed dead eyes following his every movement. Gruesome, that she still seemed alive.

He let her fall to the ground, then began to dig.

The mound of soft earth grew steadily, and the grave yawned deeper. The spade thudded rhythmically, but for John Torg it always seemed drowned by the voice of the dead girl, protesting: "Don't bury me! Please don't bury me—I don't want to be buried."

"Well, you're going to be buried, damn you," Torg muttered fiercely to himself. "Dead and buried, out of my way forever!"

Anna Claire had been a millstone around his neck; an albatross weighing him down. He was through listening to her whining, sniveling love, her pleas to marry her. That was finished now. The future held nothing but Gloria. Her beauty, her social position, and her money would soon be his.

In the midnight gloom of the forest glade, John Torg tumbled the body into the grave. The white face stared up at him. Her glazed eyes seemed pleading not to be buried. Or were they threatening eyes? Torg threw a shovelful of earth on the face. A sudden gasp of protest seemed to mingle with the thud of it. Frantically, he shoveled the rest of the earth in upon her; then he trampled and leveled it down.

The grave almost full, he buried the spade. Then he scattered the leafy mold over it so that if by daylight anyone did chance upon this secluded spot, no fresh earth would be noticed.

That was the end of Anna Claire. The big, handsomely dark, swaggering John Torg was triumphant as he trudged back through the woods. There was nothing ahead of him but the straight road to Gloria—her beauty and her money.

WITHIN a week John Torg married Gloria Nelson. It was a spectacular wedding. Then came a honeymoon of three weeks so full of

new scenes, excitement and gaiety that he almost lost the memory of Anna Claire. Almost—but not quite.

When they returned to the luxurious little cottage which Gloria had selected for their home, the memory of the woman he had killed leaped into a damnable vividness. The cottage was on a green, tree-strewn slope, with the lush woods at the bottom of it, and the grave of Anna Claire no more than a mile away.

It was as though John Torg were living almost at the brink of that secret grave. It was a terrifying thing, because now the thought of his murder was always before him. There were frequent evenings when, fascinated, he would sit on the veranda, smoking, staring out over the spread of trees with the moonlight silvering their tops. Then there would come the gruesome memory of Anna Claire as she must look now, moldering out there.

"John, dear, what's the matter with you?"

There had come an evening when Gloria could not help noticing her handsome husband's moody abstraction. Tall and slender, in the dimness of the veranda Gloria bent over his chair, her jeweled fingers caressing his dark curls.

"John, dear—"

"Eh? Oh, it's you, Gloria." It startled him to find Gloria here; he had been thinking of Anna, who had been small and not very pretty.

"What's the matter, John? Didn't you hear me calling you?"

"Yes, of course I heard you," he said. "Sit down beside me, darling."

Torg had always been a moody fellow, abstracted so that he seemed oblivious to what was going on around him. He tried now not to let that grow upon him. But his abstraction was steadily worse; and tonight as he sat with his arm around his wife, abruptly it seemed that there were three of them here.

Torg was horribly startled, that first night when he became aware that he was hearing the damned thing which now was Anna. His frightened gaze darted around the dim veranda. But there was nothing of her to see; nothing to feel but Gloria's softness against

him. Yet he knew that Anna was here. A little sound that he could not mistake—a vague quivering of her breath as though she were silently panting as she stood here in the dimness beside him.

Idiotic thoughts! It was his own guilty conscience, of course. He had been obsessed with memory of Anna ever since he killed her. John Torg was a sensible fellow. He knew that he couldn't be haunted by the ghost of his victim. He fought off the obsession; saw it for what it was. The ghost of Anna Claire, rising to torture him? How silly.

But there came a night when Torg could no longer fight the thing away. At last he knew that it was a reality. There was a ghost that he could not see, could not feel, but could only hear! A damned thing that was the living, breathing body of Anna Claire! Torg lay at midnight in the dimness of the bedroom, with Gloria beside him. God!

Would Gloria hear it? The vague pounding of Anna's heart, the little hissing gurgle of intake and outgo of her breath.

"You go away from me! You're dead! You're dead and in your grave—you've got no right to be here, because you're dead!" The frantic words were only in his thoughts; but it took all his will power to keep from screaming them aloud.

"You're not asleep yet, John?" Gloria murmured suddenly.

"No—it's—it's hot tonight, isn't it?" he muttered.

HE lay tense, expectant, wondering how Gloria could help but hear the damnable thing. Thump—thump . . . a heart that should be silent, festering in its grave. But it wasn't. A tremulous breath that had no right to come from between these unseen lips . . . The damned thing was so apparent that in the darkness beside his bed, for a second the terrified Torg thought that he saw her. That was imagination; but the sound of her was reality.

"You be quiet! Damn you—you're dead! Your heart can't beat—you can't breathe. Go away—go back where you belong."

God! He had murmured it aloud; and the sleepy Gloria turned in bed.

"What did you say, John?"

"Nothing," he muttered. "Did you—do you think you hear something, Gloria?"

In the darkness he held his wife and tried to keep himself from shuddering. And the damnable unseen ghost rustled closer—an invisible, imponderable thing that he could hear quivering and pulsating with life when it should have been dead.

One could go mad from terror. Torg was aware of it. And there was the terror that some time he would forget himself and scream out at Anna; and Gloria would understand that her husband was a murderer. The grisly, throbbing ghost was always with him now. Day and night he could always hear her living body. He was gruesomely fascinated, analyzing the myriad sounds of this unseen, ghastly woman who stalked constantly beside him.

The pulsations of a living thing are intricate. Her heart, her breath, he had heard them so long that he could almost ignore them now in his fascination of listening to the lesser sounds. That little rubbing swish—was that the pleura as the lungs expanded against it? And it seemed that he could hear the faint muffled murmur of the blood gushing through her arteries and veins, the flow of the gastric juice in her stomach.

Vast and intricate mechanism was the living body of Anna Claire. But in John Torg's mind there was no thought of awe at the wonders of nature. Nothing but terror. Sometimes when he was alone, he would reach and strike at the horrible thing. But there was nothing to take his blow. Nothing to see; just the quickened sounds of her pulsating body for him to hear.

And then he knew that he must silence her. Out there in her grave, that ghastly, decomposing thing must be silenced. If he ripped it apart, strewed it, would that silence it?

"Something is bothering you, Mr. Torg. Your wife is really worried about you," a voice broke in on his thoughts.

The grave-faced physician whom Gloria had unexpectedly summoned, gazed with such damnably keen eyes. "Tell me what's bothering you, Mr. Torg."

"Why — nothing," he muttered. "How silly of Gloria. I—I have a bit of indigestion sometimes. It makes you morose, I guess."

He got rid of the doctor at last. He promised to take the sedative which would quiet him at night. He saw the doctor gravely talking with Gloria. He could not hear what they said, but they feared for his mental health, of course.

Torg realized now to the full his desperate danger. He'd have to quiet the damned thing that was Anna Claire, or it would expose him. He'd silence it tonight! Rip the festering body apart. "You be quiet, damn you! I should have strewn you in that grave." He laughed wildly and he muttered on: "You're dead, but you don't know it. I'll show you! I'll pull you to pieces — stop your damnable noise—"

AS though the invisible Anna heard him and understood, the noise of her grew louder as she pressed closer—the sounds of her living body all quickened and intensified with her defiance.

Silence her . . . silence her . . . all that evening it pounded his tortured brain. And it seemed incredible now that Gloria did not notice the blended clattering. It was so loud, so damnably, defiantly loud, as though Anna were struggling to make her panting breath audible to Gloria. She'd succeed any minute now if he didn't stop her. "Shut up, you damned thing. Be quiet!" He didn't dare shout it. He kept murmuring it to himself. . . .

He got Gloria to bed at last; and he lay down beside her. She made him take his sedative. That was a joke. Nothing could make him sleep now until this horrible thing was strewn and silenced. He lay listening to it as it stood here now beside the bed, pounding and gurgling louder than ever.

Then at last Gloria was asleep, and Torg cautiously slipped from the bed. He put on his shoes downstairs, quietly left the house, descended the slope in the moonlight and plunged into the

woods. The carving knife which he had hidden under the veranda was in his hand. The woods were dark, but it wasn't far.

"I'll kill you now if I didn't before." He wildly muttered it over and over as he strode through the thickets. And Anna was racing beside him; her heart was racing; her breath racing—the whole imponderable, damnable shape of her accelerated into a horrible clattering, thumping, gurgling.

"I'll kill you now, if I didn't before." He could fling it at her now with his muttering, menacing voice. But she wasn't afraid to follow him back here to her grave. Maybe she didn't think he could kill her. But this time he would. He'd find her body buried here, of course. And this time he'd strew it — smash it and scatter it so that nothing would be left to make these damnable living sounds.

The grave was covered with moldering leaves, but the exact spot was so vivid in his memory that he found it easily; and he flung himself down, babbling with tortured mind as he groveled, digging with frantic fingers until he unearthed the buried spade; seized it and frantically dug.

"Damn you, I'll silence you now, forever—"

The demoniac John Torg, with his mind completely crazed by the lash of his terror, was not aware of the two hurrying shapes that had followed him into the woods—Gloria and the physician who lived nearby and whom she had hastily summoned when she saw her husband rush from the house. They were searching for him in the woods now; but Torg did not know it.

For him there was only the damning sounds of Anna's pulsating body which must be silenced. He realized that Anna was afraid now, as he dug into her grave. He could sense that she was pressing close upon him as though to hamper him—with her heart wildly thumping, her breath panting as it swished in and out of her festering lungs. The sounds were louder as he uncovered the dirt. And now he could see the body!

The spade went into its ghastly face. The whole body was here, just as he

had tumbled it in more than two months ago, save that now it was noisome.

"At last," he gibbered. "I've got you now! Stop that damnable noise I tell you!"

HE had flung aside the spade and leaped down into the grave.

"Damn you—damn you, be quiet." He stabbed with the knife, and then he was ripping and tearing at the noisome body like a hyena worrying a carcass.

"John—oh, my God—"

He looked up and saw his wife's pallid face as she sank fainting beside the grave. And he saw the terrified physician. Did Anna see them? Damn her, she was making more noise now than ever.

"She won't be quiet!" he gibbered. "You hear her, Dr. Gregg? That's what's driving me crazy—that noise, and I can't stop it! I killed her two months ago, but she won't lie quiet! Look at her! She's dead, isn't she? But you hear the damned noise of her? You hear it?"

Wildly he waved the noisome knife. Was that his own throat he was slashing? What matter? Damn you, Anna—be quiet.

He felt the hot blood as it came gushing from his slashed throat; he felt the

hot stab of the knife. He had plunged it into his chest. What matter? Nothing mattered save the noise the damned dead thing was making—that quivering, thumping, gasping body of the dead Anna Claire. Then the noisome moonlit grave suddenly went black. And blessed silence came at last as John Torg drifted off into eternity. . . .

"I have the autopsy report," the grave-faced physician said quietly. He riffled the big typewritten sheets and then set them aside. "There was nothing the matter with his brain, save that undoubtedly he was crazed at the last with his terror. Your husband was always a trifle deaf, wasn't he, Mrs. Torg?"

"Why, yes—I got that impression," Gloria replied. "Though he never admitted it, even to himself."

"He had an ear disease," the physician said. "Growths—an obstruction of the inner ear. In the last two or three weeks they were quite evidently getting rapidly worse. You say that he was always afraid that you'd hear something which he was hearing? It wasn't the ghost of Anna Claire that he heard."

"The noises were only those of his own living body! Noises short-circuited in his head, vibrations of his body-sounds carried by his bones and magnified on his own ear-drums!"

MYSTERY HEADLINERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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A Novelet of Weird Cadavers by RAY CUMMINGS

THE FARING OF THE WOLF

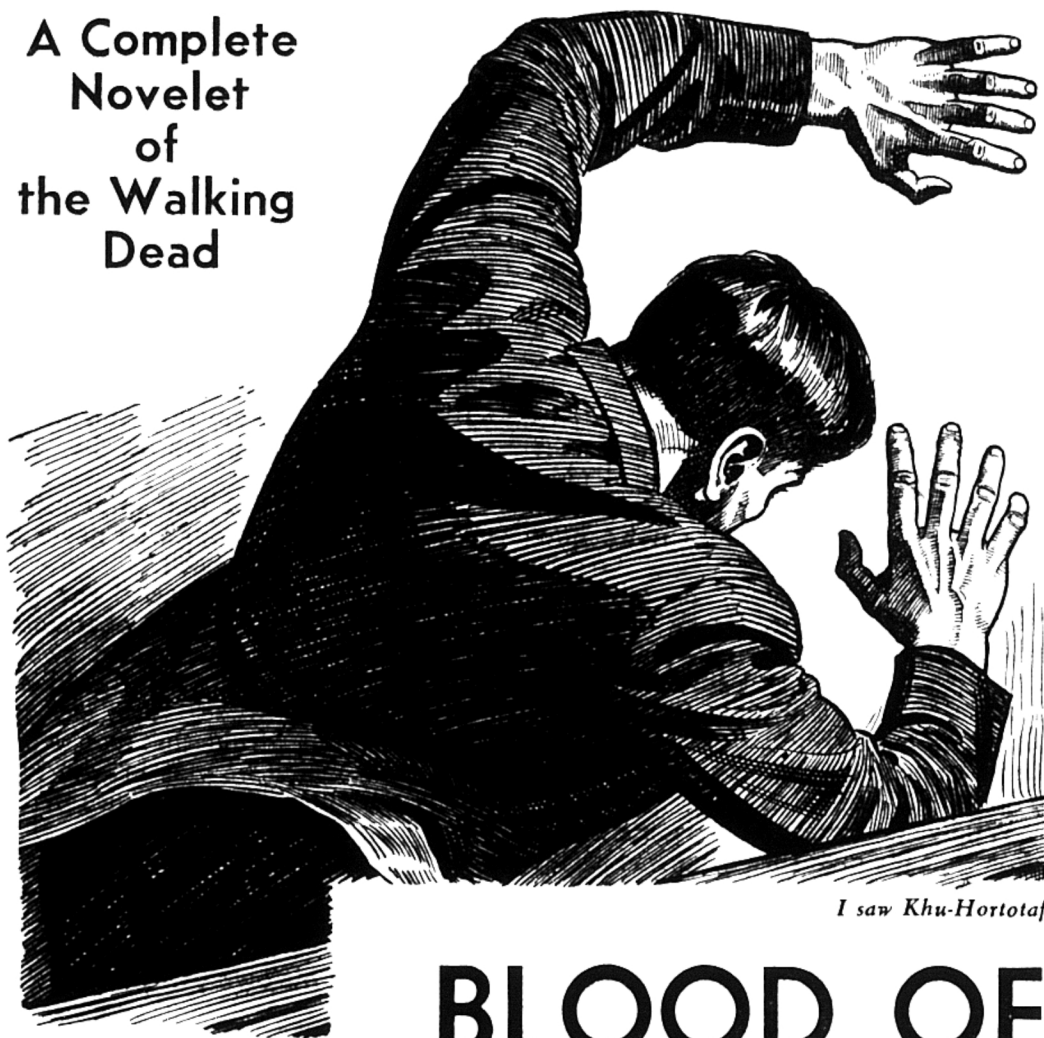
A Novelet of Satan's Slaves by ROGER HOWARD NORTON

THE DEVIL'S BROOD

A Novelet of Monster Heritage by HENRY KUTTNER

The Sorcery of Ancient Egypt Casts a

A Complete
Novelet
of
the Walking
Dead



I saw Khu-Hortotaf

BLOOD OF

CHAPTER I

Aura of Evil

FROM the pool of yellow light wherein lay the sarcophagus of Khu-Hortotaf, I watched Zella. Her hair was dark and wavy, her eyes soot-black. Her fingers, white and fragile, yet looking surprisingly strong, toyed with the jeweled hilt of the Turkish knife.

I watched her from the pool of light cast by the pierced brass chandelier. She was wondrously beautiful—that

sort of beauty that is like a smoldering fire, waiting to be stirred into brilliant, glorious flame. Though I was utterly devoted to Virginia, I could not look at Zella's full, petulant lips without wanting to kiss them. Guiltily, I had dreamed of holding Zella in my arms.

Zella was Mrs. Mark Hallan. I had to remind myself of that, because Mark was old enough to be Zella's father rather than her husband. There was no other reason, understand, for forgetting this fact. I didn't love Zella. I knew her too well.

She was looking into the polished

Had the Mummy of Hortotaf Traded Its

Shadow of Hate Over the Hallan Mansion!

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

*Author of "Daughter of
the Serpent," "The House
of Hungry Death," etc.*



backing into blackness

THE MUMMY

surface of the blade of the Turkish yataghan. Dark, brooding eyes—how appropriately mirrored in the blade of a knife. She had spent most of that long, gray day in the deep, caressing cushions of that same chair. She had watched jealously while we unpacked and catalogued the ancient wonders Mark Hallan's latest Egyptian expedition had uncovered. She was jealous of those dusty relics from the tomb of Khu-Hortotaf because they had deprived her temporarily of the admiration of man. Zella Hallan craved little else.

Thunder crashed ominously. The yellow glow from the brass chandelier was augmented by searching white lightning. My eyes returned to the open, inner sarcophagus of the mummy, Khu-Hortotaf.

Some trick of the intense, swiftly moving light lent the appearance of motion to the stiff, linen-wrapped form within the sarcophagus. It was almost as though the mummy had drawn a quivering breath.

Cecil Kabel, Mark Hallan's curator, must have noticed the illusion born of the lightning flash. His nervous, knot-

Shriveled Self for Pulsing, Virile Life?

ted fingers recoiled from the mummy-wrappings and curled up like the leaves of a sensitive plant. The white fire that played momentarily about the room pierced the shadows of his black, overhanging brows and glittered in his deep-set eyes. And the lightning found the sprinkling of silver in his black hair.

He straightened suddenly, looked about the room, and discovered his pipe on a teak-wood taboret. Yet he wasn't searching for his pipe, I was certain. It looked as though he were expecting to see something standing in the shadows at his back.

Kabel pinched the bit of his Dublin pipe between his lean jaws. He looked over toward the leaded glass window of the study. Virginia was there, standing between the parted curtains, watching the storm. Virginia was Mark Hallan's daughter. She was about four years younger than Zella, her step-mother. Just looking at her, with the lightning making a halo of her straw-colored hair, put a pounding pulse in your throat.

BECAUSE of Virginia, I had obtained the job as assistant curator to Mark Hallan's private museum. Because of Virginia's ethereal loveliness, I was making a colossal mess of my job. I wondered if Mark Hallan would notice how far I had fallen for his daughter when he returned from his six month's absence. Mark Hallan had always been kind to me, but I couldn't help wondering if his attitude wouldn't change when he saw that I was trying to steal Virginia.

Cecil Kabel barked out a dry cough that brought my eyes to meet his and my mind back to the mummy. Old *Khu-Hortotaf*! From what I had heard he must have led a pretty wild life. A priest, a sorcerer, sentenced to death by Pharaoh Seti I, because he had been found guilty of necrophilia, a morbid practice so common among priests in ancient Egypt.

I uttered a jarring laugh. "Dead over three thousand years, Mr. Kabel, yet we have him with us tonight. And the wonderful part of it is, we're still alive. According to the triple curse inscribed

on the walls of his tomb we should have been reduced to mummies ourselves for our part in disturbing his unholy remains."

Cecil Kabel frowned blackly. "There is a plausible explanation for that," he said.

Virginia turned from the window. The anxiety in her violet eyes was undoubtedly occasioned by the fact that her father had not returned.

"You're not serious, Mr. Kabel? You mean you believe that a three-thousand-year-old curse may actually be wandering around this enlightened world?"

"A curse, young woman," said Kabel in a quiet, chilling voice, "is something that may become more virulent when nurtured in the dust of centuries gone by. The malignancy of hate is a hardy thing. I assure you that the sorcery of an ancient Egyptian adept was something beyond the coarse ken of our science. I sincerely hope that neither your father nor any of us shall ever become intimately acquainted with the power of a curse."

Kabel turned to me. "Do you understand fully the meaning of *Khu* in conjunction with the name Hortotaf?"

I racked my brain for fragments of Egyptology I had picked up in spite of Virginia's entrancing presence.

"It means that Hortotaf was a sorcerer, doesn't it?"

Cecil Kabel scowled. "Undoubtedly, that is what Mark Hallan supposed. I shall take the matter up with him on his arrival. In my opinion, *Khu* means simply the magical powers of an Egyptian adept. In its broadest sense, it might mean the mystic soul of a sorcerer. At any rate, it is generally believed that the *Khu*, or magical powers, were handed down through generations by means of transmigration. That is, the *Khu* of a priest like Hortotaf would, on Hortotaf's death, seek out another living body. Thus transplanted, the sorcery was kept alive; and let me assure you its evil was cumulative.

"I mean, of course, that this mummy might be that of quite another person than the priest, Hortotaf — someone who had inherited, through transmigration, the *Khu* of Hortotaf. Such is

my interpretation, at least."

I didn't see that it mattered. Of course, it must have been of great importance to a scholar like Kabel, but I hardly thought Mark Hallan would care to argue the matter. Hallan was an Egyptologist because ancient Egypt was one of the few remaining frontiers of mystery, and because a millionaire ought to have something to do with his money.

Cecil Kabel hopped like an anxious robin to the sarcophagus, bent over, and gave the mummy a long, searching look. He straightened, and the blood drained from his cheeks.

"Lew Churchman," he addressed me, "er—doesn't it strike you—" He shook his head. "Very difficult to express, but I am experiencing a sensation I thought entirely lost to me. There is an aura of evil about the sarcophagus of Khu-Hortotaf. Something I can't explain—"

A THUNDEROUS crash shook the house on its foundation. Lightning through the rain-washed windows showed Kabel's face in bold relief. There was terror there, close to the surface of the man's lined face.

There is something contagious about terror. My own scalp had an unpleasant, creepy feeling. I went over to the window where Virginia stood, conscious of the fact that Zella's dark eyes followed me. Virginia found my hand and pulled my arm about her waist. We looked down into the depth of darkness in the valley below. When lightning glimmered we could see the silvery ribbon of the Hudson. If Mark Hallan didn't hurry there would not be a single approach to the house that would support the weight of his Duesenberg, it had been raining that long steadily.

"I wish Dad would get here," Virginia quivered.

"Why?"

Virginia and I turned around, surprised by the one and only word that had passed Zella's lips that evening.

"Why?" Virginia echoed. "Does he mean so little to you, Zella?" She never called Zella "Mother" unless she wanted to infuriate her.

Zella stood up, the Turkish yataghan in her hands. With lazy, graceful steps, she approached the sarcophagus.

"My God," she whispered, "am I married to man or mummy? On our honeymoon we talked, ate, slept Egypt, nothing but Egypt. Do I belong in Mark Hallan's collection of curios to be exhibited to his crack-brained friends?" She laughed stridently. Her teeth were startlingly white behind her parted, rouged lips. She turned her back on the mummy, resting one pink palm on the edge of the sarcophagus. She was acting now, beautifully. Eyes spotlighted her, found her lovely and a little terrifying.

She threw back her head. There was mirthless laughter on her lips; triumphant laughter, for she had stolen the center of attraction that had belonged to the mummy.

"I know what Mark will do when he comes in. He'll give me a kiss like a sparrow's peck, hand me a ring that came out of some old tomb, then come in here to caress his mummy!"

Those white, strong fingers of hers clenched the knife hilt fiercely. She whirled around, eyes bright with hate. She would not have done what she did then had not Virginia said:

"Be careful, Mother!"

And that was the spark. The explosion followed. A priceless bit of pottery was within easy reach. Zella hurled it inaccurately in the general direction of Virginia. The pottery was smashed against the window frame. Cecil Kabel uttered a pained cry and sprang to restrain the woman. But she was just out of reach. She lunged at him with the yataghan, uttered a screaming laugh, turned the blade so that when it struck it ripped into the frail linen wrappings of the mummy. And again she struck with the knife into the priceless mummy of Khu-Hortotaf.

Cecil Kabel blanched. "Good Lord!"

Zella threw down the knife and tried to snap the silvery blade beneath the heel of her little slipper. But the blade was in finer temper than Zella was. She would have doubtless gone on with her vandal's work had it not been for the entrance of the butler.

The servant bowed. "Madam, there is a Mr. Thrasher in the hall. A—er—Mr. Thrasher is a mortician. He was on his way up the road to the Biskirk place, but he finds the road impassable. And he is unable to return because there has been a bridge washout. He wishes a lodging for the night."

"An undertaker?" Zella shrieked. "Of course! How perfectly lovely! We need nothing so much as an undertaker to enliven things. Show him in by all means."

But the servant didn't move. His pale eyes seemed on the point of crawling from their sockets. He was staring at the mummy, horrified beyond speech and movement. My eyes followed his gaze. An oath jerked out of my throat before I knew it. Virginia clutched my arm with her fingers.

"Look," she whispered. "The mummy! It must be alive! It's—it's—"

She swayed slightly forward. I seized her, held her close, tried to turn her head so that she would not see that which was awful, terrifying, and utterly inexplicable. For across the linen that swathed the mummy, was a dark, moist stain that seeped slowly from the knife holes in the ancient wrappings. Buried three thousand years, the mummy of Khu-Hortotaf was bleeding!

CHAPTER II

The Walking Dead

MY first glimpse of Mr. Thrasher, the mortician, was a sidelong one. Even then he instantly reminded me of a raven trying to look happy. His clothes were rusty black. He was beak-nosed. His professional smile had degenerated into a ghoulish grin.

Cecil Kabel was throwing out his arms toward the door and nodding furiously at me.

"For God's sake, get him out of here, Lew!" He was speaking of Mr. Thrasher who had just put in his appearance. I broke away from Virginia, strode across the room, and got hold

of Mr. Thrasher's bony forearms.

"So sorry if I have intruded," Thrasher said. But he made no effort to withdraw and the brim of his black hat swirled icy rain into my face when he took it off. Nerves already on edge, it took only Thrasher's insolence and that icy water to infuriate me. I gave the undertaker a shove that landed him in a chair in the next room. Then I slammed the door in his face. A little ashamed of my temper, I leaned against the door and mopped my brow. Zella, Cecil Kabel and Virginia were gathered about the sarcophagus. All eyes had a single point of focus—the growing blood stain on the mummy wrappings.

The knob on the door behind me rattled. And if that was our gloomy and unwanted guest again, I vowed I would wring his scrawny neck. I jerked open the door. Steve Hallan, Virginia's brother, was in the hall.

"Was that Dad?" he asked, as he stepped into the study.

Nobody answered him. He was a shy lad of eighteen, frail and unattractive. He walked on tiptoe habitually. Now, he fairly crawled toward the sarcophagus. Mummies terrified him, he had often admitted. I had no idea what effect a bleeding mummy would have on him.

"Steve—" I tried to check him. But before I could detain him, he was at Zella's side. His face turned a sickly shade of green. He staggered a little. Zella's arm went out and around his waist and the blood flowed quickly enough into Steve's face. His lower lip puckered up between his teeth and he bit on it until the blood came.

"If it lived," Zella's awed whisper sounded loud in the churchly hush of the study, "then I killed it."

"If it lived," Kabel echoed, "it's better off dead. But damn it, it couldn't be." His blinking eyes roved from one to the other of us. He shook his head rapidly from side to side and stared out the window at lightning lashing across a storm-torn sky.

"But it couldn't live," he said hoarsely. "Not by the farthest stretch of the imagination could it live. A mummy has no blood. A mummy isn't even flesh."

Virginia moistened her lips and looked across the sarcophagus at me.

"Then," she said, very slowly, "that thing isn't a mummy. Lew, we've got to do something. We've got to find out. We've got to unwrap this—this thing."

Cecil Kabel crunched the bit of his Dublin pipe. "We must wait until Mark Hallan gets here. Lew and I have had explicit orders not to unwrap the mummy."

"Why?" Steve asked timidly. "Dad unwrapped it, there in the tomb before he shipped it. You know he did. He sent those pictures of Khu-Hortotaf." The boy shuddered. "I ought to know. The mummy's wizened face has haunted me for a week."

"You don't understand," Kabel said. "This mummy is of tremendous value. Only an expert can hope to unwrap it without damaging it. The slightest mistake and the features might crumble to dust. I wouldn't dare attempt it."

"We've got to attempt it," I insisted.

"Yes," said Virginia calmly. "This is a matter of murder."

ZELLA'S dark eyes hardened, narrowed, bit deeply into Virginia's face.

"What do you mean by that? What do you mean? Can't you hear me? Go on. Say it. I want you to. Accuse me of murder. Call the hangman. You'd be glad enough to get rid of me, wouldn't you?"

"Why did you stab that mummy with that knife, Zella?" I asked.

Zella's lips curled contemptuously. "You ought to know. Because it was a mummy. Because Mark Hallan thinks more of mummies than he does of his own wife."

Kabel drew a long breath. "Stop this quibbling. Leave this entirely in my hands. Lew and I will unwrap the mummy. Zella, you and Virginia go out and entertain that scarecrow of an undertaker. And keep this matter a secret, do you understand? No one has murdered anyone. As soon as we have removed the wrappings we will undoubtedly find that some liquid of some sort was buried with Khu-Hortotaf—a

protecting poison, a ceremonial wine, or something of that nature. I've never heard of anything like that, but that must be the explanation."

"That's it," Zella agreed immediately. "The knife struck the container of wine. Struck something hard. I felt it. Isn't that enough? I just now remember that the knife struck something hard. We'd better wait until Mark comes."

"Dad won't be coming tonight," Virginia insisted. "You heard that the roads are impassable, didn't you?" Then she came around the sarcophagus to where I stood. She took my coat lapels in her two hands. "Lew, make me a promise."

"Yes?"

"Unwrap that mummy now!"

I nodded. "At once." I led her to the study door. Out in the hall Zella was asking the servant what had become of Mr. Thrasher. At the mention of the undertaker's name, a shudder quivered Virginia's body.

"That man terrifies me," she whispered. "He was here the other day when you were down in the basement helping the truckster unload the curio packing boxes. He asked to see Mr. Kabel."

I patted her arm. "That's nothing to be worried about."

"But don't you see, Lew? Thrasher must be lying. He said he had come up here to go to the Biskirk place for a body. If that were so, wouldn't he have brought an ambulance and some assistants? He's alone, and he came in a sedan. He's frightening. And foreboding, like Poe's raven croaking 'Nevermore'."

"Silly!" I kissed her quickly and gently pushed her from the room. There was a disagreeable task before me and I wanted to get into it as soon as possible and have it done.

Steve Hallan and Cecil Kabel were over in one corner of the room. Kabel was talking to Steve in a low, reassuring voice, trying to bolster up the lad's lagging courage. "Steve," I said, "where are the photos your father sent—the ones of Khu-Hortotaf in the tomb?"

"In the museum," Steve said dully.

He came over to me, biting his lower lip. I took hold of both of his hands; they were as pale and small-boned as his sister's. "Lew, what's happened to Dad?" he asked anxiously. "Why hasn't he come? We haven't heard a word from him since he left Egypt."

I put as much reassurance in my smile as possible. "He's probably in New York right now. But you know what these roads are like in wet weather. Cut out the lip chewing." I went over to where Kabel was gnawing his pipe and got the keys to the museum from him. Kabel told me that the photos were on his desk. I went directly from the study into the hallway that connected the center portion of the huge house with the north wing, which was devoted entirely to Hallan's collections.

I UNLOCKED the museum door and stepped inside. A loud crash jerked my heart into my mouth. I groped frantically for the light switch and pressed it. Nothing happened; no light save the intermittent flares of lightning, and that was more terrifying than utter darkness would have been, for it animated things—stone statues of Egyptian deities, the two glass-incased mummies, the weird wood carvings.

A blown-out fuse must have accounted for the failure of the electrical system. I started across the long, low room toward the curator's desk at the opposite end. The crashing sound came again, and an icy draft whipped across my face. One of the steel-framed casement windows was open, swinging back and forth in the furious, inconsistent wind. I went back to the desk, struck a match, and found the envelope of photos. I opened it and looked down into the face of Khu-Hortotaf.

It was a remarkably clear picture. The very tautness of the parchmentlike skin was clearly discernible. But there was something remarkable about the sharp, bony features of the mummy. Instead of stony placidity so common in mummies, there was a definite quality of malignancy. The shriveled eyelids seemed not quite closed, as though hidden eyeballs beneath kept an eternal vigilance.

The match burned my fingers and went out. I had some trouble returning the photo to the envelope. The casement window banged again. I turned quickly, the photos clutched in my hand, and went over to the window. I couldn't close the casement with one hand. I thrust the photos into my pocket and raised both hands to push the window back into place.

And then something behind me creaked. I half turned my head before something cold and steel-hard nudged me in the back. Lightning flared, caught on the jagged outline of a face—a face that was chiefly jaw and Roman nose. A husky voice said:

"Keep those mitts way up, buddy!"

I don't suppose that it crossed my mind that the hard thing in the small of my back was a gun. Surely I wouldn't have been so foolhardy as to have attempted resistance—if you could call it resistance. I swung wildly at the pugnacious face. I don't know whether the blow had enough reach. It certainly must have lacked speed, for the thug's gun whipped up like a ray of light and clipped me across the temple. Then there was plenty of light—blinding, flashing light, followed by a wave of blackness that shut out the entire world.

After time immeasurable, my senses flowed slowly back to me. Dimensions of the museum were distorted, either because of the lightning flashes or my position on the cold floor. I made no attempt to rise. My strength was gone. I felt like a half-crushed worm. And I was afraid, deathly afraid of something very near me. I couldn't see it. I didn't want to see it. But I could smell it—nothing human, nothing animal, but something vile.

Very slowly, I turned my head. Unseen eyes riveted mine. Phantom wires of will pulled my head around. Then thunder ripped the heavens wide, and I saw!

There, enshrined in the crackling lightning, stood the mummy of Khu-Hortotaf! Only for a second it stood there, thin yellow arms crossed on its breast, shriveled eyelids not quite closed.

Then, with a rustle of dusty wrap-

pings, the mummy turned and stalked into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

Flesh of Amber

I LAY there shivering, eyes closed. "Lew!" the darkness whispered. "Lew, where are you?" Footsteps came close to me and the toe of a slipper kicked into my ribs. There was a half-uttered scream, a flutter of skirts, and Virginia's quick-moving fingers scrambled anxiously over me. "Lew, dear, are you hurt!"

I got hold of one of her hands and squeezed it. "Not much," I whispered. I sat up.

"Lew, there's somebody in this house. Someone's prowling around."

"Somebody! Some *thing*, you mean!" Then I had the sense to lock my lips before I blurted out what I had seen or had thought I had seen. I got to my feet. "Did you hear anyone—anything moving in this room?"

"No, not here. Lew, I'm so scared. It's just a feeling, I guess, that something isn't all right. What—what was in the mummy case? Did you unwrap the mummy?"

No, I hadn't unwrapped the mummy. I didn't know whether Cecil Kabel had or not. I was going to find out. One thing was certain: Khu-Hortotaf was not in his sarcophagus. God only knew what was!

Together, we hurried from the museum, down the narrow hall, and into the study. Everything was exactly as we had left it. A hush, uninterrupted, except for the sullen rumblings of the storm, had descended over the house. Both Virginia and I would have welcomed some sort of a noise, but neither of us could muster so much as a whisper as we approached the sarcophagus. The mummy had not been disturbed. The blood stain on the wrappings was dry and dark.

I picked up the yataghan that Zella had dropped and cautiously inserted the tip of the blade beneath the fold of the linen bandage that began just beneath

the mummy's chin. The cloth ripped and brown dust like mushrooms spores scurried into the air. My trembling fingers caught the frayed ends of the cloth and peeled them back. There was another layer of cloth beneath, but I could feel the shape of the shriveled features.

In another moment I had torn away enough of the bandage to bare a portion of the face. The sunken cheeks appeared to be covered with a thick, semi-transparent callus, as yellow as amber and nearly as hard. Thin, faded hair straggled down beneath the bandage that covered the forehead. I touched the hair gently with my fingers. My pulse quickened. I shot a glance at Virginia. She was standing very straight, her arms pressed close to her sides, her blue eyes glassy and unblinking. I wonder if she knew that the hair of this mummy was still alive!

I PULLED the dusty bandages back over the chin. The amberlike flesh of the lips hugged the prominent teeth. On the upper lips there was a thin, carefully trimmed mustache. I bent over the mummy, fingers pressed against the throat, almost as though I expected to detect a pulse there. Of course, there was none.

I straightened, and as I did so, Virginia uttered a small, choking sob. I swung around the sarcophagus and caught her in my arms. "No, Lew! No, that isn't Hortotaf!" she sobbed.

I knew it wasn't, but I reached into my pocket to get out the pictures that Hallan had taken of Hortotaf. The pictures weren't there!

"It isn't! It isn't!" Virginia cried. "Look, Lew. That mustache! Lew, she killed him! Killed him with that knife. She knew all the time that mummy wasn't in there. She knew who it was."

I forced Virginia into a chair. "But, dear," I whispered, "it is a mummy. I've seen enough mummies to know. Of course it's a mummy. What if it isn't Hortotaf? Your dad just made an error."

She blinked back tears and stared me straight in the eyes. "Did you ever see a mummy with a mustache? I

mean an Egyptian mummy. Lew, don't you recognize him? Didn't you notice the scar on the chin?"

"Dear—"

"Oh, don't try to conceal things from me, Lew. Don't. You know it's Dad. Dad's in that sarcophagus. That's why she killed him. Zella just married Dad for his money. She knew he was in that mummy case. That's why she stabbed—"

I shook Virginia by the shoulders. "Stop that! Talk sense, darling. That couldn't be—" I stopped, turned to look back at the mummy. My mouth was suddenly as dry as plaster. From where I stood, I could plainly see the scar on the mummy's chin. And then I realized the terrible, incredible truth. The mummy in Khu-Hortotaf's sarcophagus was the embalmed body of Mark Hallan!

Embalmed? Impossible! The body had bled when Zella's fit of temper led her to stab it. Until that moment when the knife had entered his breast, Mark Hallan had lived—had lived a half-life that was worse than premature burial. For his flesh was hard, like amber, and beneath that amber shell had been a living heart, a sluggish blood stream, and, more horrible than anything else, perhaps a living brain. To think in eternal darkness, to will a finger to move, yet feel that finger shriveled and hardened—that had been the hell the Khu-Hortotaf curse had designed for Mark Hallan!

THEN I remembered what Kabel had said: how he had believed that the sarcophagus might not contain the mummy of Hortotaf; how he had said that the *Khu*, or mystic powers of Hortotaf, might have passed into a mystic body. Was that what had happened? Or had the mummy of Hortotaf traded its shriveled, mummified existence for the virile life of Mark Hallan? A wild absurdity.

Yet here was something that demanded rationalization. Men had gone mad over less horrible things than I had witnessed tonight—a living man turned into a mummy by a crawling, amber death that embalmed its victim while still alive; a rotten, century-old

mummy stalking the shadows of a rambling house.

I dragged Virginia out of the chair. "We've got to get out of here. Got to. It isn't sane. It isn't good for us. It isn't as though this were murder. It might better be murder. It's something more than that—something that modern knowledge can't explain."

I got the girl out of the study, more dead than alive. My arm tight about her waist, I half carried her across the hall and up the steps. At the stair head, a door banged open in front of us. A broad-shouldered shadow blotting across the shivering panel. A hoarse voice yelled:

"Cripes! Let me out of here!"

I had barely time to shove myself in front of Virginia when a man bolted through the door, waving short arms above his head. There was an automatic in the man's hand. He all but got it leveled on me when I landed a kick on his wrist that sent it flying. He plunged into me head down. I landed a left to his jaw that straightened him out and sent him wavering across the upstairs hall until he struck the opposite wall. He sagged down to the floor, fully conscious, but looking as though he hoped oblivion would blot out his senses.

Suddenly, I remembered the prowler in the museum. This was the same man, the same Roman-nosed, iron-jawed thug who had cracked me across the temple with the barrel of his gun.

He didn't try to sit up. He massaged his jaw, his eyes fixed glassily on the door through which he had just passed.

"You've got me, mister." I guessed that he was talking to me. "I'll admit to any damned thing. Only get the law up here. I busted in your house to heist some jewels. I'll go to jail. Hell, I want to go to jail! I want to get out of here, that's what. This house is lousy with nuts and stiffs!" Then he shot out his right arm, pointed into the room, yelled stridently, and closed his eyes.

I sprang into the room. Just a faint flicker of lightning in the darkness and I saw something that strained all credulity: Dark-eyed, lovely Zella locked

in the scrawny, yellow arms of the mummy of Khu-Hortotaf!

CHAPTER IV

The Fear That Kills

SO brief was the interval of light and so dense the darkness that followed, that I had an excellent excuse for mistrusting my vision. Both woman and mummy were gone with the lighting. And I had scarcely entered the room before the Roman-nosed thug had hold of my arm and was tugging me back in the hall.

"Slug Meagan never did a good turn for nobody up to now, brother, but I couldn't let a dog go in there. Not after what I seen *it* do to the kid!"

I broke away from the burglar, took a step forward, and turned on the light in the room in which the apparition had appeared. The room was empty, but a door which connected it with a bedroom was wide open.

The man who called himself Slug Meagan got in front of me. His eyes fairly leaped from their sockets in an effort to impress me with his earnestness.

"This is on the level, mister. I don't know what the hell that thing is, but I seen it take one good look at a guy and the guy curled up and kicked off without lettin' out a squeak. It's walkin' death, that's what it is. Looks just like one of them mummies down in the museum. Cripes, them things got no business walkin', have they? Ain't they dead?"

I nodded, went back into the hall where Virginia was. Slug Meagan stuck as close to me as a moth to a flame.

"Give it to me square, mister," he said. "I ain't yellow, see? But I gotta know what that mummy-thing is!"

"You'd better get out of here," I told him. "As long as you haven't stolen anything, I don't care about pressing charges. You got a chance and you'd better take it. What goes on here isn't any concern of yours."

Meagan ran blunt fingers through

short, red hair. "I can't get down this mountain tonight. The road's washed out and I'd get lost tryin' to make it on foot. And I ain't nuts about the kind of dark you've got up here. And don't talk about callin' the cops, because the phone line's down. What's more, you ain't nuts about havin' the law look in on you, either. How I see it, we're all in the same boat. There's been a guy murdered here, and with my record it's apt to get pinned on me. And I didn't do it, 'cause the mummy just looked at the guy and he fell dead."

"Whom do you mean?" Virginia gasped. "Who fell dead?"

Meagan shook his square head. "Think I've had a pink tea introduction to everybody in the house? Some little squirt—"

"Lew!" Virginia clutched my arm with frantic fingers. "He means Steve. Steve's dead! I know it!"

I looked from the anxious, frightened girl to Slug Meagan. The man was admittedly a crook. Dare I trust him with Virginia even for a moment? I decided to take the chance.

"Where'd you see all this?" I asked.

Meagan pointed to the door through which the mummy-thing must have passed.

"In that room. The dead guy just curled up on the bed and his eyes—"

"Shut up!" I snapped. "Stay here a second." I crossed the room and went through the connecting door. There was a little night lamp burning beside Steve's bed. I could see someone's slippered feet hanging over the edge of the bed. I took two short steps, stopped, stared at the thing that had been Steve Hallan. Meagan was right. The boy was dead. Nothing that looked like that could have lived.

Saliva was smeared across the lax lower lip. The boy's flesh was a deep shade of blue. The eyeballs, already glazed with death, bulged from the eyelids. If those eyes had mirrored the sunken, yellow features of the living mummy, it was no wonder that the youth was dead. The face that had haunted his dreams had become a living reality.

Fear had killed Steve Hallan, fear of the walking mummy.

I STOOD beside the bed, wondering how to break the news of her brother's death to Virginia. This, I was afraid, would be more than she could bear. She had scarcely known her father, for he had spent most of his life in foreign lands. But Steve had been a companion to the girl for years. More than that, she had nursed him back to health from many a sickness.

It was because I lacked the courage to face Virginia that I lingered long enough in the room, where her brother had died, to hear the sound of a voice coming through the wall of the next room. I crossed the room on tiptoe and pressed an ear to the wall. For a moment, I could not catch a word. Then a new voice, a croaking voice that I recognized immediately as that of Thrasher, the mortician, rose above the muffled, angry words of the other's:

"Chiefly formic acid," Thrasher was saying. "But that is of no importance to me at present. The point is that you will pay, and pay dearly. It isn't a pleasant way to die at all."

A sound of footsteps retreating across the floor of the next room. A door opened and closed. Formic acid? What had I heard about formic acid? It was the poison secreted by certain kinds of insects—ants or something. Yes, but there was something else—formic acid and the manufacture of resinous products—

I sprang to the door of Steve's room, opened it and ran into the hall. A hoarse cry of terror rose to a crackling pinnacle. Then a woman shrieked. Virginia! I turned toward the stair end of the hall. Slug Meagan came around a jog in the corridor, bellowing for help. I seized him by the throat, tried to shake words out of him, but in my panic more than half strangled the man.

"The mummy!" he screamed. "I saw it! It looked at me. I'm good as dead!"

I flung him out of the way and dashed to the stairway. I stopped, listened. Soft, padded feet shuffled on the stair-treads. There was no light in the stairway itself, but a light in the lower hall threw a tall, grotesque shadow against the wall of the landing—something that was gaunt and ragged

and manlike. And it carried something in its arms—something that was terrifyingly like the body of a woman.

I went down the steps three at a time, struck the landing and all but fell the rest of the way. I caught the banister in an attempt to right myself. Gun-flame flashed from the foot of the steps. A shot roared. Something like a hot poker lanced through my shoulder, and I seemed to have lost my left arm entirely, for there was nothing connecting me with the supporting banister.

A sudden sickness that was made of pain and fear up-ended the house. I went head over heels down the rest of the stairs with a nightmare vision swimming dizzily in front of my eyes.

For the thing that had shot at me had lived long before the invention of firearms. It had held a pistol in one bony, yellow claw that protruded from filthy grave wrappings. It had sighted the gun without raising its shriveled sunken eyelids, for the malignant eyes of Khu-Hortotaf seemed to see without being seen.

Khu-Hortotaf! As I clawed at the air, as I thumped down the steps, I saw Khu-Hortotaf backing into blackness, the limp body of Virginia hooked across his bony arms.

I couldn't lose consciousness, sickening though the pain was. I ground my teeth, dug my heels into the floor, and tried to get up; but it was not till I had got hold of the newel-post of the banister with my right hand that I could drag myself to my feet. My left arm dangled like a stick of wood. The warm wet stuff that glued my sleeve to my flesh was blood.

I staggered across the front hall, falling into things, searching the semi-darkness with eyes that would not focus. I turned into the study and went from there into the museum. The museum seemed the logical place for a mummy, but there was no *living* mummy there. I became desperate. I shouted for Virginia, hunted in absurd places that could not have hidden even her small body. Then my fevered brain thought of the other wing of the house and I scrambled back as fast as I could.

In the library I found Zella, lounging languidly on a chaise longue, laughing softly to herself. I could have killed her, and she must have seen murder in my eyes. As I lurched toward her, she slid to her feet.

"Lew," she gasped, "what's the matter?"

I laughed—an unnatural, hollow sound it was. I lunged suddenly, my good arm stabbing out, my fingers hooking into her white shoulder. "Where's Virginia, damn you? Spit it out!"

"Didn't you?" I shook her. "Didn't you?"

"No!" she gasped. "Mark Hallan? Where is Mark? Where is my husband?"

"Don't you know? In the Khu-Hortotaf sarcophagus. He was dying, but you hastened the process when you stabbed him. That was crazy. Whoever is behind this might have got by with it if you hadn't stabbed Mark. But I don't give a damn about Mark. What's happened to Virginia? Where is she? Who's that mummy masquerade?"

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Laughter on Zella's lips froze into a stiff smile. She shook her head, tried to pull out of my grasp. My fingers released her shoulder only to grasp her throat. I dragged her so close to me that I could feel the rapid beating of her heart against my chest. I hated her dark, damnable beauty. Curse of Khu-Hortotaf? More than likely it was the curse of Zella Hallan's beauty that was behind all this.

"You killed Mark Hallan," I snarled.

rader? You know that. I saw you in his arms. Where has he gone? Where has he taken Virginia?"

"I don't know!" Zella shrieked. "I tell you I don't know. I don't know! I don't—"

Rage tightened the grasp I had on her throat. Her face turned blue. Her tongue crawled out of her gaping mouth. I flung her back on the lounge. She lay there, gasping and choking. I was all but a murderer, and I didn't

care. I dragged through the rest of the house, calling out to Virginia. But there was no answer. Perhaps she could not answer. Perhaps—

Out of an upstairs window, I saw a square of light coming out of the dark, rain-soaked ground back of the house. I remembered the big underground fruit cellar that Kabel and I frequently used as a workshop when reconditioning some of the curios that Mark Hallan collected. I had not looked there. I all but fell down the steps, ran unsteadily back through the kitchen and out the back door. It was raining steadily, a cold drizzle that had followed the electric storm.

I fell three times in the slippery mud before I gained the hummock of earth that was piled over the roof of the big fruit cellar. I punched at the thick oak door until my right fist was bruised and bleeding. I could hear voices within the cellar, but my rage, roused by my own impotency, made it impossible for me to catch a word of what was said.

Then I remembered the window in the cellar roof, staggered around to it, and threw myself on the sloping bank so that my head was directly over the pane of glass. I could see then, and hear things which turned my blood to water as chill as the rain that pattered steadily against the turf.

CHAPTER V

The Embalmer

THERE were mummies in that underground room—mummies and mummy makers. Khu-Hortotaf stood rigidly upright in a common wood packing case at one end of the room. In a glass case lay the mummy of Mark Hallan, yellow as amber, his mustache shaved off, his body swathed in linen wrappings. On a sheet-metal slab lay the contorted body of Mark Hallan's son, Steve.

On a table, directly beneath a powerful, cone-shaded light, lay Virginia, her face cold, white and colorless. Fresh linen wrappings criss-crossed her body from breasts to toes. Her bright gold

hair fell in a lustrous cataract over the edge of the embalmer's table.

There were two men in the room. Thrasher, the undertaker, still wearing his sad, black raven's garments, was one of the men. The other was dressed in a surgeon's smock and cap, a gauze mask over the lower part of his face.

Thrasher was croaking: "And you agree to meet my demands? One half of the estate and your embalming formula in return for my absolute silence?"

The man in white nodded, tapping impatiently with a keen-edged scalpel on the edge of the table.

"I agree. Money is the least of it. I want the woman, do you see? I've wanted her always. But you must help me get rid of Lew and that prowler. They probably suspect something."

Thrasher laughed. "Why not employ Khu-Hortotaf again? It seemed easy enough for you to scare young Hallan to death with him."

The embalmer shook his head. "A bullet is surer. I may have already killed Lew. I couldn't be sure. I know I hit him. Then I have only to convert him into a mummy by means of my formic acid formula, seal him in a glass case, as I did Mark Hallan, and put him in the museum. No one will ever know them from Egyptian mummies when I get through with them. The formic acid converts body proteins into something not unlike synthetic amber. No doubt you will make a great deal from the formula, Thrasher."

I saw a shudder ripple across the undertaker's thin shoulders.

"No doubt. But, good Lord, you embalmed Mark Hallan alive. His flesh turned to amber before his heart stopped pumping, before his brain stopped thinking."

The man in white laughed. "Then he had plenty of time in which to think of how he neglected Zella." He put aside his scalpel, picked up a hypodermic needle the size of a small bicycle pump, and filled it from a beaker containing some yellow liquid.

Thrasher prodded at the white-wrapped body of Virginia. His bird-like eyes darted toward the man in white.

"She isn't dead," he said thoughtfully. "And she's rather beautiful. I might drive a different bargain with you." An ugly smile twisted his thin lips.

I scrambled down from the bank. Virginia was not dead! There was hope. But not if that hypodermic needle entered her flesh. That yellow liquid would spread throughout her body, converting her flesh into amber, a shell that would actually entomb her alive!

I stumbled over a boulder, larger than a man's head and half embedded in the muddy bank. I dropped to my knees, dug my fingers into the mud, rolled the stone up against my right shoe. Three times the heavy stone slipped from my grasp before I lifted it. Then, breath locked, I crawled back to the window and hurled the stone straight through the window pane.

THE glass shattered. The stone struck Thrasher directly between the shoulders and flattened him to the floor. The man in white stepped back from the table, put down his hypodermic needle, jerked up his smock. I didn't wait to see more but leaped straight through the window.

My feet struck Thrasher's recumbent form. A shot blazed from the gun in the pocket of the man in white. The slug cleared me by inches and must have found Thrasher's flesh, for the undertaker's body writhed beneath me.

I sprang to my feet, sprang toward the man in white. The embalmer tried to yank out his gun but it caught in the edge of his pocket. My right-handed blow to his biceps made him release the butt of the gun. The revolver dropped to the floor. I dived for it, but the toe of the embalmer's shoe was inches ahead of my hand and the gun skated across the stone floor. I straightened, took a kick in the belly without feeling pain, staggered back a pace.

The man in white snatched up something from the table—the hypodermic syringe, filled with that damnable amber fluid. My right hand came up as he charged me. My fingers clutched the embalmer's wrist, kept off that deadly needle. But he pressed me steadily

backward, pounding my pain-racked body with his left fist.

I was utterly defenseless. I might as well have held a rattlesnake as the wrist of the hand that held that hypodermic syringe. I dared not let it go. But if I didn't let go, if I didn't get in a telling blow with my only usable fist, the man in white would soon beat me into insensibility.

My breath came in hissing gasps. Strength ebbed steadily from my body. Twice, the embalmer tried to sink his needle into the flesh of my throat. And twice that needle lacked a fraction of an inch of its goal.

Then, with a final, desperate effort, I twisted around, thrust out with all my strength against my opponent, and released my hold on his wrist. My movement came as a complete surprise. The man in white staggered backward, slammed into the upright packing case where stood the mummy of Khu-Hortotaf. The packing case fell forward. The mummy collapsed, crumbled like a man of sand. A shriek of pain and terror knifed the air and echoed throughout the cave-like chamber. Even as the mummy fell, so fell the man in white.

The embalmer groveled on the floor amid the dust of crumbling bones. Shriek after shriek echoed through the chamber. And from the cracked skull of the mummy, black Egyptian beetles scurried for the darkest corners of the room, raced on busy legs across the eyes and forehead of the man in white until he clawed at his face and ripped aside the gauze mask.

A convulsive twitching ended it all. Then he lay still with the black mummy beetles scurrying across his distorted face—the face of Cecil Kabel.

THE nightmare passed. How I kept consciousness to coax Virginia's blue eyes open and bring a smile to her red lips, I do not know. Later, much later, police came. Slug Meagan of all people had gone down the mountain for them. Thrasher, the undertaker, lived long enough to choke out what he knew of the plot. It seemed that Cecil Kabel's research on the subject of Egyptian embalming had led him to discover a

formula for converting flesh to amber through the action of formic acid on the body proteins. It was with the idea of obtaining that formula that Thrasher had called to see Kabel. And Thrasher had met murder, had learned of Kabel's plan to get rid of the Hallan family, marry Zella, and thus obtain both the woman of his secret dreams and the Hallan fortune.

Hallon must have returned a week or so earlier than any of us had expected. Kabel had taken him to that cellar-laboratory of his and injected his yellow embalming fluid. Then, when the mummy of Khu-Hortotaf arrived, Kabel had simply removed the mummy from the sarcophagus and substituted the body of Hallon. Probably, he did not know that there was still life under the steadily forming amber shell that had begun to cover Hallan's body. Anyway, he had planned to pan off Hallan's body as the mummy of Khu-Hortotaf. He might have got by with that, even, had not Zella, furious because of her husband's neglect, tried to destroy the mummy in the sarcophagus. Anyway, there was no way of proving that Zella knew the mummy was really Mark Hallan.

Kabel would have disposed of Steve and Virginia the same way. When they had both been embalmed, he would have placed them in the Hallan museum, covered with linen wrappings that no one but an expert could have told from the real mummy wrappings. In other words, the entire Hallan family would have just disappeared, and perhaps the blame would have been laid to the Khu-Hortotaf curse. Then

Kabel would have married Zella, for Zella was undoubtedly in love with him.

As to the walking mummy that had frightened Steve Hallan to death—that, of course, was Cecil Kabel. With both photos of Hortotaf and also the original mummy to work from, he had created a mask that was a pretty good likeness of the face of the mummy. Kabel had had plenty of practice at that sort of thing, for he had frequently restored features of mummies that had been damaged in the removal from their tombs. The mask, together with grease paints and a ragged robe, had completed his disguise. He had used a compound of valerian to synthesize that rotten smell that had accompanied the "mummy" wherever it went.

As to the curse of Khu-Hortotaf, it may have been born in hell, but it was a godsend to Virginia and me. We would have both lost our lives had it not been for that curse. For it was the curse that killed Cecil Kabel. Imbedded in the breast of the mummy, protruding between its clasped arms, was a thin sliver of wood, smeared with some sort of poison that had remained potent even after three thousand years. Undoubtedly it had been placed there with the idea that it would destroy whoever disturbed the mummy. That last desperate effort of mine had thrown Kabel against the mummy and the poisoned sliver had entered Kabel's spine.

So there was *some* truth after all in what Kabel had told me about the cumulative virulence of an ancient curse!

THIRTEEN

GRIPPING TALES OF THE UNCANNY

—in Every Issue of Our Companion Magazine

STRANGE STORIES

15c AT ALL STANDS

CROSS AND DOUBLECROSS

A Brace of Plotters Try to Reverse Pygmalion in a Diabolical Murder Rite

By WILL GARTH

Author of "Fulfillment," "Arab Interlude," etc.

ANYBODY in his senses, if he'd stop to think, would have known in a second that the whole set-up was screwy. It was a frame-up, pure and simple. But who would suspect such a state of affairs at midnight amid such ghostly surroundings? Who would be so critical at such a moment? Certainly, Marcia knew, the sap wouldn't get it.

J. Basil Wetherington, his name was



J. Basil Wetherington

—parted on the side, like he wore his snap-brim hat.

Marcia didn't remember just where and how and when she had first met him—she thought it must have been at

one of the fashionable night clubs in the Fifties—but it didn't make any difference. He was the heir to the Wetherington millions, and Mike Kerrigan had said for her to swing onto him for a first class tapping.

So Marcia, svelte redhead and girl friend of the big racketeer, swung. The pay-off game was the good old murder frame.

Mike had all the dope on young Wetherington, he sized up the young wastrel, saw that he had become deeply infatuated with Marcia Rockholt, and he figured the murder frame the best bet for a tap.

Mike, christened Benito Gavelli, had grown up on the lower east side when an Irish name meant plenty and other names didn't count. Quickly seeing the advantage, he had changed his monicker successfully but not his Latin temperament.

He had prospered, but of late the numbers racket and a few other lucrative sources of income had turned sour on him temporarily. So he welcomed the opportunity to tap young Wetherington.

Don't get Marcia wrong. Sure, she was the bait, but she was a good kid and she traveled in big company. Mike Kerrigan was big stuff, and the Wetherington millions certainly weren't chicken feed.

So here was the pay-off, in the studio of Adolf Lebanoff, the mad genius from Central Europe.

It was a good show, even if Marcia did say so herself. All the props were working swell—the background of

nude female statues that Lebanoff had been casting for a beauty salon on Fifth Avenue looked, under the circumstances, like ghastly evidence of past nefarious activity.

Lebanoff himself made a fiendish looking assistant to a man-torturer as he tightened the rawhide thongs about Marcia's helpless body. The very castelike iron box she had been placed in, to the superficial eye, would look like the mold for making those nude statues instead of just the mortar-mixing container it was. Mike looked positively brutal as the insane sculptor.

He stood above her, aproned and bare-armed, holding the huge container of the first batch of mix, ready to pour it over her as Lebanoff shoved her down flat in the trough. The stuff was even smoking realistically, and Mike had donned a pair of heavy work-gloves for the final touch of realism.

In the gloom, behind the group of statues, young Wetherington was already stirring, coming out of the stupor of the knock-out drops Marcia had administered in his last cocktail at the Twenty-Three Flamingoes club not an hour ago. In his side pocket reposed the automatic pistol with the harmless blank cartridges.

Oh, it was a swell set-up. A brief torture scene, the half-dazed Wetherington to the rescue, a couple of shots from his blank pistol, Mike Kerrigan would go down and bleed to death—after breaking the red ink capsule in his breast pocket, and Lebanoff would expose the whole thing as a joke.

Only Mike would continue faking death, and the gang would go to work with everything they had to clean J. Basil Wetherington in return for hiding the body and removing all traces of murder.

SIMPLE, sure, but perfect. It always worked on the saps, this murder frame. For a moment Marcia felt a twinge of pity for this sucker, and a sudden rush of shame and humiliation.

Wetherington had been mighty sweet and decent to her. Then all personal thoughts and reflections were drowned out in the act that Mike Ker-

rigan started putting on.

"All right, you little cheat!" he said in the ugliest voice Marcia had ever heard him use. "See all these stone statues behind me? Well, they got real girls inside under those shells of cement and clay—just like you're gonna be. I'll teach you to two-time me, you dirty little tramp."

So far, so good. Just like it was supposed to go.

The climax was to be when Lebanoff pretended to throttle her as she screamed, and Mike poured the first batch of imitation cement down over her fainting form. Of course, that meant the ruin of a seventy-five-dollar dress, but what the devil—there had to be some expense in staging a good show. And this one ought to nick J. Basil Wetherington for a cool million.

"Mike! Mike!" gasped out Marcia frantically. "You're mad! I'm innocent. What in heaven's name are you going to do to me?"

At this point Lebanoff stepped out of character in his zeal. He jerked the thongs cruelly tight. Marcia winced and cried out in real pain.

"Adolf!" she whispered. "You hurt. That's too tight."

"Shut up, you cheat," snarled Mike Kerrigan, hoisting his metal beaker higher and catching it under the base with his left hand. "Fall in love with that playboy because he's a millionaire, will you? Give me the runaround, will you? Go on, start screaming, so I can fill your mouth with this stuff. You—you red-headed—"

What he called her was awful. This wasn't in the script at all. And then Adolf Lebanoff chuckled as though he knew a very funny joke. Suddenly the girl widened her eyes and stared from one to the other. Both of these men she knew so well oddly seemed complete strangers.

This was getting too realistic. And Mike's lines were getting twisted; he was ad libbing. And then what he had said about real female forms beneath those clay shells impinged on her consciousness.

"Mike!" she cried out. "Come to your senses. Cut it out. Are you crazy?"

Kerrigan laughed. The sound went through her like the rasping of a file on a rusty saw.

"You thought you could ditch me, did you?" sneered Kerrigan. "I give you a job to do, and it looks so good you think you can throw me over, do you, you lying little—"

"Hold it, Kerrigan!" said a masculine voice from behind the first statue.

There was a thickness in the tones, as though the tongue was numb, but there was deadly menace just the same.

A click sounded—an automatic safety being audibly slipped.

J. Basil Wetherington had awakened and joined the party, cueing beautifully, as though he had rehearsed his entrance a hundred times.

Marcia was conscious of a sense of relief—why, she could not say.

"One move other than I direct you, and I'll blow a hole through your back right where your suspenders would cross, if you had on suspenders. Put that vessel of stuff down—slow!"

"Go to hell!" snarled Kerrigan savagely. "Start any rough stuff, and I'll make an angel outa you, sucker."

HE pressed against the riveted trough that contained the bound girl, raising the butt end of his heavy container. His face was utterly unrelenting and sadistic as he glared down at the girl. There was no softening of his eye as he stared at her lovely white neck and bosom which rose like a plateau of beauty from her strapless red evening gown.

He didn't even deign to glance around at the man with the pistol; he had put the blanks in the gun with his own hands.

"Choke her and shove her down in the box before I wring her damned neck," snarled Kerrigan to his confederate.

Lebanoff complied with a bestial chuckle and gripped the girl around the neck with his sinewy hands. Marcia let out a wavering cry, and Kerrigan tilted his container of pseudo-mortal.

"I warned you!" said the crisp voice of J. Basil Wetherington.

And as the girl's scream choked off

in a gurgle, and the first drop of the still smoking mixture fell from the metal container, Wetherington pressed gently on his trigger. The automatic roared once.

Kerrigan uttered a guttural cry, shuddered, and arched his shoulders like a cat, letting the heavy container of mortar crash to the floor on his own toes. But he never felt the blow.

His blue shirt and the top of his white apron blossomed like a poppy. He clutched at his breast and then, under Lebanoff's and the girl's horrified gaze, fell forward across the casketlike trough.

This wasn't part of the show, either. Lebanoff crouched back and stared at Wetherington with unbelieving eyes. Slowly his hand crept toward his hip pocket.

"Don't do it, if you want to live to testify in court," warned the man in the snap-brimmed hat, now coming forward. "Untie that girl, instead."

Mr. Lebanoff couldn't believe that blank cartridges could be so deadly. He snatched feverishly at his gun. And Wetherington's weapon spoke once more, and a slug shattered Lebanoff's right collar bone and smashed him back against the wall.

At this slaughter Marcia's nerves gave way completely, and she began screaming hysterically.

"Oh, you've killed Mike! You've killed Adolf! You ruined everything!"

"Just about," agreed Wetherington grimly, stepping forward and using his penknife to saw through her bonds. "Thanks to you, Marcia, we've caught Mike Kerrigan, alias Benito Gavelli, red-handed in a real murder frame. Uncle Sam's been interested in his activities in narcotics and smuggling for some time."

"Uncle Sam?" she said, ceasing her shrieks abruptly. "Then you're a G-man? You're not Basil Wetherington of Chicago?"

"You're psychic, baby," said her liberator. "The name's Clark."

"How—how did you kill Kerrigan?" groaned Lebanoff, now thoroughly cowed. "I saw him fix that gun with blanks myself."

(Concluded on page 91)

THE GRUESOME THING

Death to Life and Life to Death
Are the Twin Arcs of a
Vicious Circle!

By **RAY KING**

Author of "In the Murderer's Brain," "The Case of the Walking Dog," etc.

THE broad bow of the old motor-boat breasted the waves with sheets of flying spume that drenched Clark and his sister Gladys as they sat at the tiller in the stern. Ahead the dim outlines of Sandy Key were just barely visible in the twilight storm-murk. The island was no more than half a mile long—a little flat mound of sand, palm-strewn, with the lone house on a rise of ground back from the sea.

"We're all right now," Clark said. "It'll be calmer when we get under the lea of the island. The lagoon should be on this side."

Most of the two-hour trip from San Marino, the small capital of this West Indian island group, had been stormy. The night was still solid black and the wind roared overhead, but the sea around them now was calmer. In the sodden murk a white line of beach was dimly apparent, with a small opening that led to a lagoon.

Suddenly the girl clutched her brother. "Tom, don't let's go see him," she said. "Let's go back—forget the whole thing. I—I guess I'm frightened."

"And take a night voyage back in this storm," Clark retorted. "Believe me, I want to see him."

Grimly he steered into the lagoon, toward a dark little boathouse. A weird blue-green light showed now through the storm, up at the house. Silently Gladys clung to him.



The monstrous thing seemed almost alive!

IT had been a queer mixture of emotions which caused young Thomas Clark to plan this trip. He and Gladys were twins; they were just twenty-two now. They had been making a summer tour of the small West Indian island groups, and quite by accident they had heard of John Peters, who lived alone on this lonely Sandy Key. Investigation had proved to a certainty that he was their step-uncle; not exactly hiding here, but for years wholly disconnected from what was left of the Clark-Peters family.

Young Clark had never said so to Gladys, but for a year now he had wanted to encounter this step-uncle. The facts of Peters' villainy had only just come to light. Ten years ago, when Clark and Gladys were only twelve, their widowed mother had died, a wealthy woman. Her will had bequeathed all her fortune to her step-brother, this John Peters, with only a small trust fund to educate the children in boarding schools. That will, Clark was convinced now, was a forgery. Peters had made away with the money. . . .

They landed at the boathouse and tied up their launch. If Peters, up at the house, had seen them arrive, he gave no sign. It was raining hard as they started up a little palm-shrouded path. Clark could feel Gladys trembling as she clung to his arm.

"No use thinking about going back on a night like this," he declared.

She shuddered. "But what they told us about him in San Marino—what's he doing here, Tom?"

What indeed? This Uncle Peters had always been an eccentric fellow, Clark understood. Back in San Marino an old native had warned them against coming.

"*Dios!* You go spend the night there?" the old man had muttered. "That *Americano* Peters, he buy dead bodies. You stay away from heem, *señor.*"

The sun had been shining then in San Marino. One may laugh, by daylight, at things which at night do not seem so funny. The old native had some wild tale of how it was known that Peters had bought dead bodies;

paid the relatives for the cadaver of someone who had just died so that the corpse was not buried, but was iced and carted by Peters to Sandy Key.

"Maybe he sick and need the blood—or the meat," the old native gruesomely muttered.

It was crazy talk. Clark had told Gladys—that morning—that it was idiotic. But now, with the black storm, the dark palm-clad outlines of the key enveloping them, Clark was wondering.

The wind plucked at them as they reached the top of the mound. They could see the house plainer now—a big rustic bungalow, with a spreading veranda. It was all dark except for one side window, where the weird blue-green light showed.

"You're not going to quarrel with him?" Gladys said hesitantly.

He avoided answering. Just what he would do he hadn't decided. He could jail this villainous step-uncle; he was convinced of that. Or perhaps Peters would be able and willing to make at least partial restitution. Clark wouldn't go into it tonight; and in any event, he wouldn't discuss it before Gladys. Certainly he would settle it amicably if he could.

They came to the dark house. Still there was no sign of life, aside from that blue-green shaft of light.

"There's a door by that lighted window," Clark said. The green light painted them momentarily with its glare as they headed for a small side door. With Gladys still clinging to him, Clark knocked. In a lull of the wind, from within the house a low electrical whine and a crackling hiss were audible. Then as he knocked again, the door opened. Framed by a ghastly green interior light, the big figure of their Uncle Peters loomed in the doorway as he stared out at them. . . .

"**S**O you are my niece and nephew? Tom and Gladys—well, how you have grown!"

"Ten years," Clark said. "That's a long time, Uncle Peters. We heard you were here—wanted to see you."

Wasn't he going to invite them in? He had come hastily out and partially closed the door. He was tall and gaunt,

with a bullet head of iron-gray hair. But to Clark's memory, he hadn't changed very much. He was surprised, naturally by their sudden appearance here on his lonely island; but his voice and his handshake seemed welcomingly cordial.

"Yes—glad you came, of course," he said. "I've sort of been out of touch with the family."

He was dressed in trousers and shirt, with a big surgical apron. And suddenly Clark saw that the apron was splattered crimson.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Peters ejaculated, as he saw Clark's startled gaze. He began to take off the soiled garment. He smiled. "My experiment here—I was in doubt whether to invite you into the laboratory. I ought not leave here for a moment yet; then we can go around to the living room."

His gesture waved them into the doorway but Gladys hesitated, and Peters laughed.

"They told you about me at the village, I take it?" he said.

"Well—" Clark hesitated.

"Well, no one there knows what I'm doing. But it's no secret from you. A gruesome thing—until you're used to it. Come in for a moment."

He widened the doorway; went in. At the threshold, Gladys gave a little cry of horror, and Clark stood transfixed as they stared. It was a big room of morticed log walls and low-beamed ceiling. A huge electrical apparatus stood in one corner, with a slab-like operating table under it. Another table was littered with the paraphernalia of chemistry—tiny hydro-oxygen torches, retorts, test tubes and mortars. A big glass cabinet held an array of gleaming surgical instruments, with a sterilizing bath near it.

The complicated electrical apparatus was humming; some of its dials were in movement; a row of its little fluorescent tubes was glowing. One of the hydro-torches was burning low, with a faint hiss; and from the small rectangular tank which was the instrument sterilizer, wisps of white steam-vapor were issuing.

To Clark's dilating nostrils, the air of the close room was fetid—heavy

with acrid chemical smells. And there was something else; a nauseous odor—the heavy smell of human blood and flesh. . . .

Then in those stricken seconds of his swift glance, Clark saw that huge glass containers were ranged against the wall—containers that were filled with a white liquid in which ghastly things were emersed. Dissected portions of human bodies! A torso. A human leg. An arm, with hand and fingers that seemed to stir as they floated in the liquid. A man's head, with staring goggling eyes. And on a shelf, glass globes filled with the white liquid showed a human heart, with tiny wires attached so that it was beating rhythmically, stirring the liquid with pulsating waves. A human brain, with all its tissues quivering as though it were thinking thoughts; a stomach that seemed to be digesting food; human eyes that floated, goggling at the visitors. . . .

"I've been working on this for years," Peter said. "When Carrel and Lindbergh showed the world, a few years ago, that a human heart, all the tissues of the body organs, could be kept alive apart from the body, I was doing it here. And then I went a step further. I put them together! Look what I have created!"

THE whole laboratory was lighted by a greenish glare, the source of which was hidden by a big post which supported the beamed roof at the center of the room. At Peters' gesture, Clark moved with his sister a few steps sideways. And the gruesome thing in the glare over by the opposite wall, was revealed. Ghastly, culminating horror!

It was the body of a man—a monstrous, six-foot upright thing swathed in surgical bandages. Bathed in the green electrical light from nearby, it stood on its feet, with a metal brace behind it. The feet were planted widely on the floor; the arms dangled. The ghastly green, cadaverous man's face was quiescent. The face of death. But somehow the staring dark eyes seemed alive. . . .

"It is almost alive," Peters explained, his eyes glowing. "My creation that

will make me famous. Tonight—or by morning I will have given it life.”

He was puttering at a big instrument panel of burnished copper. Eight feet high and half as wide, it stood upright a few feet from the inert standing monster. The burnished panel shone like a mirror, reflecting the green-white glare of the ray-beam that bathed the monster's dead face with its lurid light. From the panel wires went to a metal plate on which the monster was standing; wires also lay like snakes on the floor, leading to the other electrical apparatus over the operating table, where doubtless the inert monster had previously been lying.

Peters pulled a huge switch that connected two great naked electrodes at the side of the burnished copper panel. The hissing, crackling green glare died to a faint radiance. It still showed the monster's gruesome swathed form; and it seemed to Clark that the thing's arms jerked convulsively.

“My God—it's alive!” Gladys gasped. “Tom—take me out—”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Peters exclaimed. “I didn't realize it would frighten you. Come to the living room.” He seemed contrite. As he led them through a hallway, he added to Clark, “We'll talk about it, after she goes to bed, Tom. My life's work—you'll be proud of your uncle, when this is achieved. You saw its arms move? That wasn't life—just the galvanic action of the muscles when I lowered the current. But it will come to life by morning. I'm sure of it.”

A madman, thought Clark, obsessed with this wild thing he called science. Of course he couldn't create life. To Clark came the sudden memory that this was the villainous step-uncle who had defrauded him and Gladys of their inheritance. But he hadn't seemed guilty when he greeted them. Clark had imagined that he would be perturbed, defensive—ready for a fight—frightened with the realization that Clark, grown now to manhood, had discovered his villainy and could send him to jail. Peters, however, showed no such feelings. He seemed obsessed only with his crazy science. . . .

* * * * *

But Clark was wrong. At midnight

that night, after Gladys and her brother had retired to their bedrooms off the big central hall of the bungalow, the burly John Peters sat in his own bedroom, pondering what he would do. The sudden appearance of his grown niece and nephew, now at the culmination of his great experiment, had startled him. Did they know what he had done ten years ago, to defraud them of their inheritance?

At first, Peters had thought not. But later, after he had served them supper and they sat chatting in the living room, he had carefully questioned Tom. The lad was transparent, though he obviously didn't know it. With the inexperience of youth, his underlying grim belligerence was apparent.

IN the bed beside Peters now, a revolver was lying. He picked it up, fingered it thoughtfully. No! That wouldn't do. In San Marino, of course, it was known that young Clark and his sister had come here to Sandy Key. He couldn't produce their bodies with bullet holes in them. Even if he wrecked their boat and claimed they had never arrived, some other relative would hear of it, be suspicious; that old will business would get raked up.

Jail . . . or hanging . . . Peters shuddered. Then a grim thought suddenly leaped at him. The monster! If only tonight he could vitalize the monster, how easy it would be to mangle the bodies of Gladys and Tom—and claim that the monster had done it! He was planning to put the gruesome thing in a cage which he had in a recess of the laboratory corner. He would do that—tonight—now. Then tomorrow, when the storm had abated, he would go to San Marino with his horrified tale of how the monster had attacked his young visitors—killed them before Peters could drive it away and lock it up.

For a long time the tense, grim Peters sat planning, listening to the howl of the wind that lashed the palms. He had tossed his revolver to a bureau drawer. His big hands were twitching—hands that could strangle this young cub of a nephew so easily.

Then Peters padded out into the dim

hall. It was well past midnight. Clark and the girl doubtless were asleep. If only the monster could be brought to life. The vitalizing current was still on it. The living heart tissue by now should begin to pulsate.

From Clark's bedroom where he had been lingering undecided, Peters suddenly turned away and padded through the small corridor that led to the laboratory. It gave access to the room close to the small outer door where Clark and Gladys had arrived. If only the monster could be brought to life tonight! His great achievement. A living thing in a cage which he would exhibit all over the world. The dawn of a new era in electro-biochemistry and surgery. . . .

Peters' heart was pounding with excitement as in the little doorway he stood peering at the dark laboratory room—great eerie shadowed place with the hissing of the electrodes and a faint green glare. Then his heart seemed to leap into his throat and stick. The monster had vanished!

In that horrified second as he stiffened, Peters' mind, tumultuous with his murderous plans, went into chaos. The monster had vitalized—moved! And then he saw it, diagonally across the room—the blurred upright shape of it standing in the distant shadows, peering at him. Belligerent! Good God!

Terror swept Peters. He had not believed the thing could vitalize fully with the low current bathing it. He had intended now to turn the current full; to put the thing into the cage when the first real signs of life appeared. But that was passed now. It was alive! Stalking the room! Monstrous ghastly thing fashioned in the guise of a man, alive at last, stalking, peering at its master!

"You—go back where you were!" Peters was suddenly aware that he had staggered forward and quaveringly shouted the command. Would the damned thing understand him? Could it hear? Could it think? God! At the sound of his voice now, it moved again!

THE eerie blurred room swayed before Peters' terrified gaze. A wild blurring panic swept him. Good God—

if the thing got out of hand—He'd have to get it into the cage now, before God knows what impulses swept its deranged mind.

"Go back where you were!" he shouted. "I'm your master—I made you—you've got to obey me—"

But it didn't obey! Where was it? He couldn't see it now. In the darkness Peters stumbled over a laboratory chair; and as he picked himself up he saw the monster again. Silent stalking thing, it had moved back almost where it belonged. Had it obeyed—docile? Or was it lurking—murderous? The lurid green radiance was shining on it again now—on its cadaverous inscrutable face, and on its burning, peering eyes. . . .

"You stand still!" Peters gasped. "Don't move again—"

He darted forward. He must shut off the current. That would quiet it. The big copper instrument panel loomed beside him as he reached for the switch. Too late! For that second the monstrous man-thing had seemed quiescent; but suddenly it seemed to Peters that the great swathed arm had lashed out at him, was attacking. He whirled, terrified, and struck back. And then the monster was upon him!

Ghastly combat! To Peters there was only a blur of horror as the giant monster's body bore him down—horrible strangling fingers at his throat.

There was only a second of consciousness left to John Peters. In it he was aware that the entangled bodies of himself and the fighting murderous monster were jammed against the instrument panel. From the great naked electrodes where Peters' fumbling hand was still reaching for the switch, there came a sizzling flash. To Peters there was the dim realization that he wasn't destined to become a murderer. It was his last ironic thought as he was hurled into eternity. . . .

* * * * *

"I wasn't asleep—I heard him shouting," Clark was saying to the group of officials and awed Americans who had come from San Marino. "My sister and I rushed down here. We saw—well, what you see now."

Two charred bodies lay entangled

across the naked electrodes of the switch on the big instrument panel, where the high tension current had burned them into grisly blackened things of horror.

"The monster—he came alive and attack Senor Peters?" a San Marino policeman suggested.

"We heard him shouting," Clark said. "Sounded like, 'Go back where you were—I'm your master.' We thought the monster had come alive and he was chasing it."

"That's crazy," one of the Americans declared. "You can't create life—that's idiotic. Peters reached for the switch and caught the electrode. In his struggles he pulled that damned dead thing down on him."

From over by the door, one of the Americans gave a startled gasp, and jumped forward.

"My God, Clark," he exclaimed, "you're standing where you say the monster stood—and from the doorway with that central post hiding you, all I could see was your reflection in that copper instrument panel. It's bright as a mirror from here. For a minute I thought you'd miraculously gotten across the room. Gave me a start in this damned gruesome place."

"Well, if Peters thought the monster was alive, maybe that's what he saw," somebody else said. "Don't tell me anybody can create a living human. That's crazy."

But was it? The two gruesome, charred bodies would never give the answer. And everyone was sorry for the crazy, fanatical scientist who was killed by accident. Nobody knew it was a potential murderer who justly went to death.

CROSS AND DOUBLECROSS

(Concluded from Page 85)

"Not this gun, pal—the other one. This pet was strapped to my left calf."

"Then you played us for the suckers all the time," said Marcia shakily, climbing out of her casket. "You didn't have to—to kill Mike, did you?"

"If I wanted to save your pretty face and your life I did," he answered promptly. "And I did. You've been playing marbles with the wrong crowd, Marcia. Kerrigan always played for keeps. He really thought that you and I fell for each other, and he couldn't take it. Stick your finger in that mess of stuff on the floor."

MARCIA did so, smelling delicately of the sticky white stuff. Then it began to bite like acid, and she ut-

tered a cry of alarm.

"My God!" she exclaimed, wiping her finger hastily. "What is it?"

"Quicklime," advised Clark curtly. "I could even smell the stuff over there behind that statue. Kerrigan was going to bump you off actually and frame me for a real murder which he would have squared for a million bucks. But ask Lebanoff there. They were in the smuggling business together."

But Marcia didn't have to. She was convinced. When the cops came in for the clean-up, they found the girl sobbing in the G-man's arms while he was comforting her gently. Which ought to convince everybody that, for one time, Mike Kerrigan had been right.

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SEE COUPON ON PAGE 110

DEATH'S FLEET WINGS

A Complete Novelet
of
Sky Mystery

By **ARTHUR
J. BURKS**

*Author of "The Cannibal Floor," "Moaning
on the Styx," etc.*

CHAPTER I

The Devil Co-Pilots

WHEN I got out of the hospital I was sure in my craven heart that I would never fly again. The name of Elbert Harn had gone around the world; Elbert Harn, whose errors in navigation had cost the lives of eleven persons in a crash in midwinter in the Bitter Root Mountains.

Why in God's name had Fate decreed that I be the only survivor of that crash? The man who had caused it! The mere fact of my survival made a horror of my name in the newspapers of the nation. I'd been broken up some, but the consensus of editorial opinion seemed to be that every bone in my body should have been broken, and that I should have died by slow inches.

Instead, I lived, and knew from my awakening on the hospital cot that I would be my old self again, outwardly at least. My gray eyes were



haunted, of course. How could they help being? My cheekbones were out-thrust, because I was skin and bones, and scrawny. But I was still a six footer, and in time would weigh my regular one eighty-five.

My hair—no, it hadn't turned gray, but it should have, for every waking minute since the crash I had suffered the torments of the utterly damned. But my hair stayed brown and glossy.

An Airship Heads for Oblivion with a



*He grasped her
by the shoulder*

I blamed myself, too, which, but for the findings of the investigating board, would have made it unanimous. The board found me guiltless in the crash. Instruments had gone wrong. Weather data had been off. I shouldn't have left Billings that fatal night, for the hop to Spokane. But I didn't know that, nor did anyone else, until I sped into the Bitter Roots and a blinding snowstorm en-

veloped me. I knew I was in a notch, and should be able to follow through.

I knew there were twelve-thousand-foot mountains all around me, save dead ahead. I tried to climb, but the snow formed ice on my wings and I began to lose altitude instead. I warned my passengers to fasten seat belts. They were white and frightened. They sensed, I think, that the next few moments would bring death

Strange Cargo and a Pilot Gone Berserk!

and destruction.

I saw the side of a mountain through my snow-fogged shield. Then I awakened in the hospital to find that I was the sole survivor of the most disastrous crash in recent aviation history. They told me I had walked, raving in delirium, to the nearest town, bearing in my arms the broken, bleeding body of a child killed in the crash. I remembered the child, but nothing of taking her out of the wreckage, nor what they did to her when they took her from me.

AND now, six months later—six months of such horror, such fear of the outside, as none could possibly imagine—I was well again, in everything but my corpse-haunted mind. I, Elbert Harn, had slain eleven people. I was obsessed by the idea that the board had exonerated me in order to save the line's face; that, if they had done the right thing, they'd have found me guilty of gross criminal negligence.

I should have been executed. So I kept telling myself. And I felt that retribution, some time or other, would surely overtake me. I only wished that it would come soon. For though I might be black anathema in the eyes of the world, I was blacker in my own eyes.

I would never fly again.

Yet, I told myself, that was cowardly. What else did I know? Nothing.

I'd fought poverty and disappointment for a career in the sky. I knew nothing else. Up until the crash nothing could have persuaded me that there was anything else in the world worth doing.

Now, the killer of eleven persons, four of them women, one a girl-child of ten, what could I do? Make atonement? Give up my career? What could I do?

I gritted my teeth when the idea came. I thought it took a lot of courage—a characteristic in which I was sadly lacking, after six months in a hospital, thinking it over—to do what I had in mind.

But I went to the operations office in Billings. There was a stir in the

place when I went in. A girl typed furiously when she recognized me, and I knew she was conscious of me—conscious that I had been the cause of eleven deaths. Her typing was needle points shot with deadly speed right into my heart.

I went to see the traffic manager. His face was perfectly smooth when he looked up at me. I met his gaze. I licked dry lips with a drier tongue. This man had been my friend. He must know how I felt about all this.

"Well, Nate," I said to him, my voice shaking, "here I am. I don't know why I'm here. According to the best advice in the matter I should jump from the highest peak without a parachute. I'm inclined to agree, but I've got to do something, for my own salvation."

"Harn," he replied, after a long pause, pregnant with pain and significance, "I've given it a lot of thought. The newspapers have been tough on you. They were wrong."

"Just the same, but for me there would be eleven people alive today who are dead!" I almost shrieked. Then I sensed that the typist had stopped work to listen, and I crawled into my shell like a beaten cur. I winced, pulling in my mental neck like an injured turtle. "But there must be some way I can atone!"

"If you want to try the hardest way in the world," he said, "you'll get a break. Maybe nobody will fly with you, but—"

"Fly with me? You mean I'm to fly again?"

Even to me my voice sounded like a scream of terror. He nodded.

"Exactly that. The board found you guiltless. If you don't fly again, and over the same route, the world will think that we, too, believe you guilty of gross criminal negligence. You owe it to the line to help us out—and that is your salvation, if you've got the guts to stick it."

I groaned in an agony of spirit. My hands were shaking. My palms were flat on Nate Gascon's desk. Sweat poured from them, wetting the oak top. Fly? My God, the very thought almost drove me mad with terror. Yet

I must have thought of this, or I wouldn't have come to Nathan Gascon at all.

"Of course," he said, "you'll need time to get your nerve back. So, Elbert, until you're yourself again, you'll fly co-pilot, from Billings to Spokane. Well, will you do it?"

"What else can I do? But if my mere presence on the plane fills people with fear, what then?"

"You will not be flying. You'll merely be the co-pilot. Your pilot will be one everybody believes in, the oldest on the line, with millions of hours without a fatal accident, or even a forced landing. Of course, when you're in the front office with Damer, he'll allow you to fly, to get your hand back in. The passengers won't know that."

I should have fled from that office as from the beckoning hand of the devil. But I didn't. What else did I know but flying? I nodded my head, scarcely realizing what I did.

It was blistering, hideous agony for me to take off, hours before dawn, when the night was at its blackest, on the Billings-Spokane flight. The crate we flew had come from Minneapolis. Its passengers, thank God, were asleep, and I did not have to attend them. I sat in my seat and shook as with the ague. Perd Damer, the pilot, sneered at me.

"Made you yellow, eh?" he grated. "Well, with me you'll get a course of the sprouts. I'll either kill you or get you back where everybody believed you were. Personally, I always did think you were a lousy pilot, that you didn't have the guts of a goose!"

I half rose to my feet, fist cocked for a smash at his jaw. Then I remembered. He was probably right. I sat down again, sweating in every pore. He laughed at me.

"Not even the guts to slug me, eh? I wouldn't turn you in. I'd just smash your face!"

A tough guy, Damer, none tougher. But he was being plenty hard. Yet when I thought of the eleven dead I couldn't blame him.

"Tried to play the hero," he went

on, "by bringing in that dead girl! Not a pilot on the line but thinks you did it to save yourself with a sob story!"

"If that were true why would I be allowed to fly, even as a co-pilot?" I demanded.

He snorted. "The face of the line must be saved—even at risk of losing more lives. Only, with me, there isn't a chance of lives being lost. The line is really taking no chances, see?"

He revved up his motor. The big passenger crate moved down the field, every bounce of it agony, a stab at my very heart. I was afraid even to ride in a crate. I knew where the big rocks rose about the field. I was afraid that, from the mere fact of my being aboard, we'd have an accident. And there were eleven passengers now, too! If an accident was meant to happen, I wanted to die instantly.

The lights were right. Damer swung into the wind, stepped up our speed. The tail came off. The take-off was smooth, effortless. Damer, across from me, was grinning—and his grin was like a snarl. He resented even being in the same "office" with me. I couldn't blame him, either, which made it many times harder to bear.

I had to keep on the beam. I was the navigator, the telegrapher. It had been years since I'd been that. So much depended on me. Only tonight there would be no blinding snow. Even if there were, I knew that Damer could "fly by the seat of his pants" and get his passengers safely through to Spokane.

ONCE in the air I tried to keep from thinking back to the last time I'd flown this route; but I couldn't help myself. I could see the white face of every last one of those passengers. They'd haunted my nightmares for six months. They'd been behind my lowered lids every day. I'd screamed inside me, almost mad, because I could not banish their faces.

For in my nightmares they were always streaked and grimed with blood, and crimson cheekbones showed

through the ruptured skin. The crash had been a ghastly thing. The one miracle had been my own escape, which no person could possibly explain. Somehow, by a freak of the accident, I'd been thrown clear.

I licked my lips as we rose to eight thousand and held to our course. Now and again I looked at Damer, and always he sensed it, turned and looked at me out of milky eyes. He'd always hated me, I knew that. Julie Trant had been the cause of that.

Julie often flew between Billings and Spokane—she was saleswoman for some sort of a dressgoods house with national distribution — and both Damer and I were in love with her. I knew if I didn't get her I'd die. Perd Damer warned me off. I was sure she preferred me, because she'd said so. She would marry me, she said, if I'd give up flying.

I had demurred, much as I loved her. Then had come the accident, and Julie Trant hadn't written, telegraphed or come to see me. I supposed that she took the view taken by the rest of the world. I had murdered eleven people. But even my love for Julie had been subordinated to the pain I would never lose, because I had escaped the crash.

That escape was like . . . Well, suppose the captain of a liner escaped alone from a burning ship at sea? It would have been like that. The reporters said so.

We were approaching, now, the place where last winter I had killed those eleven. I had a ghastly case of the jitters. I couldn't even be sure which side of the beam we were on. Instruments on the panels blurred before my aching eyes. I looked out and down, and lowered my lids—for it was so easy for morbid eyes to see, far down against a precipice, the wrecked plane of last winter, with the broken dead among the blood-spattered wreckage.

I cried out with the pain. I couldn't help it. My nerves were like taut bowstrings. Maybe I was yellow, but I couldn't help crying out. Those eleven dead were curled about my heart and soul, their corpses like the

ice in which they had stayed for weeks, until rescue parties reached them.

Almost any other man, unless possessed of no heart whatever, would have felt the same way. I told myself that, but it was no use. Nothing helped. But my cry did something to Perd Damer. Maybe he himself was bothered by having a killer for a copilot.

Anyhow, he took his right hand off the wheel and slapped me savagely across the mouth and nose. My nose began to bleed.

"Cut it!" he snapped. "If your jitters cause me any trouble I'll throw you out of the crate, and you'll get what you should have got last winter!"

I groaned. He was master of this ship. I couldn't even slug back, not when he had to stick to his instruments or endanger the lives of eleven more people. I stopped the nosebleed, finally—about when we were directly over the spot where I had crashed.

The air was bumpy. The crate flopped about the sky. Damer corrected for every variation from the course, aloft, aloft or sideward with the sure hand of the master surgeon on the stick.

"Go back and see how our passengers are standing it!" he snapped.

"But if they recognize me!" I protested.

"They can't run out on you now, can they? What if they do recognize you? That'll be fine, especially when I've landed them safely in Spokane. Oh, and by the way, if you get hold of yourself, maybe you'll be asked to Julie's wedding—with me!"

CHAPTER II

Living Dead

NOTHING could hurt me further, though. I got myself together as best I could, opened the door, strode into the aisle. Some of the passengers were flopping about, because

their belts were not tight enough. I started near the tail end of the crate, to work forward, automatically balancing to the rolling of the plane.

The first passenger I noticed was a girl—and that brought memory flooding back. A little girl! God, when I remembered . . .

I started to tighten her belt, with fingers that were all thumbs, with hands that shook uncontrollably. She sensed me there, turned and looked full into my face. I bit through my teeth to keep from crying out. I must be wrong! This couldn't be!

I went to the next passenger. I got a look at her face, too. And then, fighting to keep my sanity, I went from one passenger to the next, adjusting belts to keep the sleeping bodies from sliding out of seats. Then, the ghastly count complete, I literally fell into the pilot's cubby.

Damer stared at me.

"What the Hell's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Are you always seeing ghosts?"

"No! No!" I rasped. "Not always; but this time, yes! Damer—"

"Mr. Damer!" he corrected me.

"Hell," I said, "what does a name matter? Listen to me, Damer! Those passengers we are carrying! They are the same eleven I carried to their deaths last winter!"

Perd Damer, the tough guy, stared at me for all of a minute. Then he did something I had never seen him do before. He took both hands off the wheel, grabbed the collar of my blouse, yanked me close against him. His face was white, his eyes wild.

"Say that again!" he barked.

"They're the same passengers I killed last winter!"

Putting it baldly like that didn't help Damer or me. But it was out, could not be taken back.

"You mean, they're dead? They're smashed up, the way they were when you—when you—"

"No! They're alive, just as they were when I brought them this way six months ago."

"Elbert Harn, you're crazy as a loon!"

"Maybe I am, but I'm not mistaken.

Go and look for yourself! I looked at each face. I knew them. How in God's name could I ever forget them? And you'd better get your hands back on the controls!"

I spoke just in time, for he jerked a look ahead, then fought the crate frantically out of a slip that would have crashed us against the mountain. We did everything but drag our wheels. How we missed that crag I'll never know, except that Damer was an incomparable pilot. Terror such as I had never believed possible coursed through my very veins. For in that narrow escape from death it came to me that . . .

I was fated once again to slay the eleven I had slain before!

I'd heard wild tales of ghosts—ghosts haunting the places where they had died by violence, re-enacting their demises night after night to the very end of time, or until the guilty were punished. Great God, was that it? Were these eleven here for the sole purpose of punishing me as the board of investigation had not seen fit to punish me? That couldn't, simply couldn't be possible. There were no ghosts. Those things didn't happen.

Had my head been injured in the crash so that I was seeing things? No, for I had studied each face while it danced a devil's rigadon before my bulging eyes. One after the other, they had been the same.

I stared wildly out into the night, to discover that I had been wrong in one thing. We hadn't reached the place of last winter's crash; it was twenty minutes still ahead of us! I'd never forget it, could not be mistaken!

Were we heading that way, this minute, to do it all over again?

"Turn back! Turn back!" I yelled at Perd Damer. "Don't go on, or we'll crash, sure!"

His face was sheet-white as he yelled back. "I can't, Harn! I'd be laughed out of the flying service. Perd Damer turned back because a madman saw eleven ghosts! Can't you just see the headlines? No, I'm Perd Damer, the incomparable, who, come hell or high-water, deadheads

through. I've got to go on, Harn—damn your eyes!"

"But I tell you, this is a judgment against me! We're going to crash again!"

He stared at me for a long moment. There was a grim set to his lips. His eyes popped. And in that instant I knew something about Perd Damer that chilled me to the marrow of my bones. Perd Damer, who had called me yellow, was terrified beyond words to express! And I was his co-pilot, responsible next to him for our passengers. If he cracked up, his nerves went bad, I must take his place. And I knew I couldn't fly.

"Harn, you're seeing things!" he yelled. "Go back and take another look!"

God, I'd never feared or dreaded anything as much as I dreaded that second look, but I rose to make it. I opened the door, looked out into the gloomy area where the passengers were. The slipping and sliding around the sky had wakened them all. As the door opened every face in the passenger section stared at me. And there was no mistake about it. I know, because I studied every face with greatest care.

They were my dead passengers, and they were not dead now, but horribly living!

My uniform was wet with sweat as I backed into my seat, closing the door. For all of a minute I could find nothing to say. Outside the wind whistled about the shield. The props bore through the night. Dead ahead I could see the face of a mountain I had just cleared last winter, only to crash into the slightly higher mountain beyond. I saw black wings to the right, where ebony wisps of cloud rode the windy notches.

The roaring of the motor was a Bull of Bashan sound. We were in a mad thing, fleeing through the night. Not until then did I realize that Perd Damer had lost his head, let his motor full out.

"Slow down!" I shouted. "Climb! You can get over all this. Last winter I couldn't, because of ice on the wings. But now—"

"Now," he retorted, "I am the master of this crate, and I'll fly her through the eyes of needles to get her through."

His laugh was wild, hideous. His eyes were red, savage.

"You're too low to cross that mountain peak ahead." I said. "Go to the right or left, around it, or nose up to get over!"

"No! We'll clear it by five hundred feet! I guess I can estimate altitude with the next one!"

I stared ahead and knew he was wrong, just as I knew nothing I could say, so discredited was I, would convince him. Terror had fogged his vision or something, and he was headed for a crash as surely as I had been last winter.

HE laughed again, looked at me. And I knew that a madman was at the wheel of the crate, knew it now beyond all mistaking.

He rose, steadying the wheel with one hand.

"Take over!" he said. "I'm going to have a look myself. If you're seeing things, or pulling something on me, I'll throw you out as sure as God made little apples!"

I was shaking like a leaf, but in his position even the word of a madman was law, so I slid under him, took the wheel. He slipped through the door, into the passenger cubby. I closed him from my mind, or tried to, and immediately nosed up a little. Not enough for him to notice, in the state he was, but enough to take me over that peak.

And onto the peak where I had crashed with the eleven that flew with me again!

I was as sure in my own mind that I would crash again as that the sun would rise tomorrow in the east. I was alone in the cubby, as I had been last winter, when my co-pilot had been making sure of the seat belts of the doomed passengers. The child had been crying, I remembered. I thought I heard her crying now—again!

The seconds passed. I sighed with relief as I saw the peak drop under my nose. Not far under, but enough,

unless a down-draft caught the crate.

Why didn't Damer come back? The motor-roar seemed a great shout of mockery at the fate I was sure awaited me, dead ahead. The spinning props were imps of hell, leading me to destruction with a vast whirring of wings. The wind of our speedy passage was a shriek outside the crate.

I was holding the speed Damer had set. Now I would cut the speed a little. At least it would lessen the shock a little, delay its coming.

But the throttle would not close! It was tightly stuck! It was as though the hand of inexorable Fate itself had jammed the throttle to make sure they all died again, when I crashed once more! I think I prayed; but it did no good. As the peak whipped past under me I realized the terrific top speed we were making. To crash at that speed would leave no bolt or nut of the crate intact. Mercifully, though, the passengers would never feel the inevitable, cataclysmic impact.

Why didn't Damer come back? Out there with the eleven who had died, and now were alive again, what was he doing? I could see all those familiar faces, including that of the child, and Damer going from one to the other, staring at them, studying them. And he was mad already. By the time he returned he would be a gibbering idiot. Or maybe, in his madness, he would do the passengers some harm. Again I thought I heard the child crying, as though in deadly terror.

My hands were sweaty on the wheel. I looked at them. The palms were bleeding where my nails had cut into them around the wheel.

We roared on, and Damer did not return.

I felt as though, now, I were all alone—save for a madman back in the passenger section, sitting and laughing, with eleven corpses for company—white zombies from the Bitter Roots.

I almost laughed aloud at the hideous impossibility of it. Mad I might be, but I knew I had not been mistaken in those faces. I had even pinched the arm of one of the men passengers,

and he had struck at my face. He didn't feel like a ghost, but what did normal men know of ghosts, after all? I didn't believe in them, or hadn't until now.

It was impossible, yet I had seen it.

CHAPTER III

Damer the Demon

A HEAD of me rose the fatal peak, with snow capping it. And I knew it was too high. I should have banked around, started back, but somehow I could not. There must be a way through. The snow-cap of the peak added the final fillip to the whole thing, for last winter snow had been my undoing, and now snow again was beckoning me to destruction. And some stubborn streak in me held me to my course. What did it matter whether I turned back, after all? If I were fated to crash again—and yet again and again—I would crash, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I smothered a mad burst of laughter in my throat, where it almost choked me as the bullet-fast crate sped on through the night, straight at that white-crested rampart ahead and far above my spinning props.

I turned on the landing lights, and looked down their beams at the timbered roof of the Bitter Roots. No place down there where a landing could be made, and even if there were, what then? With the longest landing field in the world at my disposal, I would surely crash, for when the wheels touched, the motor would still be full out. Of course, I could cut the ignition, but that was too great a chance to take now.

So I held on.

And as the minutes passed I found it more and more difficult to keep from screaming. For with fascinated eyes fixed on that white-capped peak, I had "frozen the stick!" I fought with all my will power to make my hands and feet do something to avert disaster, but mind and feet and hands didn't cooperate. Maybe because I'd

been hurt worse than I had thought, than even the doctors had discovered.

And why didn't Damer come back? What was he doing, back there with the eleven corpses which only I had any right to kill again?

I felt waves of bitter cold swirl about the back of my neck, like wind from the glacier out of which the rescue workers had dug my victims. That same cold was here with them now, bathing me, freezing me to immobility. I was a robot, drawn by the magnet of the fatal mountain, to carry passengers and plane to destruction and death once more.

The door behind me opened. I whirled and looked. Perd Damer had entered. His lips were set in a grin that showed tightly locked teeth. Sight of him chilled me anew with an eerie terror. He slipped into my place, put the headphones askew on his skull. He stared at me, and kept on grinning.

"I can't handle it, Damer!" I shrieked. "Take over! I've no nerve left!"

To my horror he put his right forefinger alongside his nose, a gesture filled with immeasurable slyness, and winked.

"No, no! Not me, Harn! You're the little guy slated to crash this plane and kill the passengers! When we're found, if we ever are, I will be found in the co-pilot's seat. Never let it be said, even after he is dead, that Perd Damer lost a plane or a passenger!"

"Then, I'm turning back, Damer! We're going too fast, and the throttle is jammed. Or I'll climb over the crest!"

"Hold your course, Harn! You're fated to crash again, and there is no escape. Crash then, damn you, or I'll sock you over the head with this and crash the crate myself!"

I stared at him aghast. He had whipped an automatic out of his tunic and was holding the blunt muzzle of it toward me. He didn't intend to shoot me, I supposed. But he did intend to bash me over the skull with it, then leave me in the pilot's seat to be found when the wreckage was uncovered,

whenever that might be.

"**B**UT it can be averted!" I cried. "I'm just seeing things, that's all. I can get over the peak . . ."

"Stay on your course! Your master, Shaitan himself, decrees it. And I am here to see that his flight orders are obeyed without question; Crash, damn you! Crash!"

"I'm going to nose up!" I shouted. "Why should I crash, just because I've been seeing things?"

"Then I'm seeing things, too, for I examined every one of those passengers, including the girl you tried to use for a sob story. And they're the right ones. I compared them with this!"

With his free hand he whipped a newspaper clipping out of his pocket, flipped it open. My brain reeled with nausea, remembering. It was the first full page of pictures of the crash victims of last winter. I didn't stop to wonder why Perd Damer carried it. I did understand that he had compared the faces in it with the faces of our passengers.

And he had found them to be the same!

He was mad, I knew, but even a madman could identify people. Perd Damer laughed.

"All we need to make this party complete," he said, "is for Julie Trant to appear from hiding—a stowaway!"

"Thank God," I said, "that she isn't here! If she could see you now, the man she is going to marry, and found you to be a bigger coward even than I, the man she once intended to marry—"

"Take care!" he said. "I've little patience with a yellow cur like you, Harn!"

I stared into his face. Out of the tail of my eye I looked ahead, estimating the distance to the peak we must surmount. Then, slowly, I brought the nose up. Instantly then, and so swiftly I could not believe it was happening, Perd Damer acted. He crashed the muzzle of his gat against the side of my head.

By sheer reflex action only I slid back a little, and so failed to get the

full force of the blow. If I had it would have stove in my skull, without the slightest doubt. As it was it knocked me limp, and almost unconscious, into the space between the pilot's and co-pilot's seats.

And the plane, with its nose not lifted nearly enough, roared on into the night, still aimed far below the crest of the white-maned mountain peak.

I tried to move and couldn't. I couldn't wriggle hands, fingers or limbs. And Perd Damer, staring ahead, laughed wildly, and stayed in the co-pilot's seat.

"They'll find me here," he cried, "and know that I wasn't flying her when she crashed."

A pair of silken legs came into my blurred vision. I twisted my head to look up at the figure and the face above it. My brain reeled. This couldn't be true. Ghosts might be true, but this, never!

Julie Trant was entering the pilot's cubby. She looked, an unreadable expression on her face, first at Perd Damer, then down at me.

Quite calmly she estimated the situation. Then she slipped behind the wheel, grasped it with both hands. I'd taught her all she knew of flying, which was never enough to tool that monster to safety through the night, over the Bitter Roots. And even if she had been capable, Perd Damer would not have it.

HE laughed aloud. He shot out his left hand, grasped her by the shoulder, spun her from under the wheel, back through the door. I heard her crash in the aisle. Then Perd Damer followed her. I heard him screaming:

"So, you'd save his skin, eh? Save his skin, when you've promised to be my wife! Now, my dear, I'll teach you how a *man* makes love!"

I heard Julie scream with terror and dismay. I heard a palm slap against a face; the savage laughter of Perd Damer. Then the door closed. In split seconds the crash was due, and I couldn't get to my feet, slide under the wheel.

And if I could, if I could somehow save the plane and the passengers—which I did not for a moment believe—what of Julie Trant, in the mad, brutal power of Perd Damer, who had been driven insane by terror of the inevitable crash?

Only God knows how I ever got under the wheel of that crate in time. My mind was a whirling maelstrom of doubts and fears. Dead ahead, so close under my prop that I fully expected to waken again on an operating table in Billings or Spokane, was the white-crested rampart of the Bitter Roots.

Wildly, madly, I came back on the controls. I nosed up savagely, too steeply. The slanting horror of the mountain side was under my wheels like a landing field standing on end. And back in the passenger section, with no safety belt to hold her, Julie Trant fought with Perd Damer—or had already crashed against the back of the plane.

She must have been hurt when I nosed up. I must even have done something to the backs of the passengers when I nosed up—or rather, I had bumped their heads against the backs of the seats in front of them. And in that second I knew, with all the power of that crate, that I could not hold her in the steady climb that was necessary to get her over. Even her mighty motors, full out, would not do it.

What then, in God's name?

I held her until she began to lose way by her very inertia, then dropped my left wing down, to bank around, get some more speed under her. The wing fell away. The mountain slanted away under the body of the crate.

And I couldn't level out, just yet, without plenty of speed. The mountainside was a welter of snow-killed trees, of monoliths of stone that looked like cathedrals in the eerie moonlight reflected by the snow. It was an icy Inferno of which the genius brain of Dante had never even dreamed.

The roaring of the motor was a wild, savage thing. I could do nothing with it, for the throttle was still

jammed.

I heard screams of terror from the passenger section behind me. The sound was sharp as a knife, cutting through the door itself, through the wild screams of the motor. And the child was crying out in terror. The plane rocked as though some heavy object were rolling back and forth in the aisle of the passenger section—unrestrained.

That, of course, would be one of two things, or both those things—Julie Trant and Perd Damer.

And I couldn't leave my wheel. If God were good to me, just once, I might save the crate and passengers this time. But what would happen to my Julie while I saved it? Could I leave it, go to her assistance? Perd Damer had a gat. He would shoot me, when he wouldn't shoot Julie. A dead woman was no good to a crazed man like Perd Damer. And the most that could happen to Julie and me would be that we would die together.

NOW, more than ever, I wished to live. For after tonight, after the way Perd Damer was treating her, how could Julie possibly marry him? She might never marry me, but she certainly could never marry that beast!

I managed to get the wings parallel with the mountain, then gradually to nose up. I tried to figure out the meaning of the sounds that came through to me. The passengers were still in their seats. With the crate behaving so crazily, none of them would dare unfasten his or her belt, and go to the aid of Julie Trant. They were human, and must realize—unless they, too, went mad—that their salvation, if any were due them, lay in keeping those belts tightly fastened.

Yet I could not leave the controls.

There was one relief in all this, when at last I looked down at the highest rampart of the Bitter Roots, and saw it go sliding eastward under my fuselage. It wasn't far down enough for me to take a chance on securing the wheel and going back to fight Perd Damer, but at least I had successfully passed the spot where I

had crashed last winter.

And what did that mean?

My mind was clearing, my courage coming back. Those eleven "corpses" back there could, and somehow would, be explained. In any case, I had thwarted ghostly tradition, was not going to reenact the killing of last winter's gruesome, pitiful eleven.

CHAPTER IV

Winged Bedlam

I held steadily on my course, listening with the ears of my mind, seeing with the eyes of my soul, what transpired in the passenger section, where I knew Julie Trant fought savagely with Perd Damer.

But now, with the western slope of the mountain falling away under me, I could hear nothing at all. That was the very worst.

Back there a madman and the woman I loved—and the eleven I had killed, yet realized now I had not killed, in spite of all the newspapers had said—riding with me toward far Spokane. Up here a jammed throttle, and a haunted man flying westward with the corpses of his dead hanging on his shoulders like old men of the sea.

I gritted my teeth. I'd let the mountain fall away a bit more under me, so there could be no danger worth mentioning until I had done my job with Perd Damer. Then I'd secure the wheel, or put the robot to work, and go back to whatever the consequences might be.

A few minutes more, a few miles further. God, would the right moment never come?

It came, finally, and I had started to secure the wheel, when the door opened. Julie came staggering in. Past her I looked for a fleeting instant at the dreadful faces of the doomed eleven. Yes, they were the same faces, which I would see in my nightmares to the end of time.

I looked at Julie as she swiftly closed the door. I had seen Perd

Damer, sprawled on his back in the aisle, motionless, save as his body rolled a little from side to side with the swaying of the crate in the mountain winds.

Julie had been through plenty. Her cheeks were dyed a deep red from the smashing hands of Perd Damer. There were marks of fists on her shoulders, her neck. His hands had ripped and torn at her like the claws of some hideous carnivore.

"Please don't look at me!" she begged hoarsely. "Fly on, Elbert!"

I did fly on, quivering, feeling that I would like to get my hands about the throat of Perd Damer. Julie sat in the co-pilot's seat, staring straight to the front.

I had to keep my eyes and mind on business, for there was still the landing at Spokane. And when I got there, circling down over a low hill toward the city, I knew what I had to do.

It was simple, after all. I simply cut my switch, and waited for the motor to die. I lost altitude. Never before had I landed passengers without the aid of the motor. But feeling as I did then, I could have landed on a dime without danger.

And land I did.

Julie Trant looked at me, when the plane came to a stop.

"Quickly," she said, "kiss me, Elbert, before anyone comes."

We kissed and it was our reconciliation. In it all the past was wiped out except, of course, the eleven I had slain. And some explanations were due from the eleven I had not slain.

We went back through the passenger section. Field attendants were already dragging out Perd Damer.

This would all now show itself to be a dream. However, it did not—just then. For I walked out onto the ramp past the unforgettable faces of the eleven I had killed last winter! They looked ghastly in the faint light of approaching dawn.

THE child was still softly sobbing. She gazed in terror at Perd Damer as he was being dragged roughly out.

Out on the cold concrete Julie stopped, waiting for our grisly passengers to alight.

The first one out was a man. His face was white. He walked belligerently up to Julie and said:

"We didn't know what we were letting ourselves in for, or money couldn't have hired us to do it! You'd better dig up a few hundred dollars more!"

Mouth hanging open, I stared at the speaker, wondering what in time he was talking about. I wondered more when Julie made soft reply.

"Whatever you want, in reason, I shall be glad to pay. If Elbert Harn won't pay it, I will!"

The other passengers got out, gathered around us. They all looked accusingly at Julie. The child was not crying now, and I stared at her in amazement. In the growing light of dawn I saw that she was probably twice as old as I thought—one of those young women who can play child parts for years past their childhood. I began to get it then, and I turned to Julie.

"I got them together in Saint Paul, Elbert," she said quietly. "The company didn't believe what I claimed, but finally agreed to cooperate. Of course nobody expected things to happen as they did, or nobody would have taken a chance. Not even I, as much as I love you!"

I choked when she said that, for I had never expected to hear it again; had never, in fact, expected to hear her voice this side the grave. I, a pariah, an outcast, could not expect absolution or forgiveness. Yet now they were being given me.

"They're show people. I explained it might be dangerous, but paid them well. The line helped with some of it. At my request they assigned Perd Damer to the plane with this group. These people were 'asleep,' and well covered up when you and Damer took over at Billings."

Yes, I was getting it, all right.

"But how could you possibly know I would report to the operations office?" I asked.

(Continued on Page 111)

HORROR-SCOPES

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DEVIL COUNTRY

NEENA was the beautiful daughter of a tan-skinned native of British Guiana, which is often called The Devil Country. Several years ago an American explorer and his wife were in that section; and the wife took a liking to Neena, who was almost white. Neena looked like a Latin.

The woman explorer arranged to bring Neena back to the United States and send her to an American college for girls. Neena consented to the arrangement.

Just before she graduated, Neena met Don Hernandez, a handsome American of Spanish descent. Neena fell madly in love with him. Don was a gambler and seldom worked. He led Neena to believe that he loved her. Then, when Neena insisted that he marry her, he scorned her. She went back to her father, and then met her death.

Over Neena's dead body, the father held a photo of Don Hernandez, and cursed him, according to the tradition of the Guiana jungle.

In America, Don was living at a boarding house with his pal Jack Gordon. About the middle of June, Don started complaining of pains in his head—he couldn't sleep nights. He began taking sleeping tablets—more and more of them.

Then one night, Don came into Jack's room and woke him up. Don was in agony. For hours he had been trying vainly to get some sleep. Then, in desperation, he had swallowed an entire box of tablets. In a

few hours he was dead.

At the autopsy, the doctor found a lump on the back of Don's neck. He cut it open, and in the lump was a black worm.

"Well," said the doctor, "I haven't seen a mosquito-worm like this, since I was in Guiana. A mosquito down there bites you and deposits an egg. Later, the egg hatches and the worm lives on your flesh. If the worm isn't removed, sooner or later you go mad. This fellow must have been in Guiana recently."

They asked Jack Gordon, Don's pal, about it. "No," said Jack, "Don was never in Guiana—but he dreamed he was there."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the doctor.

"Well," said Jack, "last June first—I remember the date because that night I became engaged and arrived home about one o'clock—I wanted to talk to Don, but Don wasn't in bed in his room. I concluded he was out on a party, and I went to bed. In the morning, Don told me about his strange dream. He thought that some Guiana natives had taken him into the jungle and tortured him. I told him he should get to bed earlier then he wouldn't have such bad dreams. 'But,' said Don—'I went to bed at ten o'clock last night. I never moved out of bed all night.'"

Where was Don when Jack came in? How had the mosquito-worm entered his neck?

There are no such insects in America.

RADIO CHIMES

A RADIO actor tells this one. Several years ago, an eastern radio studio had been preparing a script for a new program. It was the creation of an old writer who always signed himself "B. G. E." His name was Ben G. Everhart.

Ben worked hard on the script and he looked forward with pride to the broadcast. But three days before the program was to go on the air—Ben died. Friends were mighty sorry that old B. G. E. wouldn't be there to hear it. But the show had to go on.

It was a great success—and just as the program finished, the swinging chimes in back of the studio rang three distinct notes.

Believing that a draft of wind had knocked the cylinders of the chimes against each other, the men thought nothing of it.

But then as the musical director stepped up to congratulate the actors, he heard one say: "Too bad that B. G. E. wasn't here tonight to take a bow."

"What did you say?" asked the musician.

"Why, B. G. E.—the fellow who wrote this program."

"That's strange," said the musician. "Those notes that were struck on the chimes just now were B, G and E."

Had Ben's ghost tried to tell his friends of his presence? Who knows?

DEATH AT THE WHEEL

TWO mechanics of New York City, while at lunch recently, were discussing dreams.

Said one: "The night before I came on this job last week, I dreamed I was being run down by a steamroller and couldn't get out of the way. The driver on the roller was grinning. He looked like a skeleton—the kind of a face that artists often draw to represent the angel of death. The steamroller was crushing my body. I woke up gasping for breath—so realistic was my dream. I'm glad there aren't any steamrollers in this repair shop—I'd quit my job if there were."

"That's nothing, Ken," said the other. "I often have dreams. You were probably reading a story about a steamroller one time, and it left an impression on your mind. There's nothing to dreams. It's a lot of bunk about dreams coming true."

But the next day, the friend had to change his belief about dreams, for the NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM carried the following item that night:

"Kenneth S....., aged 40, was crushed to death early this morning between two heavy trucks in the machine repair shop where he worked. He had been employed in the shop about a week and was cranking the motor of one of the trucks, when the other, in some unexplained manner, rolled back against him."

In the shop was a large drawing of a Safety Campaign, depicting the Angel of Death at the wheel of a car. The drawing
(Continued on page 106)



NORMAL SCHOOL PRINCIPAL FINDS N. I. A. GIVES REAL SERVICE

"I am glad to tell you that I sold an article. Before enrolling I was skeptical of N. I. A. training as the best preparation for writing in fields other than newspaper reporting. I am now convinced that you make good on your claim that N. I. A. is the preparation needed by writers in all fields. N. I. A. renders a real service by giving thorough, sincere and expert criticism."—E. L. Mendenhall, 253 Linden Street, Fond du Lac, Wis.

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(Continued from page 105)

had been placed on the wall only that morning—but no one could remember who had put it there.

IRON BED

MARY LANE of Philadelphia and her friend **Alice Bronson** had graduated together from a New England college that day. **Alice Bronson** begged **Mary** to spend the night with her at her home in Brooklyn, New York—and then to go to Philadelphia the next day.

Mary consented. But when they arrived that evening at the luxurious **Bronson** home, several relatives were staying over the week-end, and the guest rooms were occupied.

Mrs. Bronson, however, insisted that **Mary** stay. There was a cozy little room on the third floor with an antique iron bed, which **Mrs. Bronson** said was the most comfortable bed in the house.

So **Mary** stayed. Although a cool breeze came in through the open window, **Mary** couldn't get to sleep. She felt stifled. About three o'clock, she suddenly felt choked up and had a hard time getting her breath, and for a moment she thought she was going to faint. She sat up in bed, and as she did so, she seemed to see a shadow dart past the bed and disappear through the open window.

She didn't want to awaken her friend, and tried her best to convince herself that she had been half asleep and dreaming. So she forced herself to remain quiet until dawn. But she was a nervous girl and would never forget this night.

She didn't tell her friend about her experience, but thanked **Alice** for her hospitality and left for Philadelphia.

Although **Mary** saw **Alice** several times after that, at college reunions, she never visited the **Bronson** house again. Years passed. Both girls got married and seldom ran into each other. **Alice Bronson** had moved to an estate in Long Island.

Then, one day, **Mary** picked up a Philadelphia newspaper. A news-item attracted her attention, for it brought back the memory of that strange night in the **Bronson** home many years ago. The item read:

Brooklyn, N. Y. The former **Bronson** home which has been unoccupied for some time, was gutted by fire last night. The mysterious blaze started on the third floor. The owners say they will not repair it, but demolish the remains and probably erect a modern apartment house. The end of this famous house, recalls a tragedy of 33 years ago when **Malcolm Dorrington** strangled his wife on an old iron bed on the third floor, and then leaped from the window to his death in the courtyard below.

THE CHRISTMAS VISION

LAST Christmas morning **Tom Duffy** of New York City was lying on the living room couch looking at the pretty Christmas tree by the window. His children were play-

ing in the center of the room. His wife had gone to take a present to her sister a few blocks away.

As Tom gazed at one of the big silver balls on the tree, he caught a reflection in the bright surface. Could he be seeing a vision? For he was sure he saw his own face very clearly—and there seemed to be blood streaming down his cheeks from a cut across his forehead.

He jumped up and looked more closely, but the vision had gone. He tried to figure out what had happened—but it couldn't have been his own reflection, for no light had been shining on his face as he lay there. There was only the reflection from the window and that couldn't have reached him at that angle.

It worried him. Perhaps it was a warning—and he dreaded going to work the next day in the machine shop where he was employed. He didn't want to tell his wife. She might get frightened. So he resolved to be very careful hereafter.

His mind was still troubled when his wife returned a short time later. Her face was white—and she looked as though she had had a terrible fright.

"Oh, Tom," she said as she dropped into a chair. "I just had an awful shock. I was crossing Seventh Avenue on my way back when a man stepped in front of a taxi-cab. As I looked at him, I thought it was you, and I wondered why you had left the house. The cab struck the man and knocked him to the curb. I rushed over to him, terrified—believing it was you. I saw a cut on his forehead and the blood was streaming down his face. But as I looked closer, I saw it wasn't you; but he looked enough like you to be your twin brother. I waited for the ambulance—and the doctor said the man would live. I was so glad—for I knew how I would feel if it had been you."

Tom's face was happy as he kissed his wife and told her of his strange experience. Had his wife's thought at the scene of the accident been registered on the Christmas tree ball through some strange mental power yet undiscovered? Who knows?

AUTOPSY

EVERYONE has heard of the biblical story of the "Handwriting on the wall." But the question has long remained as to whether there was actual physical writing on the wall, or whether the witnesses saw it only in their minds.

A recent happening, however, seems to clear this up.

Some time ago, a business man in New York City was notified that his sister had died of heart failure. He was in his office the next day preparing to leave for the funeral, when a messenger boy came in and handed him a telegram. He read the telegram after the boy had left. "INSIST ON AUTOPSY."

There was no signature, so the man put the telegram in his pocket and left at once.

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

Did this imply that somebody had murdered his sister?

He was so affected when he reached his sister's home that he spoke to a doctor friend of his, employed by the city. A secret autopsy was performed and it was discovered that the sister had been poisoned. A discharged servant was later arrested and convicted.

But when the brother took the telegram out of his pocket to try and discover who had sent it—the telegram was blank. A check up at the telegraph office of that date brought forth the report that no messenger had brought any telegram to that man. There was absolutely no record of this telegram anywhere. The only fingerprints on the blank were the man's own.

This happening has remained a mystery to this day.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra:

Is Mass Hypnotism a scientific fact?

GEORGE NEWBOLD

Dear Mr. Newbold: Yes. This has been demonstrated recently in Mtubatuba, Zululand. Peter Titlestad, an European trader, does it time after time with natives whom he addresses. Photographs were recently published in The Star of Johannesburg. The photographs show hundreds of natives asleep on the countryside. Witnesses who reported the incidents say that Peter Titlestad moves

NEXT ISSUE



THE FARING OF THE WOLF

A Gripping Novelet of
Satan's Slaves

By **ROGER HOWARD NORTON**

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

among the sleeping natives whom only he can awaken. Others have tried. Titlestad is curing natives of many ills by hypnotism. He owns the local store, besides being the local doctor.

Dear Chakra:

Are the so-called "three mysterious knocks" really believed to be a signal of death?

J. L. C.

Dear J. L. C.: Let Marie Murphy of Box 1712, Ketchikan, Alaska, answer you in her own words: "My sister was ill, giving birth to a child, and my mother, my husband and myself were anxiously waiting to hear how she was when we heard three distinct knocks on the door. My husband hurried to the door but no one was there and there were no tracks in the snow which had been falling. We retired, and at four o'clock in the morning we heard the pounding again, this time on the front door. And once again, no one was there. No one in the house had been out since the snow had begun falling and there were no tracks in the snow anywhere around the house. My sister died at four o'clock. We will swear before God that this is the truth."

Dear Chakra:

Is there any case of a human being dematerializing himself and then appearing instantly in a distant place?

M. HOLDEN

Dear Mr. Holden: No actual proof has been made to science, but many cases of this have been reported in India and Tibet by educated persons. Some people still believe that Houdini held the secret of dematerialization. When alive, he never denied it, and destroyed all his secret files on this performance.

Dear Chakra:

Is it true that the monks in the lamaseries of Tibet can project before them scenes of activity in all parts of the world?

MARGARET WOODS

Dear Miss Woods: According to Jacques Romano, the famous chemist, who spent 14 years in a lamaserie, this is possible. When Romano was a boy of 16, he saw a demonstration of this. Two monks projected on the wall a scene in the home of Romano, thousands of miles away. Romano saw his mother and father sitting in their living room. These

(Concluded on page 110)

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ROMANCE RIDES THE RANGE IN

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(Concluded from page 109)

same monks also looked in on a scene in Buckingham Palace in London. Romano, who is now 75, but looks 45, intends to go back to that lamasery when he is 90. He claims the monks live to be nearly 200 years old.

Dear Chakra:

Do any of the motion picture stars believe in ghosts?

GRACE SIMS

Dear Miss Sims: Carole Lombard will tell you that she does.

Dear Chakra:

Are there any records of strange voices or sounds coming over a radio which cannot be accounted for by any scientific means?

THOMAS REFFE

Dear Mr. Reffe: Yes, there are many cases, and several scientists are working on a machine to pick up ultra-sensitive vibrations. A book on this subject will be published in the near future. The author believes that through radio the psychic forces will make themselves heard. It is claimed that the spirit uses the same wave frequency as human thought—and when a machine can be developed to pick up this super-frequency, the world will be astounded. What a revelation this will be if true!

CHAKRA

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BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

DEATH'S FLEET WINGS

(Continued from page 103)

"My dear, the world may not know you, but the woman who loves you, does! I knew you would face the music. What's more, I knew you would come through, which you did! But"—she smiled a little—"I took no chances. Nathan Gascon would have sent for you if you hadn't come."

"But so many coincidences! Perd Damer as my pilot—"

"I asked him to have you fly with him. I told him I hated you, that I wanted to see your nerve completely gone and wanted him to break it..."

"He almost did, all right!" I said, ruefully. "Until he went completely mad himself!"

"That," said Julie softly, "is what I couldn't possibly have foreseen. All I wanted to do was trap him into confessing one thing: that he had killed eleven people in an attempt to kill you!"

"What?"

(Continued on Page 112)



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20x4.50-21	2.40	22x4.50-21	2.47	20x4.50-18	2.40	22x4.50-18	2.47
20x4.75-19	2.48	22x4.75-19	2.55	20x4.75-20	2.48	22x4.75-20	2.55
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20x4.50-170	2.38	22x4.50-170	2.45	20x4.50-171	2.38	22x4.50-171	2.45
20x4.50-172	2.38	22x4.50-172	2.45	20x4.50-173	2.38	22x4.50-173	2.45
20x4.50-174	2.38	22x4.50-174	2.45	20x4.50-175	2.38	22x4.50-175	2.45
20x4.50-176	2.38	22x4.50-176	2.45	20x4.50-177	2.38	22x4.50-177	2.45
20x4.50-178	2.38	22x4.50-178	2.45	20x4.50-179	2.38	22x4.50-179	2.45
20x4.50-180	2.38	22x4.50-180	2.45	20x4.50-181	2.38	22x4.50-181	2.45
20x4.50-182	2.38	22x4.50-182	2.45	20x4.50-183	2.38	22x4.50-183	2.45
20x4.50-184	2.38	22x4.50-184	2.45	20x4.50-185	2.38	22x4.50-185	2.45
20x4.50-186	2.38	22x4.50-186	2.45	20x4.50-187	2.38	22x4.50-187	2.45
20x4.50-188	2.38	22x4.50-188	2.45	20x4.50-189	2.38	22x4.50-189	2.45
20x4.50-190	2.38	22x4.50-190	2.45	20x4.50-191	2.38	22x4.50-191	2.45
20x4.50-192	2.38	22x4.50-1					

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(Continued from Page 111)

JULIE nodded somberly. "He confessed it all, in front of my eleven theatrical people who were made up to match your dead; before I knocked him out. He was quite calm about it, because he did not expect to live. Yes, my dear, it's the horrible, ghastly truth. I suspected it. I'd seen him coming from your plane before the take-off and didn't think anything of it until afterward. He is a master mechanic, you know. He jimmied up your crate, that fatal night last winter, just enough to drive you off your course, a fatal distance south. He didn't cause the snow, of course, but if he hadn't trapped you in advance—callously trapping eleven people with you—you'd have got through that, being the flyer you are!"

"Then I'm not guilty of those eleven—"

She put her soft, lovely fingers against my lips, told me to hush, never to mention it again. I kissed her fingers. I knew that Perd Damer had jammed the throttle, to make a crash certain, when he'd gone mad. And

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what had driven him mad? I had been almost mad, wondering just how deep my guilt was in the deaths of the eleven. Perd Damer had gone entirely mad, because in his mind there was no possible doubt of his guilt.

His mind had snapped when I'd come back to tell him what I had seen.

And then he had looked for himself. I should have guessed, when he showed me the newspaper clipping. Had it not been for my terror, perhaps I might have.

Of course, the law put Perd Damer away for the rest of his life.

"Lord," I said to Julie Harn, "you might have married that monster!"

"There never," she whispered, "was a single moment when I considered it in the slightest. I wanted his confidence, wanted enough hint to go ahead with what I suspected. And I got it. His nervousness whenever the accident was mentioned, his unwarranted hysteria at certain moments, all linked up to that moment I had seen him near your plane. But it was tough to stay away from the hospital, knowing what you were suffering, just so that I could make him believe I hated you as much as he did!"

And to the end of my days as a flyer, I know I can, and will, fly the highest ramparts of the Bitter Roots without the slightest bit of terror. Fate kept me for that, and for Julie, else the miracle would not have saved me from the crash that started the horror.

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