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MYSTERY

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THE TALKING TOWER

A Novelet of
Lost Treasure

By **EARLE DOW**

**DEATH CALLS
CINDERELLA**

A Colonel Crum
Novelet

By **JOHN
H. KNOX**

**A THRILLING
PUBLICATION**

FEATURING

**SERVANT
OF THE AXE**

A Novelet of
Crime's Executioner

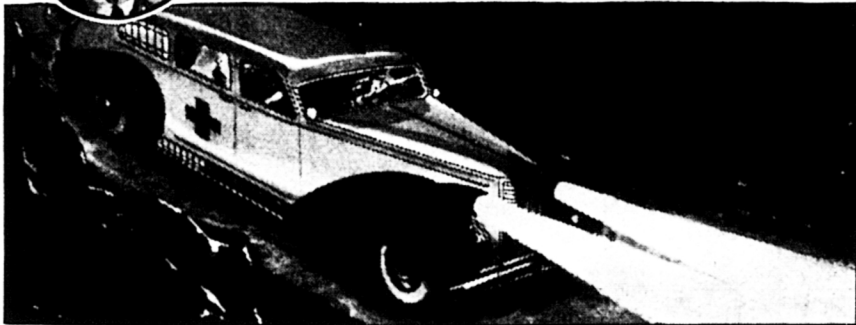
By **STEWART STERLING**



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A true experience of male nurse GROVER C. BIRCHFIELD, Los Angeles, Calif.



"WE WERE RUSHING A CARDIAC CASE by ambulance to the hospital one dark night," writes Mr. Birchfield. "We were two thousand feet up on a winding mountain road and six miles from our goal, when all lights blew out.

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THRILLING MYSTERY

Vol. XVII, No. 2

September, 1941

Price 10c

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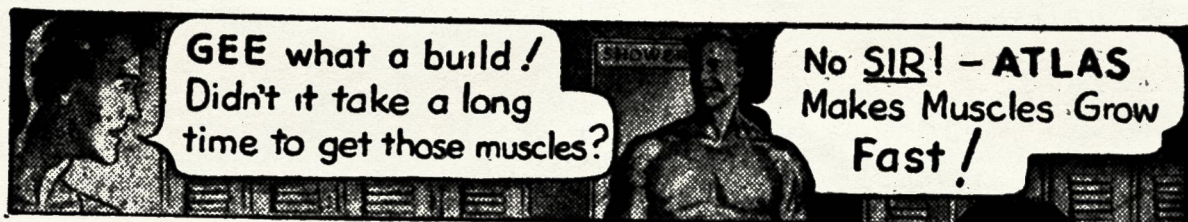
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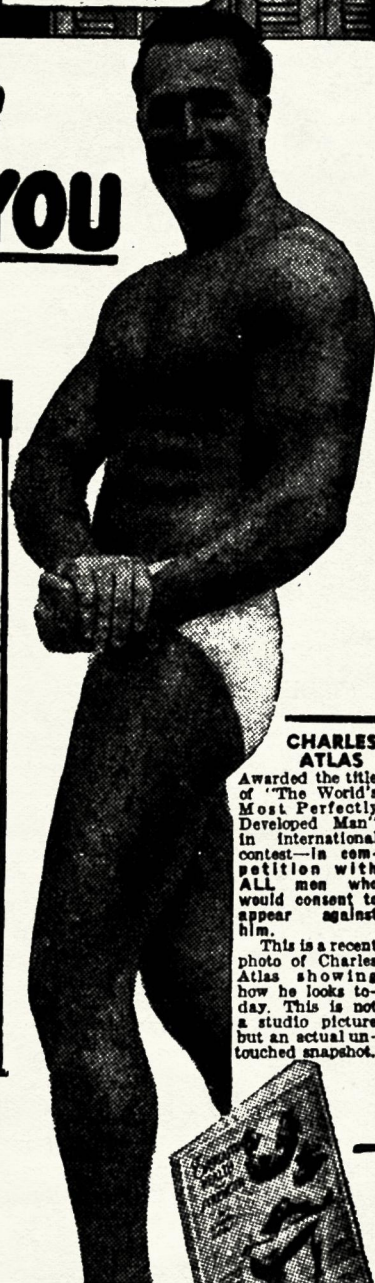
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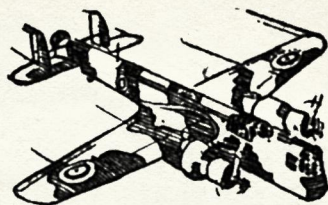
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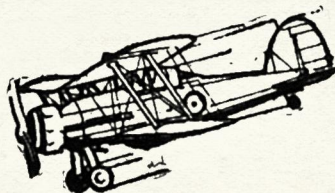
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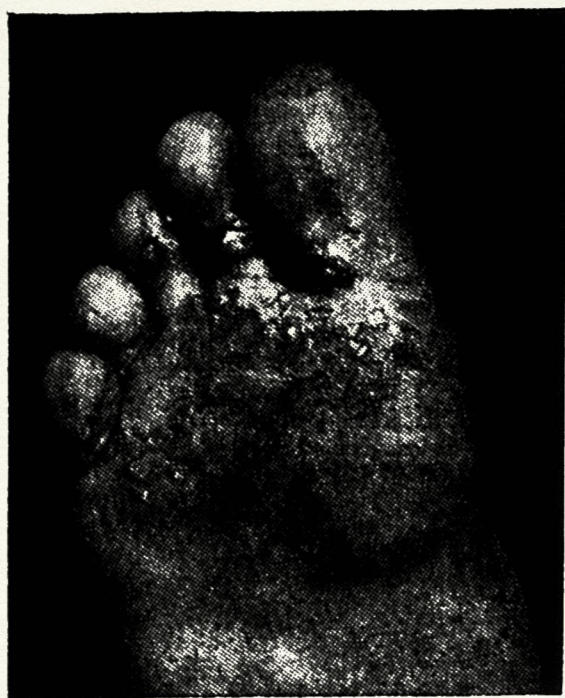
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CHAPTER I

Murder on Parade

COLONEL FABIAN CRUM usually had trouble seeing parades. The scientist-detective with the big reputation was small in stature—slightly less than four and a half feet tall. But today he was

enjoying that visual treat in comfort. Seated on the reviewers' stand, along with the Mayor of Bannon City, the Chief of Police, the President of the local Chamber of Commerce, and other notables, he was viewing the colorful opening of the "Cinderella Pageant."

The sky was cloudless, the sun bright, the crowd gay. And the parade

CINDERELLA

"Come in, gentlemen, but raise your hands!" the figure croaked.



itself was well worth seeing. The thriving shoe manufacturing town of Bannan City had outdone itself. The gorgeous floats, each depicting a scene in the Cinderella story, drifted past like barges out of fairyland.

It was a bit ironical, Crum thought, that the rather sinister story which had brought him hurrying to Bannan City with his trailer-laboratory,

should have ended in this materialization of childhood daydreams.

That weird tale of a hooded man who branded women's feet!

He had heard it from the Police Commissioner in a nearby city, who related how a travelling salesman had come to him for advice. Nervously the man had told of having dated a girl in Bannan City and taken her to

the nearby lake resort, Bannon Beach. Lolling on the sands in the moonlight, they had been accosted by a man in black clothing with a hood over his head. At gun's point he had bound and chloroformed them. Awakening an hour or so later on the same spot, they had found themselves unharmed except for one queer detail: the girl's foot, neatly bandaged, bore on its sole a small triangular burn, or brand.

That was all. Neither had been robbed or otherwise molested. The salesman had wanted to go at once to the local police, but the girl would not hear of it. The salesman, compromising, had appealed to the Police Commissioner of the neighboring town. The Commissioner, in turn, had mentioned the matter to Colonel Crum.

Crum, intrigued by the matter, had left at once for Bannon City.

BUT here he had encountered an anti-climax. Chief of Police Roy Randle, flattered at the famous scientist-detective's visit, had given him the welcome due a celebrity, but had only laughed at the incident which had brought him.

"Probably just a prank—if it's true," he said. "After all, the woman entered no complaint. She evidently wasn't badly injured—"

Crum frowned. "That's just it. That's the sinister part of it. She wasn't harmed, she wasn't robbed. The thing's not sane, not normal. It has a look of lunacy, suggests some ugly follow-up."

Randle had shrugged it off. "Maybe some fool thought it would be a good publicity stunt for our Cinderella Pageant," he said. "Let me tell you about that. We're going to give our little city some real publicity, let the world know that shoes are made in other places besides the famous eastern centers. . . ."

And that was how the roving detective came to be watching a parade on this perfect day.

A school band passed, the little majorette prancing as she twirled her baton.

A float bearing the pumpkin coach

and its fabulous entourage drew wild applause from the watchers, cries of delight from the children. Then an awed intake of breath swept like a wind over the crowd as the crowning masterpiece of the whole parade hove into view.

Huge, white, and gleaming with crystal and silver, it bore the tableau of Cinderella in her bridal dress, with the Prince kneeling before her, about to place on her dainty foot the glass slipper. No one could miss that climactic symbol of the way all love stories should end. For the throne on



Colonel Crum

which Cinderella sat was raised on a circular column, high above the heads of the court. The Prince knelt on the steps leading up to it, holding the wonderful slipper of silver kid covered with crystal sequins. He, like all the rest of the figures in the tableau, wore a mask.

"The Prince is young Gage Herendon," Chief Randle, who was seated next to Crum, muttered. "President of the Herendon Shoe Company.

Want you to meet him sometime."

Crum said he would like to, but he was looking at the figure of Cinderella. A painted mask gave her face the anonymous doll-like beauty that was desired, but the golden hair, gleaming against the white bridal veil could surely be no wig.

"And who is this Cinderella?" Crum asked.

Randle shrugged. "Some girl who works for the company, I think. They held elimination contests a week or so ago to select a group of girls with beautiful feet. Every girl in town was supposed to enter as a civic duty. From the selected group they chose the various Cinderellas you've seen on the floats, and tonight at the Grand Ball they'll choose the prize winner of them all, who'll rule as Queen Cinderella for a year."

Crum was ready to cast his vote for this one. There was something about her posture, the queenly poise that held her gracefully erect, dainty as a Dresden figurine, white and lovely against the green of the trailing rose vines that clambered about the back of the throne.

THE murmurs of admiration grew louder, spread. A wave of applause swept over the crowd. The float was passing directly before the reviewing stand now. It was the moment at which the fitting of the slipper was to take place. Cinderella's foot was already extended; so was the slipper in the Prince's hand. Now he thrust it forward, placing its tip over the dainty toes, pushing forward and up.

The girl gave a little start, a slight shudder as of ecstasy, leaned back as if exhausted by the emotions of the thrilling moment. And just then Crum's sharp eyes saw the bee.

He had idly noticed the insect before, buzzing lower down among the blossoming rose vines. Now it had zoomed up to the higher blooms, and, just as the girl leaned back, was caught between the throne and her white-clad shoulder.

Crum tensed with a sympathetic twinge. But nothing happened. The girl did not move. And suddenly a

coldness began to run in the little detective's veins. The girl's hands, holding the bridal bouquet in her lap, were strangely still. He moved, turned toward the police chief, gripped his arm.

"Stop them!" he rapped. "That girl—something's wrong!"

"Wrong?" Randle blinked, bewildered. The float had reached the middle of the intersection now. It jolted as it hit the tracks, the high throne swayed.

"Oh, my God!" Crum groaned, and started toward the rail.

It was too late. The back wheels of the float had hit the tracks. The body of Cinderella gave a lurch to the right, tottered hideously, toppled, shot down head first. There was a crunch you could feel if not actually hear, when her head struck the float's edge, and the whole mass of white gown and fluttering veil folded in a grotesque pile that bounced off to the pavement and lay in a lifeless heap.

For a stunned instant the crowd was voiceless with horror as the truck shuddered to a halt. Then, from hundreds of throats, came sounds that blended in one weird wailing cry, and there was a rush forward.

But meanwhile Crum had vaulted the rail and dropped cat-like to the pavement below. He reached the girl, lying almost under the truck's wheels now, whirled with arms outstretched.

"Back!" he cried. "Give her a chance, give her air!"

A police whistle sounded. Three cops from a squad car came elbowing through the mob. Randle, following Crum, joined them. With the aid of the actors from the tableau, they held the crowd back while a doctor bent above the crumpled Cinderella. Crum knelt too, and as the doctor raised the girl's head, the little sleuth's sharp eyes noted the jointless way it moved on the neck and did not need to wait for the grim pronouncement.

Idly he stared at the sequin encrusted slipper, still clinging to the dainty foot. On a sudden impulse, he took it in his hands, drew it off. He pulled the reinforced portion of the sheer hose away from the girl's sole and stared through the gauzy fabric.

The muscles of his fingers tensed, a chill crept along his spine.

CHIEF RANDLE, who had seen him, stooped beside him now. Silently Crum pointed to the mark—a little reddish triangular brand. Queerly, it was of the shape and color of those accursed small wafers used in the ghastly rites of the Black Mass.

Randle's lips made a low whistle. "The branded girl of your story?" he asked.

Crum shook his head, frowning. "No. The salesman refused to give her name, but he referred to her as a pretty little red head." He looked straight at Randle. "See what that means? There's more than one branded woman. And one has died—" He glanced about him, noticed that they were being watched. "Mum's the word," he cautioned, and got up.

CHAPTER II

The Fiend Laughs

THE group in the waiting room at the Police Morgue sat in uneasy silence. The horror of that golden-haired girl lying dead in the sunlight seemed to have impressed its image on their haunted eyes.

Gage Herendon, President of the Herendon Shoe Company, fiddled nervously with his watch chain. He had changed from his princely finery to a plain dark business suit which set off the pallor of his grave, handsome young face. Beside him sat Mayor Pendleton, looking as if he had just swallowed a boiled egg whole.

Across the room were two women. One, a tall, smartly dressed, rather mannish girl in her late twenties, with dark sorrel hair and bold authoritative eyes, was Iris Herendon, sister of the young executive. She was trying to comfort the thin, dark-haired girl who huddled against her, crying in utter silence.

"I don't know what to do," the girl now sobbed aloud, "Baby's got no living relatives as far as I know. I been

her roommate two years—"

"Now, now," Iris Herendon soothed, "the company will take care of all expenses, try to locate her relatives." She looked up as the door opened and three men came into the room.

Instantly Gage Herendon was on his feet. "Well?"

The white haired Medical Examiner paced to the center of the room, tapping his glasses gravely against his left knuckles. Colonel Crum and Chief of Police Randle drifted to chairs and sat down.

"Her neck was broken," the doctor said. "Unquestionably that's what killed her. The problem is: what caused her to fall?"

"Then it wasn't heart failure?"

"No," the doctor said. "She was alive when she fell. Her heart was still working—there was considerable bleeding from the scalp. She seems to have fainted. Colonel Crum noticed it first. He saw her lean back against a bee, knew something was wrong when she didn't jump. It's possible the bee sting may have stunned her. Some people react to bee stings that way. But it will take time to explore that possibility."

He glanced at Crum. The little detective had lighted a cigarette, sat puffing reflectively, his longish, almost sinister face a suave mask in which only the searching eyes seemed alive.

"Sorry, Doctor," he muttered, "but it was the faint that caused her to lean against the bee."

The doctor frowned, tapped his glasses impatiently. "Are you suggesting, Colonel, that the tragedy wasn't an accident at all?"

"Exactly," Crum replied.

Young Herendon came to his feet, his face flushed.

"You mean you think I pushed her, or twisted her foot or something?" he growled.

"That," Crum said, with a rebuking smile, "would have been unpardonably crude. No."

"Then why try to spoil our pageant with a scandal?" Herendon demanded. "I know you're a famous sleuth, but I didn't think you had to feed your

reputation with cooked-up sensations." He checked himself, looked at his watch. "Let's go, Iris. There's nothing more we can do here."

Iris Herendon got up, supporting the dead girl's sobbing roommate with one arm. The Mayor bounced to his feet, his pudgy face scowling reproof at Crum. They all went out, followed by the doctor.

AFTER the door had closed, Randle stood up, stroking his chin.

"Look here," he said finally, "this is too damned fantastic. If that girl was murdered, she must have been murdered by magic, and that's absurd!"

"Two and two make four," Crum countered, "and that is not absurd. A woman's foot is branded by a hooded maniac with a mysterious mark. Another woman with a similar mark on her foot dies strangely. To call that a mere coincidence seems to me much more fantastic."

Randle bit his lip. "Well, what can we do?"

"You might get me the slipper that dead girl wore," Crum snapped. "When I asked to be allowed to take it to my laboratory, I was told by your Medical Examiner that the property clerk had locked it up and gone off with the key. But I'm afraid your M.E., like the mayor and others, resents my making what young Herendon calls 'a scandal.'"

"Oh, the slipper," Randle dismissed it. "I don't see what good the slipper would do. And after all it belongs to Herendon."

Crum turned away. "Very well. I'll be at my laboratory if you should change your mind."

Crum went out to his car. It was a long dark limousine, and behind its wheel sat his assistant, the huge and taciturn young Asiatic, Aga Aslan. Crum crawled in beside him and sat musing while they sped toward the tourist camp where their trailer-laboratory was parked.

"I want that slipper," the little detective muttered, "scandal or no scandal. After you drop me at the trailer, Aga, go back and pretend to look for a cigarette case that I supposedly lost. Case that property room—especially

the outside windows. If I can't persuade young Herendon to get that slipper for me, we'll have to get it ourselves tonight."

Left alone at his laboratory, which occupied only one-half of the long zeppelin-shaped trailer, yet contained all the most modern instruments of scientific crime detection, Crum set to work developing a roll of films from a small camera. They were snapshots he had been permitted to make of the mark on the dead girl's foot. He made enlargements, studied them carefully, concluded that the brand had been made by a hot iron. It was four o'clock when he finished. Aga had not returned. Crum decided to call on young Herendon and make a last attempt to get the slipper by legal means. He called a taxi and was driven to the shoe factory on the outskirts of town.

At the administration building, he was directed to Gage Herendon's office on the second floor. He went up the stairs and down the carpeted corridor, his feet moving as noiselessly as a cat's. Before the open door of Room 219 he stopped. It was a waiting room, and the inner door, marked 'Private,' was closed. Voices drifted through its open transom. But it was the girl who interested Crum most.

SHE was small and trim, in a green skirt and a knitted blouse that moulded the soft lines of her figure. Her hair was the color of wheat in the sun. Holding a sheaf of papers in one hand, she was leaning toward the door, her ear pressed almost against it, listening with furtive interest to a voice which Crum recognized as that of young Herendon.

"But I tell you, we're desperate," the young executive was saying. "Unless we get that money, we're ruined. We've gambled a terrific advertising budget on the prospect of having that money for expansion. Without it, we're sunk."

There was a pause—then the voice of Iris Herendon added: "And that means that you stand to lose too, Garlock, you and the other big shots of the town who are stockholders. You'd better give us a hint as to our chances

of getting the money anyhow."

A throat was cleared. Then a voice which Crum's trained ears identified as that of the Chamber of Commerce President, a lean, wolfish lawyer named Garlock, who had sat near him on the reviewers' stand, spoke:

"I know. I'm sorry. But it's a week yet until the ten year period expires. I'm bound to absolute secrecy until then, can't say a word."

A chair scraped, there was a movement of feet. With a start, the listening girl straightened, began backing away. Crum also retreated out of sight, spotted a broom closet and stepped inside just as heavy steps sounded in the outer office. Peering through a crack, he saw the thin, hard-visaged lawyer come through the door gripping the girl's arm. She looked flushed and angry as Garlock propelled her down the hall and stopped at a spot near the door behind which Crum was crouching.

"Now," the lawyer growled in an undertone, "why were you eavesdropping out there, young lady?"

"But I—" she began, then her tone changed. "Oh, all right. What if I was? I want to enter that Cinderella contest. I thought maybe you'd say something to Gage Herendon about why you won't let me."

"Oh, you did?" Garlock purred. "Well, it's enough for me to tell you that I'm doing it in your own interest. When you're twenty-one you can make your own decisions. Meanwhile I'm your guardian. You'll do as I say!"

The girl bridled at his tone. "Maybe I'll enter tonight anyhow! Why shouldn't I? Luther says my feet are prettier than anyone's—"

"Luther!" the word came almost in a snarl. "You're going to throw that crazy brother of yours in my face once too often. At a word, I could have him up before a lunacy commission—"

"No, no," abject terror was in her voice now. "No, no, you wouldn't, you can't! He's all I've got since father died. Please—"

"Then do as I say and don't ask questions!" Garlock growled.

His steps moved on to the stairway. The girl moved slowly back into

Crum's line of vision. Her pretty face was tight and pale; big tears swam in her violet-blue eyes. Gently Crum pushed the door open.

The girl gave a start, a hand flew to her mouth at sight of the black-clad little man who stepped out smiling, a finger pressed to his lips.

"What do you want?" she stammered. "Who are you?"

"I am Colonel Crum," he said, "a detective."

AT the name, recognition dawned in her eyes. "Oh yes. I've heard them speak of you. But why—"

"You're obviously upset," he said gently. "I think perhaps I may be able to help you, if you're willing to trust a stranger, Miss—"

The charm of his manner tricked her into a fleeting smile.

"Bell," she said, "Patsy Bell. I'm Mr. Herendon's secretary. But I don't see—"

"Why I should be interested in your troubles? Well, it may be that they overlap some of mine. I too am much interested in your guardian's reasons for keeping you out of the contest." He glanced at his watch. "But we can't stand here chatting. Could I meet you at the gate at closing time? It might be worth your while."

She eyed him, weighing the challenge.

Obviously something about him inspired confidence.

"All right," she said. "I'll be there."

She turned and went back into Herendon's office. Crum decided to defer his visit to the shoe company executive. The overheard conversation, the girl who was being prevented by Garlock from entering the contest, the suggestive mention of a "crazy" brother—these things presented new leads.

Quietly he turned and went back down the stairs.

Patsy Bell was as good as her word. At a little after six, Crum met her at the gate, escorted her to his waiting car and told Aga to cruise along the Beach Road. As the car moved off, the girl settled herself in the seat, looked keenly at the little man who

was beside her, and then spoke up:

"I guess you think I'm a little idiot—falling so easily for your bait of sympathy. I know you want to pump me. But the truth is, I'm curious too. Does Travis Garlock's refusal to let me enter the contest have something to do with that girl who died this morning. Is there some danger threatening the entrants?"

"You're a clever girl," Crum replied. "Yes, I'm afraid there is a danger threatening the entrants. Just what, I don't know yet. But if you'll answer a few questions, it might help me to find out. First, about that conversation we both overheard. Do you know what that certain sum of money that Gage Herendon spoke of represents?"

"I do," the girl said. "It's a sort of company secret and I shouldn't tell, but I will. The money is the private fortune of a man named Anders Nilson. Some three hundred thou-



sand dollars. Nilson was a big stockholder in the Herendon company. He died ten years ago with no legal heirs. Since then, Garlock, his lawyer, has held the estate in trust."

"And it was to be held ten years, I gathered," Crum added, "after which time it goes to the company—on certain conditions. Do you know what those conditions are?"

"Nobody is supposed to know that," the girl said, "except Travis Garlock himself. But"—she hesitated—"they must be fantastic. Nilson was crazy, they say. He came here about seventeen years ago, out of nowhere. He had money, bought into the company. But he always seemed a miserable, haunted man, haunted by some secret tragedy. But only Garlock knows about that."

Crum nodded. They rode on for a while in silence, and then Crum said: "And Travis Garlock is also your guardian?"

"Yes," she said, with a grimace of

distaste. "He was a friend of my father's, though what dad could have had in common with that old vulture is more than I can ever possibly be able to understand."

It opened the way for other questions about herself, her family.

SHE had come here eighteen years ago, she said, when she was just two, with her widowed father and an infant brother. Her father, dead several years now, had owned an antique shop which her brother Luther now operated. But Luther was—she paused here, confused and embarrassed—well, he was eccentric, a classical scholar, buried in the lore of ancient Greece. But he wasn't—well, he wasn't what Garlock had said he was. He was quiet and harmless. Only Garlock was always holding over her the threat to have Luther put in an asylum because of his peculiar hobbies.

"Peculiar hobbies—" Crum repeated the phrase to himself. Aloud, he sympathized with the girl, assured her that only competent doctors could get her brother into an asylum. Presently, since it was growing dark, he gave Aga the order to turn back.

They drove into the older section of town and stopped before a sooty brick building which bore the sign: "Bell's Antique Shop." A dark stairway led up to the living quarters on the second floor. Crum accompanied the girl in. At the upper hall landing he thanked her, cautioned her to obey Garlock's injunction about not entering the contest, and turned back.

But he went down the steps slowly, turned to watch her. She had gone down the hall toward a door with a lighted transom, had paused there, but glancing back had seen him lingering. Quickly then she stepped past and vanished through a door farther down.

Crum hurried down the steps and signaled Aga from the car. Together they went up again, the big Asiatic moving silently as an Indian. At the door with the lighted transom, they stopped. Crum whispered something and the giant caught his legs, lifted him as lightly as one would a doll.

Peering through the transom,

Crum's eyes narrowed. The untidy room was lined with bookshelves and prints of Grecian temples and statuary. One in particular was repeated many times—the Aphrodite of Melos. There was a life-sized plaster cast of her in one corner. And there were other casts—casts of women's feet, dozens of them.

A youth was bending over a table under a shaded light. Gangling, big-boned, he had an abnormally large head, and tousled black hair fell across his pale broad forehead. He was bending over an anatomical chart of a human foot, measuring it with calipers.

Crum gave a signal and was lowered. Silently they stole down the stairs again and out to the car. They headed for the trailer camp.

"You saw something interesting, *Effendi*?" Aga asked.

"Very interesting," Crum replied. He described the scene. "I have known students of antiquity to go stark mad on their subjects before this. Fixed ideas. Sometimes they dream of restoring damaged masterpieces—" He broke off. "But we must get that slipper. First to the trailer, then to some convenient spot behind the morgue."

At the trailer, Aga changed to a dark suit, while Crum collected a small kit of tools and keys. They drove toward the morgue, circled it, and parked across a vacant lot behind. They waited until the lights went out in all but the corridor windows, and then stole up to the back.

AGA lifted Crum to his shoulders. The little detective seized a ledge of projecting brick work and went up like a human fly. With a palette knife thrust through the juncture of the window's two sections, he worked the catch, opened it and dropped lightly to the floor inside. Straight to a large locker he tiptoed, opened it with a master key and fumbled for the slipper. He grasped it, closed the locker, turned.

Instantly his sensitive faculties quivered to the chill of danger. Then a voice spoke out of the darkness, a guttural menacing whisper:

"Raise your hands—instantly—or you're a dead man!"

He could not reach for the gun in his shoulder holster now. With the window behind him, he made a clean target. Instead, his fingers fumbled for the little watch-charm pistol that dangled across his vest front. Far from being a mere bangle, this tiny weapon carried a hollow bullet loaded with the deadly arrow-poison, *curare*. But he could see nothing to shoot at, dared hesitate no longer. He raised his hands.

As he did so a black shape moved out, materializing, it seemed, from the shadows behind a roll top desk—a hunched shape in a black robe that swathed its whole body. A faint ray of light from the window struck the head and he saw the glitter of murderous eyes behind the slits of a hood.

He stood rigid, a weird tremor tingling through his muscles. He supposed that the fiend had come for the slipper too, thus confirming its importance. Carefully, his hand, holding the slipper high, began feeling, exploring. Perhaps before he had to surrender it, he might be able to learn what he needed to know.

Stalling for time, he said softly: "You've got the drop. But I warn you that if you shoot, my assistant outside will hear—"

He stopped. His fingers had been feeling over the slipper's inner surface, and just at this moment the hooded fiend gave a gurgling laugh whose grisly cachinations seemed to jeer at the very mention of human weapons. At the same time Crum was aware of the strangest feeling he had ever experienced. A faint quivering sting, beginning at his fingers, ran through his nerves, and that in-sucking laugh seemed to be drawing the very air from the room.

Surroundings began to swim about him. He tried to make a grab for his *curare*-gun, but his lungs were suffocating, his pulse, his heart, were slowing. And now the black shape seemed to swim toward him with incredible speed, seemed to engulf him in a dense fog. His knees gave way. He was falling. He did not know when he struck the floor.

CHAPTER III

Cinderella Dies Again

CCRUM came to his senses with a bright light spraying in his eyes. Aga was bending over him, shaking him. He sat up.

"Where's that black devil?" he gasped.

"Black devil?" Aga frowned. "I saw no black devil, *Effendi*. I waited—too long. I grew worried, I climbed in. What has happened?"

Crum explained briefly. As he did so, he played the beam of his flash about the room. It was empty now. Obviously the fiend had come and gone by the hall door. His light stopped at a spot on the cork floor where a dusty heel print showed faintly. It was just beside the desk where the fiend had stood.

"Go back to the car," Crum told Aga, "and get the small camera. You can toss it up to me. I'll get a snap of this and then we'll get out."

Aga nodded. Crum turned back to examine the heel print. It was very faint, but by using the addition method—a superimposing of several negatives—he believed he could bring it out clearly. He went back to the window. Aga presently returned and Crum caught the camera as it was tossed up.

Holding the light at an oblique angle, he began to make snaps of the print from different positions. Absorbed in his work, he failed to hear the creeping footsteps in the hall. Suddenly, without warning, the door came open and a blazing light shot blindingly into his face.

"All right, Crum, get them up! You've gone too far this time!"

It was the voice of Chief Randle. And now Crum saw his scowling face beyond the light, saw the Police revolver in his hand. Other figures were coming up behind him too—the Medical Examiner, Gage Herendon.

Crum raised his hands, stood up slowly. He knew he was in a jam now.

But he smiled. "Sorry," he said.

"But I had to have that slipper you wouldn't give to me. And even a little matter of burglary—"

"Burglary!" Randle cut him short. "What about that night watchman?"

"Night watchman?" Crum stiffened.

"Certainly. The man you slugged and dragged into a closet. He's got a fractured skull and may never regain consciousness. Burglary! It's a murder charge you may have to answer to!"

Stunned as he was, Crum managed to hide the fact. "Then that explains it—"

"Explains what?"

"How the fiend got in and out of here," Crum replied, and he told them what had happened.

They listened, but the skepticism in their faces only deepened.

"Are you trying to tell us," Randle rasped, "that this fiend is a monster whose laugh alone can cause a man to fall unconscious?"

"I'm telling you that I *did* fall unconscious," Crum replied, "just as that girl fell unconscious to her death this morning. And I'm telling you something else. Unless you leave me free to act, there will most certainly be another girl murdered—probably tonight. Now I am guilty of burglary, I confess that. But of the other, I am not. And if you are foolish enough to lock me up, there will certainly be the blood of another dead woman on your hands."

Randle frowned. "How do you know—"

"Step out into the hall with me," Crum said, "and I'll tell you."

RANDLE came forward first and took Crum's gun. Then the two of them stepped out beyond hearing of the others. Crum lighted a cigarette.

"Now," he said, taking a slow puff, "do you know anything about a man named Anders Nilson who died, leaving his estate in trust for ten years, after which it was to go the Herendon company on certain conditions?"

Randle squinted. "I knew Nilson," he said. "I understood his estate was tied up in some way. But what connection—"

"I don't know," Crum said. "I'm guessing. But I have learned that the ten year trust period for the Nilson estate expires next week. Now, I ask you, why would an estate be tied up in that way?"

"Why," Randle said, "I suppose on the possibility that a missing heir might show up during that time."

"That," said Crum, "is exactly what I was thinking."

"My God! And you think maybe that dead girl—"

"She's already dead, we can't help her. I'm thinking now of another girl whose foot was similarly branded—the red-headed girl of the salesman's story. We've got to find her, Randle. I have a hunch she may be among the Cinderella contestants too. I want to see those girls. I also want to see the slipper that is to be used in the ceremonies tonight. Now, don't you agree that it's foolish to waste time in trying to pin a murder charge on me?"

Randle looked alarmed. "I'll take a chance on you," he said.

"The Grand Ball's already started. We'd better get a move on."

They went back into the room. While Randle explained to Herendon and the M.E. that he planned to question all the girls in the contest, Crum picked up his camera, tossed it out to Aga and told him to take it to the laboratory and develop the films at once. He then joined Randle and Herendon, and the three piled into a Police car.

With siren shrieking, they sped through the downtown traffic and drew up finally behind the crowded hall. They got out and went into the building by a door that gave on the backstage dressing rooms. The first person they encountered was Patsy Bell, who was acting as wardrobe mistress. She gave Crum a friendly smile, but grew tense and serious when Randle said:

"Miss Bell, we want to see the slipper that's to be used in the final elimination contests tonight."

He then turned to Herendon. "Please get all the contestants together for us."

Herendon scowled, went off down

the scenery-cluttered passage. A moment later, Patsy came with the slipper. Crum took it eagerly. It was even more ornate than the other, being completely encrusted with rhinestones and bearing a small silver plaque for the winner's name. Crum peeled back the insole, exposing the nail-studded leather beneath. He found nothing. Exasperated, he pulled the heel completely off. It was a perfectly solid block of wood.

"H'mmp!" Randle snorted. "Just guessing after all—"

A NOISE in the passage interrupted, and a group of pretty girls, all in Cinderella costume, came trooping into the prop room. Gage Herendon followed behind them. Crum nudged Randle, and the police chief said:

"Sorry to bother you girls, but we must have a look at your feet."

"Oh, we're used to that by now," one of them laughed.

One at a time they seated themselves and bared their feet for Crum's inspection. But on none of their feet did he find a mark of any kind. He got up, frowning gravely, thanked and dismissed them. Randle smiled tolerantly; Herendon wore a puzzled frown.

"What the devil were you looking for anyhow?"

Crum looked at him sharply, but did not answer the question.

"Are you sure that's all of them?" he asked.

"All that I know of," Herendon said, "unless—"

"Oh!" the sudden exclamation from Patsy Bell caused them all to turn toward her. "I just remembered," she said nervously. "There's one other—Nora Breen. She didn't want to enter, had held out, but tonight we had to draft her because the girl who was to play the part of Cinderella in her rags got sick. Nora's in her dressing room now—"

"Where's that dressing room?" Crum snapped sharply.

Patsy led the way down the passage, Crum at her heels, the others following. Patsy knocked at the door, "Nora, Nora!"

There was no answer. She tried the door. It was locked.

"Break it in!" Crum grated.

Randle and Herendon lunged against the door. Its flimsy lock shattered and they burst in. They jerked instantly to a shuddering halt, speechless before the awful spectacle.

This Cinderella was all in rags. But a costume designed for pathos had become the trappings of stark horror. For the bare-legged girl, with the blonde wig half fallen from her tightly bound red hair, was hanging, swinging slightly in a grotesque mimicry of life. A piece of trunk rope encircling her discolored neck, was fastened to an exposed rafter. Her toes hung three feet above the floor. An overturned stepladder lay nearby.

While the others stood in dumb paralysis, Crum stooped and played the beam of his flash on the sole of one of the girl's feet. As he whipped out his pocket lens the others drew nearer, and suddenly all saw the tiny triangular, reddish scar. At the same instant Patsy Bell screamed.

Crum whirled to see Gage Herendon clasp the hysterical girl in his arms. "Patsy, Patsy, what is it? I thought you were a brave girl—"

Crum had thought so too. Certainly she had borne the first awful sight at least as calmly as the men. But now, at sight of the scar—

He said nothing at the moment, however. Carefully he set up the overturned step-ladder, mounted it and began examining the rope by which the dead girl hung.

CHAPTER IV

The Feet of Aphrodite

PATSY continued to sob softly in Herendon's arms. Randle watched the little detective's investigations with growing impatience.

"Well," he said finally, "regardless of the scar, this looks like plain suicide. Evidently the girl had been terrorized—"

Crum shook his head.

"No suicide," he said, "ever dragged

his or her body up by a rope over a rafter and then knotted it while hanging there. This is too simple. Our clever killer did this in a hurry, was careless. The fibers of the rope are flattened in a direction which clearly indicates that the body was pulled up. The rafter will show the scraping of the rope too. Don't take my word. Your experts will verify it." He got down, dusting his hands. "You may as well call your men," he told Randle.

Randle went out and Crum turned to young Herendon.

"You didn't come into this room when you went looking for the girls?"

"I certainly did not."

Crum eyed him narrowly. "Who are the judges in this contest?"

"I'm one," Herendon said sullenly. "The others are my sister, Iris; Travis Garlock, who's President of the Chamber of Commerce; Mayor Pendleton, and the head of the Woman's Art Forum. Why?"

"I want to see them all—at once," Crum replied. "Please get them and bring them to the room where I interviewed the girls."

Herendon glowered at the tone of command, but obeyed anyhow.

"I'll see how many of them I can find," he said, and giving Patsy a parting hug, he left the room.

Crum stared at the girl a moment, then took her arm gently.

"Let's go back to the prop room," he said.

She went with him meekly, dabbing at her eyes with a small handkerchief. They stepped into the room and Crum closed the door.

"Now," he said, "let me see that scar on your foot."

Patsy Bell jumped. "How did you know?" she gasped.

"Why did the sight of that scar terrify you so, when the sight of the dead girl didn't? And doesn't it explain Garlock's refusal to let you enter the contest, where the scar would surely be seen? But hurry, sit down, before the others get here—"

She slumped into a chair, trembling, and Crum seized her left foot, peeled the slipper and hose away. As he had guessed, the scar was there—

triangular, shaped exactly like the others, though not so red and seemingly older. Out came his magnifying glass and he squinted intently.

"How did you get this scar?" he demanded in an undertone.

"I don't know," the girl sobbed. "I've had it always—as long as I can remember. I never thought anything of it until, well, until Luther began taking an interest in it. He always said I had pretty feet, and he called that my beauty-brand. Once he even made measurements of it. I thought it was just one of his peculiar whims. But tonight when I saw the same mark on that dead girl's foot, I—"

She stopped, looking toward the door. Crum turned. He dropped her foot instantly, muttered a silent oath. The door had opened noiselessly and Gage Herendon was standing there. Slightly behind him stood his sister Iris, and the gaunt, wolfish lawyer, Travis Garlock.

"Well?" Herendon's angry eyes took in the scene and he strode forward truculently. "What are you doing to Patsy?"

CCRUM came to his feet. "Get Chief Randle," he said.

But there was no need to call Randle, for just at that moment he appeared in the passage, came striding toward the door.

As he entered, Crum said gravely, "I want this girl arrested."

There were startled gasps all around, but Herendon's was more like a snarl as he grabbed Crum's shoulder.

Randle pulled him away, freeing Crum. He stepped between them.

"Now, Colonel," he asked, "what's the meaning of this request?"

"The full meaning," Crum said, "is not entirely clear yet. But I can tell you this much: the man who chloroformed those girls and branded their feet is this girl's brother, Luther Bell."

Patsy screamed: "Oh, it's a lie! Luther wouldn't harm a soul! Oh, you can't—"

Gage Herendon caught her, held her. "Unless you can prove that," he growled, "the accusation is going to cost you dearly."

"Oh, I'll prove it," Crum said confidently, "but only after this girl is safely lodged in jail."

Chief Randle was in a dilemma. He didn't want to offend Herendon, he couldn't believe the girl implicated. Yet the famous little detective seemed so confident that he dared not refuse.

"A few hours in a jail cell won't hurt you, Patsy," he said. He called a plainclothesman, and the sobbing girl was pulled from Herendon's arms and led away.

"Well, Colonel," Randle growled at Crum, "you'd better make that boast good. Let's go."

They went out the back way. Crum and Randle took off in the police car while the others followed in Herendon's coupe. They made one brief stop—at Crum's trailer, where the latter picked up one of the developed photos of the heel print snapped on the floor of the morgue property room. Then they drove to the Bell Antique Shop.

They went up the stairs quietly and Crum stopped before the door through whose transom he had peered. He paused, then pushed it open.

Luther Bell lay in his bed in a far corner of the room. A reading lamp with its cord running along the floor to a wall socket, shed a white glow over the pallid face, over the huge tome propped against the upthrust knees. He had turned with a start, his dark eyes wide with alarm, his mouth hanging open speechlessly. Crum stepped in, the others followed.

Bell got his voice then. "What do you want?" he stammered, his bloodless fingers clutching the edges of the book.

"We just want to talk," Crum said gently. "We just want to talk, Luther—about the feet of Aphrodite."

THE casual words acted upon the youth like a shock from a charged wire. He jerked upright, his face ashen, his bloodless lips quiver. Then the terror seemed to fade. He began to laugh, softly, madly.

"All right," he giggled, "all right. It was my secret, but it's out now. We'll talk about her"—he gestured

toward the statue of the goddess in one corner. "We'll talk about my goddess—the supreme masterpiece of all art. Ah, if we could only see her in her ancient glory, unbroken, unmarred, unspoiled by crude restorations. Wouldn't it be worth—"

"Worth any sacrifice?" Crum's steely voice cut in. "In fact, if one could restore only that broken left foot—"

"Yes, yes, her lovely feet," Bell whispered, his eyes glittering with a wild light. "It would be enough for one man's life to restore one of those feet. But I am no sculptor—"

"And hence," Crum put in quickly, "you would have to work from casts of living feet, would have to search for girls with the most beautiful feet and—"

"And then murder them!" Randle suddenly burst out, thrusting himself forward. "Murder them and then dig them up. That's what you planned to do. First you branded them, and then you—"

But the idiotic smile had faded from Bell's face. Stark lunatic terror shone there now.

"No," he gasped, saliva drooling from the corners of his open mouth. "No, it's a lie! I didn't! I branded them, I'll admit it. But I would not have harmed them, I swear. If I could have used a cast of Patsy's feet, I would have done so. They are beautiful—perfect. But they are too small. So I hung about the beach, found other girls with beautiful feet that seemed exactly right. I chloroformed them, branded them with the little mark like Patsy's—"

"But *why* did you brand them?" Randle thundered.

A cunning grin crept over the mad youth's face. "I meant to blackmail them," he said. "Not for money—just to make them sit for casts, holding their feet in exactly the right position. So I caught the girls under embarrassing circumstances. There would have been the brands they would have had to explain—"

"Rot!" Randle cut in. "You're lying now. Somehow you managed to drug that first girl; the second one you strangled and hung up!"

He glanced toward Crum for a confirmation of his accusation. But the little detective had stepped to a clothes closet and raked out a pile of shoes. Having turned them heels up, he was carefully comparing them with the photograph of the heel print he had taken from the floor of the Morgue property room. He got up, met Randle's glance and shook his head.

"No," he said, "I do not accuse Luther of the killings. I am sure it was the killer who attacked me there at the morgue, and the heel prints of these shoes do not match the photograph I took from the floor there."

"Oh, hell!" Randle snorted. "Maybe Bell's got other shoes."

"Maybe he has," Crum conceded. "The point is that all Bell's shoes are run over on the *inside*, whereas the heel print of the hooded fiend is run over on the *outside*."

HE stepped nearer to the bed, spoke gently to the cowering youth.

"Luther, I want to ask you something. A straight answer may help to clear you of suspicion. Do you know that the mark on your sister's foot had any special significance?"

The question evidently caught Bell off guard. He gave a quick frightened glance in the direction of the lawyer, Garlock, then clamped his teeth tight.

Crum faced the lawyer too. "All right, Garlock," he said. "The time for secrecy is over. It's true, isn't it, that Patsy Bell is the heiress to the Nilson fortune?"

The vulpine face of Garlock had gone rigid. But meeting Crum's level stare, he shrugged resignedly.

"I suppose," he said tonelessly, "that there's no point in denying it now. Yes, Patsy Bell is Nilson's lost daughter, kidnapped when she was an infant. It was in an effort to find her that Nilson came here in the first place, drawn by some vague tip. But he never found her and it drove him mad."

"Before that, however, he had made his will. I was instructed to keep up the search for ten years, after which, if unsuccessful, I was to let the money

go back into the Herendon company. But that will had to be kept a secret because it revealed the identifying mark by which the heiress would be known. That was a little triangular brand on the sole of her foot, caused when she was a baby by the hot tip of an electric iron which a maid dropped to the floor where she was playing."

"And it was only after Nilson's death," Crum prompted, "that you discovered that Patsy Bell had that scar on her foot?"

"Correct," the lawyer replied, "It came out by accident when I was talking with Luther's father, the late Leonidas Bell. He happened to tell me that the little girl was not really his daughter, but a waif who had been left on his doorstep. When I examined her foot and saw the mark, I was certain she was the missing heiress. But that evidence alone, I was afraid, would not hold in court. I began searching for other evidence and have done so ever since—without success. Now"—he shrugged—"I suppose I shall have to leave the decision to a court after all."

"And no one," Crum asked, "except you and the dead Leonidas Bell knew Patsy's true identity—or the identifying mark?"

"I thought not," Garlock said. He looked at Luther Bell. "But evidently Luther here must have overheard us talking at some time or other."

Crum turned his own glance on the cowering youth. "Luther," he asked sternly, "did you ever tell anyone who your sister was?"

"No!"

"Then did you ever," Crum continued, "even give away the secret of how the Nilson heiress would be identified? Think back. Months, even years ago, someone who knew that Garlock was a friend of your father's, might have asked you if you ever heard Garlock mention that will, might have pumped you about its terms—"

He stopped. A peculiar greenish pallor had suddenly overspread the mad youth's face. The light of a frightening memory blazed in his wide eyes as his glance came up,

swung toward the spot where the two Herendons were standing.

Crum started to turn too, but in that split second someone kicked the light cord, pulling the plug from its socket. Pandemonium broke loose as darkness slammed down upon the room. There was a cry, an oath, a rush of feet, a shrill scream from Luther Bell. Crum sprang toward him, fumbling for his flash. But some club-like object slammed against his head, and he pitched down in a swirl of bursting lights.

He was out only an instant. As he groped upright, the sound of a panting struggle filled the dark. He found his flash, snapped it on, seized the light cord and thrust the plug back into the socket. As light blazed in the room he whirled, almost stumbled over the sprawled, motionless figure of Iris Herendon lying face down by the bed.

Beyond her, Randle and young Herendon were struggling, the latter fighting to free himself from the police chief's clutches. There was a smear of blood on his coatsleeve. Its source was plain to see.

Luther Bell lay back against the pillows. His naturally pallid face was the color of skimmed milk now. His mouth was open, his eyes glassy and awful. His neck and the sheets and pillow beneath were sodden with the crimson gore still bubbling from the ragged gash in his throat.

Garlock was gone.

CHAPTER V

The Killer's Last Coup

TO take in the scene required only a split second. Crum, whose revolver had been taken from him, sprang forward to snatch from Randle's hip the gun he had not been able to get hold of. But before he reached it Herendon's free right fist slammed to Randle's jaw in a smash that sent the chief reeling back to the floor. Herendon whirled, and before Crum could reach him, vaulted the sill of the open window and dropped out. His

feet hit the roof of the adjoining one-story building just as Randle scrambled up.

"Did he kill Bell?" Crum snapped.

"Don't know," Randle panted. "Couldn't see in the dark. But when I heard Bell scream and sprang toward him, Herendon collided with me, trying to get out." He got hold of his gun and went lunging out the door.

Crum started to follow, but turned back to bend above Iris Herendon. He rolled her over. There was a scraped bruise on her forehead, but she was breathing. He shook her. She opened her eyes, sat up with a start. Then she saw the corpse on the bed and began to scream.

Crum shook her again. "Get a grip on yourself. I thought you were a woman of more nerve. What happened?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "Something hit me and I fell. Who killed him?" Her wild eyes swept the room. "Where's Gage?"

"He escaped," Crum said.

"Escaped! You don't mean you think he did it?"

"He certainly put up a fight to get out of here," Crum replied. "But right now I'm more interested in something else."

"In what?" she asked.

"In making sure that Patsy Bell is safe," Crum said. "Come on, we've got to get to a telephone."

But the nearest one they could find was in a drugstore four blocks away. Crum hurried into the booth and dialed the number of the jail. As the receiver at the other end was raised, he caught the sound of strident voices in an angry gabble, Randle's voice among them.

"Let me speak to the Chief," he said, and when Randle had answered: "This is Crum. Did you catch Herendon?"

"No, I didn't," Randle's voice barked, "and that's not all. While I was trying to pick up his trail, he came here to the jail and snatched Patsy Bell!"

"Snatched her!" Crum rasped. "Didn't you have her locked up? I knew she'd be in danger as soon as her identity was known."

"She was supposed to be," Randle said, "but the cop who brought her down here just left her with the matron. Didn't think it was necessary to put her in a cell. So when Herendon got here, asked to see her, they didn't suspect anything and let him into the matron's room. And once there, he didn't waste any time in pulling a gun, gagging and tying the matron and escaping with the girl through a window."

"You've sent out the alarm to all neighboring towns?"

"Of course."

Crum muttered something and hung up. He stepped out of the booth and told Iris Herendon what had happened. At the news her face paled.

"The young fool!" she husked. "But he isn't guilty. It must have been Garlock. I know Gage wouldn't have killed Luther Bell!"

CCRUM looked at her intently. "If he didn't," he said, "the sooner I can get to him and talk to him the better off he'll be. Now he must know that all neighboring towns have been called, and that he's liable to be stopped on the highway. So my guess is that he's holed up in some place nearby. If you know of any such possible hideout, you'd better tell me."

The girl hesitated, biting her lip. Finally she raised her glance to his.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I guess you're right. We might talk some sense into his head. As a matter of fact there is such a place—a cottage he owns on the beach. Few people know of it. He uses it as a place to slip away to and rest when business worries get him down."

"All right, let's go there," Crum said. "I'll call my car."

"Mine's in a garage only a few blocks from here," Iris Herendon said. "He's less likely to be alarmed if he sees it driving up."

Crum agreed. Iris telephoned for her coupe, and the two were presently heading out the lake road. A pale moon behind scudding clouds leered at them coldly. The woman drove in tense silence, her mouth set in a grim line. Where the road turned off the highway the car plunged in among

shadowing trees. The lake appeared, a dull mirror streaked with shifting moonfire. They swerved into a lane that led toward the lake shore. A rambling stone cottage came into view. The doors of a double garage behind it were open. The girl pulled the coupe to a halt before the house and they got out.

"His car's not here," she whispered, "but he may have parked it among the trees." She led the way to the front door.

A key from her purse opened it and they went in. They moved from room to room behind the probing beam of Crum's flash. The place was empty.

"He's got a workshop out by the garage," the girl said. "Maybe he's there."

They went out the back door, moved in darkness across the yard. The workshop door was unlocked. Iris clutched the knob and pushed it open. There was an instant's silence; then a voice from the darkness grated:

"Get your hands up, both of you!"

Crum, armed only with his little curare-gun, fingered it a moment, then dropped it and raised his hands as a flash beam shot out, spotted them.

Gage Herendon was crouching in one corner of the room, near the end of a tool littered work bench. Patsy Bell, pale and tearful, was huddled against him. Herendon's left arm was around her, its hands holding the light. His right hand held a levelled revolver of large caliber.

Crum eyed him coldly. "Have you explained to Patsy," he asked, "about the death of her brother?"

Herendon glared back at him. "I've told her," he said. "But I swear I didn't do it. Patsy doesn't believe I did. I stumbled in the dark and fell across the bed, and that's how I got the blood on my arm. Garlock must have done it. I'm beginning to understand that shyster now. He's probably been keeping the secret of Patsy's identity all this time with the idea of swindling her. He had to kill those girls because the brands on their feet would have stood in the way of Patsy's claim to the fortune. He killed Luther because of something he was afraid he'd tell. And when I

realized he'd done that, I knew that his next move would be to try to get Patsy and spirit her away. So I beat him to the jail and got her myself."

Crum eyed him. "And how do you think he planned to swindle Patsy?" Crum asked.

"By trying to sell the secret to me," Herendon said. "At least I think he planned that first, though I only guessed it tonight. But a week or so ago I got an anonymous letter, stating that the writer knew the terms of the Nilson will and could tell me how to cinch the money for the company. Naturally I ignored it. But now I feel certain that Garlock was the writer. And if he was, isn't it possible that the handwriting could be identified as his, even though he tried to disguise it?"

"It could," Crum replied. "Do you have the letter?"

"It's in the cottage," Herendon said. "Will you get it, Iris? It's in the lower left hand drawer of the desk in my study."

The girl nodded and left the room. They waited in uneasy silence. Patsy was sobbing softly, huddled in the crook of Herendon's arm.

"You believe in me, don't you, Patsy?" he asked, patting her gently.

She nodded, started to answer, but suddenly stiffened. At the same moment Crum whirled. From the direction of the house had come a high-pitched scream — Iris Herendon's voice, shrilling in terror:

"Help! Oh, my God, he's strangling me!"

It was choked off to horrible silence as Crum sprang through the door, followed by Gage Herendon.

They sprinted across the yard and entered the back door of the house. They went from room to room but found it empty. They ran out the front door. But all was silent now. Iris Herendon's car stood empty where she had parked it.

"God! He's carried her off!" Herendon gasped. "Murdered—"

He started circling the house, shooting the light into the trees and underbrush.

"We'd better watch Patsy," Crum

warned him, and led the way back toward the work shop.

Herendon came after him and they reached the door at the same moment. But as Herendon's light splashed in, both stopped in their tracks, frozen with speechless horror.

Patsy Bell lay on the work bench. She lay as if dead, her pale, motionless face staring up from its nest of yellow curls. And there was another occupant of the room now—a stooped shape in a hood and long black robe that swept to the floor. Crouching there like a vulture above its prey, the apparition was holding in one black-gloved hand a gleaming knife whose sharp point was pressed against the unconscious girl's throat.

"Come in, gentlemen," a croaking voice muffled by the hood now invited, "but raise your hands. And Colonel, a false move will be fatal to Patsy. Step forward, Herendon. I want to show you something."

Herendon's face was the color of wet ashes; his eyes bugged from their sockets in horror. In a hypnosis of fear, he obeyed, moved within arm's length of the threatening monster.

AND then a weird thing happened. The fiend's gloved hand shot out, its index finger pointing. The tip of the finger jabbed Herendon's arm, drew back. But instantly a shudder ran through the young man's body. He made a dizzy half-turn, his eyes rolling, his jaw dropped wide. Then his knees folded and he slumped to the floor in a heap.

The fiend laughed, an eerie cackle coming distorted through the hood.

"Once again you witness my power, Colonel. It is fatal to defy me. You will now step forward and do as I direct. You will take the girl's left foot, thrust it between the jaws of that vise, and screw it tight. You will then twist a wire tourniquet about the girl's calf. Next you will take the hacksaw there—"

It was unnecessary to finish the grisly command. Crum felt his whole frame vibrate to a rigor of revulsion. But the point of the knife was against the girl's throat. Better pretend to be obeying than to have her murdered before his eyes.

Slowly he stepped nearer, his brain groping for some ruse which would get the tiny curare gun into his hand. But as he came even with the girl, one of the fiend's gloved hands shot out, caught the little curare gun and ripped it from its chain.

"Now, do as I told you!"

Swiftly, desperately, Crum's mind went over his remaining resources. The razor-sharp penknife in his pocket would be useless, even if he could get it into his hand. The girl would die before he could even start an attack. The other tricks in his bag seemed as useless. There was the big signet ring on his finger with its dose of chloral-hydrate for a knock-out potion. There was no opportunity for that. Lastly, in his vest pocket, was the little tube of powdered dye which had on previous occasions laid the mark of guilt on ransom collectors and other criminals. But that, even if it could be used on the gloved assassin would save neither his life nor

[Turn page]



the girl's. There remained only his wits and his glib tongue.

Slowly he took the girl's foot and placed it in the vise. He picked up a strand of copper wire and tightened it about her shapely ankle. He lifted the hacksaw, laid its blade against her ankle. Then he paused.

"You are a fool," he said slowly, "to force me to do this."

"What do you mean?" the robed killer asked.

"Why," Crum said, "you think that by cutting this girl's foot off to destroy the scar, you are getting rid of the proof that she is the Nilson heiress. But what you are really doing is destroying the *evidence that she is not!*"

"Evidence that she is not?" the fiend was startled.

"Of course," Crum replied, "for, you see, this scar on her foot is a fake. Also it is different from those on the feet of the other girls. This scar, in fact, was not made with a hot iron at all, but with acid. And since the true Nilson heiress was burned with an electric iron—"

"How do you know this scar was made with acid?"

CCRUM'S eyes glinted. "Any close examiner," he replied, "would notice the irregularity of this scar's outline, the appearance of the scar tissue. But in addition—" he paused—"didn't you know I was quite well known in the field of bio-chemistry before I became a detective? Did you ever hear of the Rossman test? I have already applied it once to this girl's foot tonight. It is quite simple. Both heated metal and acid leave in burned tissues certain characteristic chemical elements that may be identified if the scar is not too old. And this scar, though perhaps an old one, has been retouched recently in preparation for claiming the Nilson money, and hence gives off the acid reaction—"

"And what is that?" the fiend was interested.

"It turns blue," Crum replied, "when a certain chemical powder is applied. Shall I demonstrate for you?"

The fiend said nothing, and Crum quickly flicked from his vest pocket a small stoppered tube. Opening it, he poured into the palm of one hand a small amount of yellowish powder. Then, while his captor watched intently, he took a little on the tip of his finger and rubbed it into the scar on Patsy's foot. Presently, when the moisture of the skin was stimulated, the scar began to darken until it shone a deep blue.

The fiend was impressed. "What is that chemical?"

"As to that," Crum answered, "I shall not tell you. If I did you would have no need of me and would probably kill me. Not knowing the drug—which is an obscure one—you *do* need me. If you spare my life, you will have the benefit of my expert testimony to prove the girl an imposter."

A snort came from behind the hood. "Spare you to expose me?"

"Expose you?" Crum asked. "But how? I don't claim I might not guess your identity. But to prove it is another thing. You are completely masked. Your gloved hands have left no fingerprints, and you have disguised your voice. You have only to rid yourself of the disguise and defy me to swear in court to your identity. So, instead of adding to your useless crimes, instead of delaying when at any moment the police may arrive here, wouldn't it be wiser to simply knock me unconscious as you did young Herendon there, and escape while you have time?"

For a moment the killer was silent. Crum waited in a suspense it was difficult to conceal. Then the fiend's right hand moved, and this time Crum could see plainly the bulge in one finger of the cloth glove, made by the small hypodermic syringe concealed there. Already he had guessed the drug which the syringe contained. Now he braced himself for its sting.

It came, in a swift jab.

Crum did not flinch or draw back as the needle stabbed his upper arm. Instead he calculated quickly what must be done before the swift rush of unconsciousness claimed him. So he did not wait for the swirl of suffocating darkness. Instead, he let his knees

fold at once, his body slump. For just a split second he tottered, and then he fell forward.

It was nicely calculated. Before the fiend could step back, Crum had fallen against the billowy skirt of the robe, and his hands were pawing spasmodically like a drowning person's clutching at one of the fiend's ankles. Then the force of the drug really hit him. A wave of enervating darkness washed consciousness from his brain.

WHEN he came to his senses an hour later, Crum sat up to discover that he was still in the same spot, dazed but unharmed. Aga and Chief Randle had been working to revive him, and both showed obvious relief. Patsy Bell and Gage Herendon, already recovered from their shot of the mysterious drug, stood looking on. Iris Herendon was there too, slumped, as if with exhaustion, in a chair near the door.

"Thank God that fiend didn't murder you," Randle said. "We drove up just in time to see his black shape vanishing through the trees. Must have scared him off before he finished his job. He had knocked Miss Herendon out too, with some sort of drug, and had dragged her into the woods, where we found her unconscious. But for God's sake tell us what happened to you!"

Crum did so, describing the scene with the hooded killer in detail.

"So you talked him out of murdering you!" Randle gasped. "Lord, what a stunt! But what's all this about Miss Bell faking that scar on her foot? I can't believe that. We found Garlock, after he ran out of the room in fright, and he was so torn up and remorseful about Luther Bell's murder that he admitted he had planned to cheat Miss Bell by selling her secret to the Herendons. But he still swears up and down that she is the true heiress."

"She is," Crum assured him. "My yarn about the faked scare was pure bunkum, cooked up on the spur of the moment to save our lives. If there's such a thing as a 'Rossman test,' I never heard of it. The chemical rubbed into the scar was simply a

powdered dye, called *blue of bromo-phenol*, which changes from yellow to blue by the ordinary action of skin moisture."

As he spoke he noticed that both Patsy and Gage Herendon, who had been regarding him with frightened, reproachful stares, now brightened with happy smiles.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyhow now," young Herendon said, hugging the girl close to him, "because Patsy's going to marry me, and the whole company will be hers—at least my part of it."

"For which you'd better thank God and Colonel Crum," Randle advised. He turned back to Crum. "Well, we've got to hand it to you for the job of life-saving you did tonight, though it is a pity the killer got away, especially since we still know so little. That drug he used in the hypo, for instance. And the way he managed to kill that first girl this morning."

"Oh, that," Crum said, "has been clear to me for some time. The drug the killer used in his hypo was most certainly *Acetyl-Choline*, called the 'fainting-drug' because of the swiftness with which it lowers the blood pressure and causes instant unconsciousness."

"And the girl who fell from the truck was killed that way?" Randle gasped. "But how was it administered?"

"By means of that slipper you wouldn't let me examine," Crum replied. "There was undoubtedly a small hypodermic hidden in its hollow heel, with some sort of spring which released the needle at a pressure on the insole. I suspected something of the kind, and that was why I tried to steal the slipper. But when the fiend surprised me in the prop room, with the slipper in my hand, I tried to make a hurried examination, touched the spring off with my finger and got a small shot of the drug myself. It was my own reaction to that shot which gave me the clue as to what the drug was. I was then afraid that it would be used a second time—in the slipper used at the Grand Ball. But the fiend fooled me there, resorted to simple strangulation instead."

RANDLE nodded and began to pace the room. "And this killer," he muttered, "you admitted you might be able to guess his identity—"

"Let's sum up what we know," Crum suggested. "It seems certain that the killer is someone who was out to find and kill the Nilson heiress, someone who wanted the money to go to the Herendon company. That might mean, of course, any of the large stockholders. And it seems plain to me that the whole Cinderella Pageant was conceived as a scheme to allow the killer to examine the feet of most of the girls in town, to find the one with the identifying scar. Hence the killer must be one of the sponsors, as well as one of the judges in the contest. But what led this clever killer astray was, of course, the mad hobby of Luther Bell. The first branded girl who turned up was marked for murder, was killed this morning. Then Nora Breen, the girl who was 'drafted' at the last minute also turned up with the brand. She was murdered by the killer. And, lastly, to climax the killer's dilemma, Patsy Bell showed up with the scar—"

"And Luther Bell," Randle put in, "was murdered to keep him from telling something that he knew. But that's just the difficulty. Unless we assume that there's an accomplice, the murder must have been someone who was in Luther Bell's room. And how could that be? For the fiend who attacked you out here, would have to be the same one who killed Luther Bell. Yet Garlock, I know, has been in town all the time. And that leaves only the Herendons. And both of them were attacked by the fiend out here."

"Gage was attacked," Crum corrected. "I saw that. But as for Miss Iris, we have only her scream, and her unsupported word for it." He turned and looked at the girl, whose poker face stared back at him defiantly.

"You are a quick thinker, Miss Iris," he said. "You were in a jam there in Luther Bell's room. Another moment and he would have revealed that he told you, perhaps long ago, that the Nilson heiress had a triangular scar on her foot. But you acted

swiftly. You kicked the light cord, knocked me out with a plaster cast, and murdered Luther Bell, probably with a knife concealed in your purse. Then you covered up by falling to the floor, deliberately bruising your head and pretending unconsciousness—"

He paused. The girl stared back at him impassively.

"But out here," he went on, "you repeated the same technique. When you learned that your brother had kidnapped Patsy, you were afraid that she would slip through your clutches. But accompanying me, gave you a chance to find her. And Gage's request that you get the letter gave you your opportunity for a last desperate coup. You went quickly to your car and donned the robe which you kept hidden there. You screamed to lure us away. That gave you the chance to slip back in here, knock Patsy out with a hypo, and wait for us to return. But I talked you out of your last attempted crime. Then in your plan of escape, you repeated the same ruse you had used before. You shed your disguise, lay down in the woods and pretended again to be unconscious—"

"Rot!" the girl suddenly interrupted. "What does all your theorizing amount to? You've proved I had both motive and opportunity. But you've proved nothing else. You haven't a shred of evidence that I committed any crime at all."

CRU M smiled and there was a trace of pity in it.

"My dear Miss Herendon," he said, "it seems almost a shame to shatter that magnificent confidence which I inspired in you when I told you I could not swear to your identity. At the time, it was true. But afterwards, I managed. May I see one of your shoes?"

"Certainly," she replied complacently, and began unlacing one of her low-heeled mannish oxfords.

"Still confident, aren't you?" Crum asked. "Well, of course you changed your shoes. But you have forgotten that when you gave me the shot from your hypo I fell against you, clutch-

ing at your ankles. And you have forgotten that I still had in my hand the little tube of powdered dye which I sprinkled down in your shoe. You didn't notice it when you changed shoes, because the powder is a yellowish, flesh color. But afterwards when the moisture of your skin had had time to change it to—"

He broke off. The girl had yanked the oxford from her foot, and now froze rigid, staring. Plainly visible through the silk hose were the bluish stains of dye the shoe had hidden.

"Iris!" Gage Herendon jumped to his feet. "Iris, you didn't—"

But the girl had recovered her poise. A look of sneering defiance overspread her face.

"Of course I did, you fool," she grated. "Somebody had to save the company from ruin. Somebody had to see that we got that money. If you were too big a ninny—"

She didn't finish. Crum saw her left hand move up from her purse and dived toward her. But he was

too late. The palm of the hand slapped flat against her mouth, her throat moved as she swallowed. She gave a wild, crazy laugh, and as hands grasped her from either side, lurched forward.

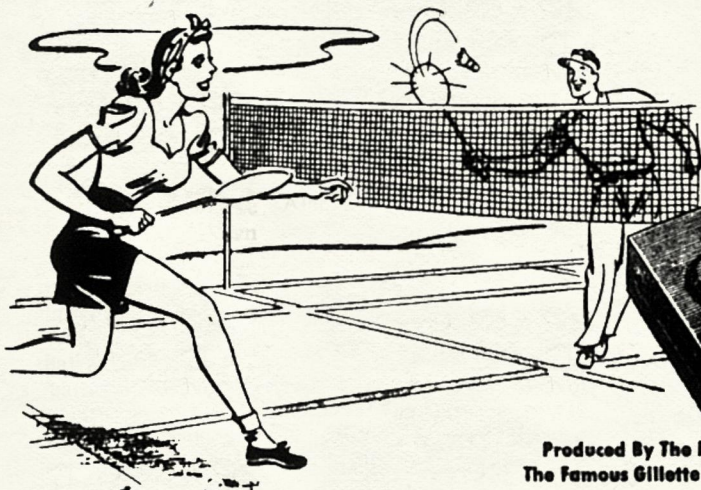
Crum caught her. But the scent of bitter almonds which had reached his nostrils told him that the poison was prussic acid, and he knew that she was beyond saving now.

It was merciful, Crum thought, that Gage Herendon had Patsy Bell to comfort him after that. The shaken man was led away in a daze. Crum himself felt sickened at the black depths of a woman's heart, into which he had cast a probing light. He was glad to be able to leave the ghastly mess, in which there was only one bright spot—the love of two young people who had weathered tragedy together and found each other. But he had done his duty, his part in the drama was played.

He and Aga were on their way out of town before the morning dawned.

Next Issue: FANGS OF DOOM, Novel by E. HOFFMANN PRICE

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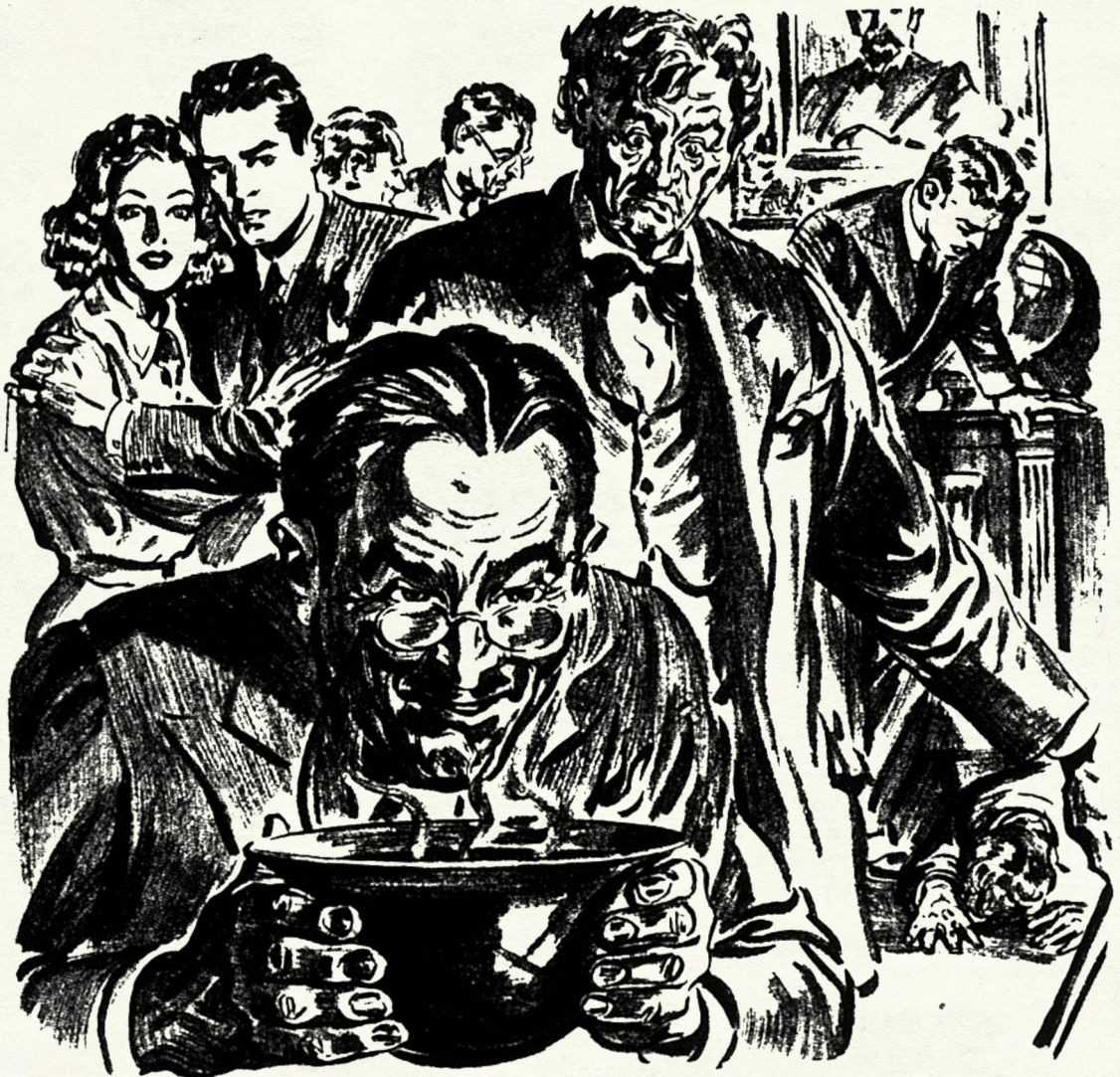


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THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

Author of "Death Is Where You Find It," etc.



“Yes, it’s blood,” the physician said, sniffing the red liquid

Simon Chadwick Offers Gold for Blood Donors—and Acceptance Brings Death From a Murderous Gargoyle!

SOUTH of California, beyond the roaring bordertown of Tia Juana, is a lost land. The great Baja peninsula stretches down toward the tropics. Aside from its few settlements, it is lonely country. The roads are

dangerous for cars. It is a place of heat, and raw, primordial savagery.

Across the Gulf lies Guaymas, the fisherman’s paradise. Sleepy Hermosillo isn’t far away. But the tiny town of Pinos, on the Pacific coast, is an out-

post that seems a million miles from nowhere.

Martin Drake looked back at the ramshackle wharf, frowned, and moved uneasily on his seat in the dingy motorboat. He was worried and apprehensive.

His big shoulders were sweat-damp under the thin polo shirt he wore. Under his eyelashes, Drake furtively watched Myrna, his fiancée. Slim, vibrant, and quite pretty in slacks and green blouse, she was looking around with the pleased delight of a child.

"Mart," she said suddenly, pointing. "See that?"

A vast torpedo-like shadow slid beside the boat through the transparent waters.

The Mexican steering the craft grinned with a flash of white teeth.

"*Tiburón. Muy malo, señorita!*" he explained.

"Shark," Drake grunted. "Another of the family, I guess."

Myrna sobered. "That's rather unfair, isn't it, Mart? After all, you've never met the—the relatives."

"I've heard enough about 'em. The Mad Chadwicks. But this is the craziest thing old Simon Chadwick's ever done."

Myrna turned to stare at the somber bulk of an island in the distance.

"It isn't so crazy. Simon's pretty old, and he hasn't seen some of his relatives for years."

DRAKE lit a cigarette. Puffing thoughtfully, he commented.

"So he retires, eh? To his castle on this Mexican island. And he sends out a message to all his relatives asking them to visit him, so he can divide up his dough among the vultures. But you forgot one thing, Myrna. Why did he want a sample of your blood?"

"The doctor said he did the same with everybody, down to the last second cousin."

"Yeah. But why?"

"I've been wondering about that," Myrna said slowly. "Simon was always a crank on health. He had a morbid fear of illness. I only saw him once or twice in my life, but Mother told me—" The girl hesitated. "Mother was afraid of Simon, I think."

"Afraid of her brother, eh? Well, she wasn't the only one. Simon Chadwick's the most ruthless, cold-blooded financier on the West Coast. And the rest of the Chadwicks—except you, hon—are no better. Except that they haven't Simon's money."

"The Mad Chadwicks," Myrna said very softly. "Reckless, daredevil, neurotic—that's what everybody knows. But I know more. There's something rather horrible about the family. Undercurrents of hatred, old feuds, and so forth. This reunion isn't going to be . . . pleasant."

"*Tiburón,*" the Mexican said again.

He nodded, and this time did not smile. As the boat approached the island, more and more of the sea-monsters were gathering. They followed the little vessel, dim, menacing shadows under the surface. Drake grunted with relief when the craft grated against the landing pier.

The Mexican held it steady while Drake helped Myrna out. Then he hastily tossed the luggage on the dock and pushed off. The engine coughed and sputtered. The boat slid back toward the mainland. But Drake noticed that the sharks did not follow it this time. They remained near the island.

Drake lifted the bags.

"Follow the trail, I guess," he remarked.

He turned toward a path that wound up a steep slope, overgrown with chaparral. A cool, refreshing breeze from the Pacific, blew salt-damp, on his cheeks. The islet was mountainous but not arid. Once they crossed a small, trickling stream. Once they saw a wild goat poised on a crag in the distance.

They rounded a bend and saw the Chadwick house. Drake whistled wryly.

It had taken a fortune to build. Huge, unexpected, and bizarre, the structure stood on a little peak overlooking the sea. It resembled an old-world castle, with turrets and battlements, and its whiteness was stained and discolored with weather and creeping lichen. The path led to a big oaken door.

There was no sign of life. Drake went on, finally depositing the bags on the threshold. He looked around, saw the girl's wondering gaze. She was

staring up at an inscription above the door, carved in solid stone.

"*Via trita, via tuta,*" Drake murmured. "In other words, stay in your own back yard. All we need is a door-mat reading, 'Not welcome.'"

Myrna said nothing, but lifted the knocker and let it fall. Echoes boomed through the castle.

Something made Drake look up—a vague, indefinable impression of danger.

HIS gaze swept over mullioned windows high above, and was drawn to one pane. Through it a face stared.

Drake gaped at the face of a gargoyle.

Yet it was human, or had been once. Distorted, grotesque, frightful, the monstrosity glared down, like the face of a corpse seen through muddy water. Only a glimpse Drake had. Then the horror met his eyes, drew back, and was gone.

Drake suddenly felt sick. For the creature's stare had been fixed on Myrna, and the fact had been that of a ravening, lustful beast.

"Mart," the girl said sharply. "What is it?"

She glanced up.

"Eh? Oh, nothing," Drake said. "Just looking the place over. Somebody's coming."

The skin was tight around his mouth. His first premonition of danger had not been without basis.

The door opened. A lean, gray, withered man stood there, clad in rusty black. With old-fashioned courtesy he bowed from the waist.

"Myrna?" Rheumy blue eyes dwelt on the girl's features. "I'm so glad. Come in."

He held the door wide. After one swift, sharp scrutiny, he did not look at Drake again.

The door closed silently. They stood in a gloomy, high-ceilinged hall, dim with shadow.

"Uncle Andrew . . ." Myrna's voice was doubtful.

The old man chuckled. "You haven't seen me for years, have you? Yes, it's Uncle Andrew, Simon's brother."

"This is Martin Drake," she said. "My fiance."

"Well—" Andrew shook hands with obvious unease. "I'm sure we can find room for you. It is a pleasure." There was a question in his voice.

"I didn't want Myrna to come down alone," Drake said. "The—roads aren't so good."

"Of course. You're welcome indeed. The others have already arrived. Leave your bags. I'll take them upstairs later. Come along."

Andrew marshaled them along the hall. The sound of angry voices came from beyond a door. The old man hesitated, biting his lip. Abruptly he decided.

"Perhaps you had better go to your rooms first. You may wish to freshen up after your journey."

His glance at Myrna was appealing.

"Of course," she said.

Drake went back for the bags and followed the others up a long staircase. So the Mad Chadwicks were fighting already, eh? He grinned mirthlessly.

Five minutes later Drake stood in his room, which adjoined Myrna's, and finished tying his necktie. Then, donning a lightweight sport coat, he strolled to the window and lit a cigarette. He stared out.

He looked upon an abyss. Beneath him the castle's wall sloped down to a more jagged but equally steep cliff that dropped sheer to the surf far below. In the distance the Pacific stretched out endlessly, peacefully to the blue western horizon. The sun was setting.

Drake opened the window and leaned on the sill, drinking in the salt air, heady as wine. The sky was cloudless. . . .

Then why was it raining? Involuntarily Drake glanced down at his hand. Something had splashed upon it. A red drop—

Slowly, slowly, the red rain fell from above. Drop by drop it gathered and dripped past the window. The sill was crimson-stained. Drake craned up, but saw only the bare wall of the castle. He looked down at the crashing surf on the black rocks. And, suddenly, he remembered the sharks.

He knew, now, why they had followed the boat to the island. They followed a blood trail.

Drake pinched out his cigarette and turned. Moving quietly, he let himself out into the hall, hesitated before Myrna's door, and then went toward the staircase. He mounted it.

He found himself before a panel that gave easily under his cautious push. He emerged on the castle's roof.

It was quite bare. The serrated battlements rimmed it. The wind keened like a gull's cry.

Drake walked toward the brink. He paused, carefully examining the tile at his feet. A small hole for a drain had been let into the base of the ramp nearby. Drake scrutinized this closely.

He found blood stains, nothing more.

A shadow fell on Drake. He started to whirl, and felt iron fingers close on his neck. He was helpless against the great strength that held him motionless. The hands of a giant constricted his windpipe. He felt himself being pressed forward and down. The abyss yawned before him.

His pulse pounded in his temples. Frantically he strained to writhe free, to reach his assailant. The fingers tightened mercilessly.

Viciously he kicked back. There was a hoarse cry of pain, and the iron grip relaxed. Drake felt himself falling. He wrenched his body aside and managed to land safely on the roof. The world was spinning darkly around him, but he struggled to his feet. He knew that to show weakness now would be fatal.

Quick footsteps sounded. Drake caught a glimpse of a dark figure vanishing down the stairway door. He saw, briefly, the hideous, grotesque mask that had peered at him from the window above the threshold of this perilous castle.

Then Drake fell, coughing and choking, weakly massaging his throat with tingling fingers. If the killer returned. . . .

But he did not. Ten minutes later, Drake weakly went downstairs.

Myrna was not in her room. He continued down the staircase, and the sound of voices beyond a door guided him. He pushed open the panel.

Four men and a girl were there. Myrna was the girl, Andrew Chadwick one of the men. The others were

strangers. They turned as Drake entered.

"Mart!" Myrna said. Her face was worried. "Where on earth have you been?"

"Just—looking around." Drake's voice was a hoarse whisper. "I'm taking you home, kid. Right now."

"That," said a new voice, "is impossible, I fear. I have just returned from the dock. Both launches are sunk."

MARTIN DRAKE looked at the speaker. The gaunt, saturnine man with the waxed dark mustache bowed.

"Rudolph Chadwick. At your service."

Andrew's gray face was worried.

"Rudy just told us—I'd better phone the mainland."

He went to a telephone in an alcove. Presently he turned from it, blinking.

"The line's dead."

"What about the boy who brought us here?" Rudolph Chadwick asked. "Won't he be back?"

"Not for weeks, at least," Andrew muttered. "This is strange. I—I—" He remembered his duties as host. "Oh Mr. Drake. Mr. Matthew."

A plump, round-faced, blond youth extended a pudgy hand.

"I'm one of the lost cousins. Glad to know you."

"Mr. Steele."

Steele was a passive, colorless, mouselike person with wispy faded hair and thick-rimmed glasses. He muttered unintelligibly.

"Another of the cousins," Matthew said grinning. "There's another one, Leslie, kicking around somewhere, but Lord knows where. Haven't seen him since lunch."

With a sudden sense of shock, Drake remembered the bloodstains on the roof. But he said nothing. Warily he waited.

Old Andrew was pouring drinks and passing them out.

"Those boats—I don't understand," he said vaguely. "And the phone."

"Listen," Matthew said, his chubby face beaming, "Simon's the maddest of the Mad Chadwicks. He's pulling some gag on us. I know the old boy."

"None of us has seen Simon yet,"

the saturnine Rudolph said. "When will he make his bow?"

"He is—ill," Andrew frowned, fiddling with a siphon. "He'll be here presently."

"And the family's gathered at his feet," Matthew chuckled. "But only the elect! Many are called, but few are chosen. My brother was hopping mad when he wasn't invited. Let's see." He ticked off names on his fingers. "Cousin Ben. He's not here. Second cousin Elizabeth. Absent. Second cousin Jimmy. In jail, probably. Ronnie—"

A dead silence fell on the room. Matthew looked around and slowly his chubby face flushed. In the stillness, the mouselike Steele began talking suddenly, desperately. But his words died away as Andrew turned and went quietly out of the room.

Accusing glances were directed at Matthew. He drank whiskey and coughed.

"Hell," he said, "I didn't think—"

"You never do," Rudolph said unpleasantly. "If you had a spoonful of brains—"

The two men glared at each other. Drake watched, conscious of tension in the room.

THE saturnine Rudolph turned to Drake.

"Since you're Myrna's fiance, you should meet some of the family skeletons. Ronnie is Andrew's son. Or was. He swiped some of Simon's dough, and the old boy sent him to the pen. After that Ronnie disappeared."

"I see," Drake said, ill at ease.

"I don't think you do. Andrew's a self-righteous old swine. Typical puritan, of the narrowest type. He doesn't like to be reminded of Ronnie, because that'll show *him* up. The son of upright, honest Andrew a common thief! That's what gripes our dear uncle. He's a cold-blooded hypocrite." Rudolph's voice grew bitterly vindictive. "And Ronnie's crime reflected on him. Sheer selfishness! You're marrying into a swell family, Drake. We're all the same. Steele's a blackmailer, though he won't admit it. A dirty, rotten scandalmonger who runs a movie column."

Steele peered through his glasses. He chuckled mirthlessly.

"And Matthew's a congenital drunkard. A dipso."

"What about you?" Matthew asked, his round face ugly.

"I confess to my sins," Rudolph said blandly. "I'm a rogue unhung. We're the worst of the lot, all of us here, except Myrna. She doesn't take after the Chadwick side of the family. And we, the black sheep, are going to get old Simon's dough." He lifted his glass. "An early death to Simon."

Steele took a furtive sip. Matthew drank with him. Myrna turned away, biting her lip.

Suddenly Rudolph cursed thickly, went to the door and departed. There was a heavy silence. Myrna moved closer to Drake, and he put his arm about the girl's slim body.

Again the door opened. Andrew stood there, his head twisted around.

"Rudolph," he called. "Would you mind—"

"I'm going to breathe some fresh air," Rudolph snapped, appearing for an instant. "I need it."

Before Andrew could reply he was gone. A door banged. Andrew stood in indecision.

"I wish—" he began, and stopped as footsteps sounded on the stairs. Then he shrugged and entered the room. "Simon is coming," he said quietly.

Every eye turned to the doorway. The footsteps grew louder. A man came into view. He was a colossal ruin. His elephantine frame had once been big and lusty and vigorous, but now the bony face was wrinkled and pale. Simon leaned heavily on a cane. His bushy eyebrows frowned angrily at the group.

He came in and sat down heavily in a cushioned chair. A small, dapper man, with a foxlike face and pincenez, came up to stand behind him. "This is Doctor Brunard," Simon said, in a low, hoarse voice. "Sit down and finish your drinks. I have no time to waste. Introductions are unnecessary. I know you all. Where are Rudolph, Andrew and Leslie?"

"Rudolph just went out," the old man said helplessly. "Leslie is around somewhere. Shall I—"

"Never mind. Listen to me, all of you. I am ill. Very ill."

"For a second, stark fear shone in the sunken eyes, and a dreadful loathing. Drake knew that Simon had always been terrified of sickness.

"I find I have become a—a vampire." The old man laughed mirthlessly. "A disease I contracted in the South Seas last year . . . anemia, or liver, or something of the sort. Doctor Brunard knows the medical terms, I don't. But I can be kept alive only by periodical blood transfusions."

The shaggy head nodded.

"There are, you doubtless know, various types of blood. In my own family only you, whom I have brought here, possess the same type of blood as mine. Now!"

Simon glanced up at the physician, then around the room.

"I am retiring. I shall live here for the rest of my life. I do not want to be with strangers. If all of you will consent to live here with me, and give me your blood in turn when I need it, I'll divide my fortune among you when I die."

Matthew put down his glass carefully. His voice was a trifle thick.

"What about professional blood donors?" he asked.

"I do not want strangers about me."

The round face grew ugly. "No. I imagine not. You can be king here, in your castle, and all of us will be slaves. Is that it? Because we're relatives, we'll have to crawl at your feet so we can get your money when you're dead. You've got to have power, even though it's limited to your relatives. And our blood—God!" He made a sudden, furious gesture.

Abruptly the fires of madness glared out of Simon's eyes.

"You are a fool!" the old man snarled. "All your life you've been a waster and a swine! You've brought shame on all of us." Simon pointed suddenly to a garishly emblazoned family tree on the wall. "Do you realize that the name of Chadwick is one of the oldest in history? That we come from the loins of royalty? Why, damn you, I could buy all the blood donors I wanted. But it would not be Chadwick blood! D'you think I, Simon

Chadwick, will open my veins and have blood-brotherhood with every low-born thief and beggar who is willing to sell his blood?"

DRAKE could not help but realize the fierce flame of unreasoning pride that burned in Simon Chadwick. Snobbisness, perhaps, but men have worshipped their ancestors before. To a man who had brooded long over "royal descent," and kept a family tree in a place of honor, the idea of purchasing blood from outsiders must seem sordid and horrible. Then, too, Simon Chadwick's abnormal pride demanded complete secrecy. He could not, would not, risk having his ailment described in headlines, to be gaped at by the world. Matthews moistened his lips nervously. He looked sick, and drank more whiskey.

Somehow Drake felt that Matthew's guess was right. Simon's face was that of a tyrant—a despot who would cling frantically to the last slipping reins of power.

"You should remember that Simon isn't as young as he was," Andrew said. "I wish my blood was the right type."

"You damned hypocrite!" Matthew snarled. "I'll do it. You know well enough I'll do it. I haven't a cent to my name. I'll have to live here and let that—that—" He choked wordlessly.

Steele peered through his glasses. "I shall be glad to help you, Simon, he said. "But there must be a legal contract of course."

Simon looked at Myrna. "Well?"

"No," Drake said painfully through his aching throat. "I'm going to marry Myrna. That's right, eh, kid?"

The girl nodded silently. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Well," Simon grunted. "Rudolph will consent. I know that. He'll give me that confounded supercilious smile of his and sneer, but he'll consent. He's penniless, too."

"The contract," Steele reminded.

"Yes." Simon heaved up his huge body painfully. "In the library. Come on, all of you."

Hobbling on his cane, he led the way across the hall, and into another room, which was dark with twilight. Myrna's

hand slid into Drake's. He gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Someone switched on the light. Simon went to a huge desk and paused there, staring down.

On the desk stood a bowl, steaming faintly. Red liquor filled it.

Simon looked meaningfully at Doctor Brunard. The physician came forward and glanced down into the bowl. He smelled it.

"Yes, it's blood," he said.

Myrna screamed. Her face paper-white, she stared in stark horror at something crumpled in the corner, half-hidden by a bookcase. The body of Rudolph Chadwick lay there. A ghastly grin of irony contorted the dead face, and the throat was gaping in dreadful similitude of another grin. . . .

The man's head had been nearly severed from his body. The stench of his blood rose reeking from the bowl on the desk.

"Rudolph!" Andrew cried.

He sprang to the mutilated body and then drew back, his face sick with nausea.

Simon swayed beside the desk. Foam flecks slobbered from his mouth. He glared down at the bowl of blood.

"No," he forced out between clenched teeth. Then with dreadful restraint, he turned to the physician and said: "Can you use this? Or is it clotted?"

Doctor Brunard swiftly lifted the bowl and hurried toward the door. Drake felt a surge of nausea. At his side Myrna was shaking violently. He gripped her shoulders and turned her from the shambles in the corner.

"Beat it, kid," he said. "Wait for me in the other room."

She went out. Drake spoke quickly to Matthew.

"You said something about another cousin awhile ago — somebody you hadn't seen since lunch."

"Eh? Leslie? That's right."

Again Drake remembered the blood-stains on the roof. He felt a cold, queer certainty that the missing Leslie would never reappear.

Simon had regained his poise. "I hear that the launches are smashed,

and that the phone's dead," he said. "Someone here planned that, I think."

He bent forward, glaring from under his shaggy brows.

"Listen! One of you is a murderer! That I know. I warn you, I know how to protect myself."

He turned, hobbled from the room. Drake followed him, but only as far as the door across the hall. Simon dragged himself upstairs. Drake went in to Myrna.

She was standing by the window, a pale, silent shadow against the deepening night.

"Myrna," he said.

"Yes, Mart?" she whispered. For a moment they were silent. The girl's head rested on Drake's shoulder. "I'm frightened. This place is evil. I can feel it."

"I'm taking you up to your room," he said. "Lock yourself in. I'm going to—"

"What?"

"Do some investigating," Drake said grimly.

"Don't Mart. I don't want anything to happen to you—"

"Nothing's going to happen to me," Drake grunted, and moved the girl toward the door. He took her upstairs and left her in her room, waiting till he heard the lock click. Meanwhile, below, the front door closed stealthily.

Someone had left the house. Who? Drake hurriedly descended the stairs and let himself out into the night. A yellow moon brightened the Pacific in the distance. A shadow moved along the trail and was gone.

Drake followed. He could not move fast, for in many places the path was very dark, and it was necessary to avoid betraying noise. Moreover, he was unarmed.

No, not quite. Drake took a folding hunting-knife from his pocket and opened it. Moonlight glinted on the blade. He went on.

THE trail ended at the beach. Waves lapped softly against the pier. And on the sand two dark forms were struggling. He heard a choking cry of agony.

Drake shouted as he sprinted forward, gripping his knife. The larger

of the two forms rose to meet him. The other writhed on the beach. In the moonlight Drake saw again the gargoyle mask of the monster that had attacked him on the roof. Noiseless, distorted, with a twisted gash of a mouth, it snarled wordless hate and closed with Drake.

He felt a fetid, sickening breath strong in his nostrils. His hands shrank at the touch of chill flesh. Then those iron hands had him once more by the throat.

Viciously, remorselessly, they tightened. Drake was borne back by the weight of the attacker. Pangs of agony darted through his bruised throat. He struck out blindly, scarcely realizing that he still held the knife.

He felt the blade sink deep. He shoved it deeper.

The gargoyle bellowed agony and sprang erect. Roaring, it crouched a few feet away, like a beast ready to spring.

Drake staggered upright, waiting, his knife ready.

Suddenly the gargoyle drew back and fled. It vanished into the shadows. Before Drake could pursue, he was halted by a bubbling groan nearby.

He turned, saw Steele lying on the ground. The faded hair was matted with sand, yet the spectacles were incongruously undamaged. A knife-hilt protruded from the man's breast. He saw Drake and gasped.

"Thought we might—raise—one of the—boats. Came down to—to see—" The dim eyes brightened. "It jumped on me—the—the—"

Froth bubbled on the pallid lips. Steele sighed and lay motionless, dead.

Drake turned swiftly, but there was no trace of the gargoyle. He remembered Myrna, alone in the house, and suddenly found he could place no trust in her locked door. The strength of the killer was gigantic.

Cold with dread, Drake went back up the trail. Three had died so far, he thought — Steele, Rudolph, and the missing cousin. And how many more would die that night?

He increased his stride, watching alertly for signs of menace. But he had reached the castle before any hint of immediate peril came.

Myrna's voice cried out from above, frightened, shrill!

Hissing an oath, Drake plunged through the door and along the hall. He went up the stairs with a rush. Myrna did not scream again, but the noise of scuffling came from beyond a door at his left.

Drake burst in and paused, staring.

MYRNA was backed against the wall, one hand at her mouth, her face bloodlessly white. She was watching two men who were struggling on the floor.

One was Matthew, his yellow hair tousled, blood staining his round face. The other was—the gargoyle!

A gun blasted. Matthew screamed, jerked convulsively, and tore free from the hands that gripped him. He took a few staggering steps, and toppled, to lie motionless.

"Don't move, Drake," said a low voice. "Be careful!"

Drake's eyes slid to the corners. He saw, at his side, Andrew Chadwick. The lean, gray, withered man was smiling, though not pleasantly. He had a revolver in his hand.

"Tie them up, Ronnie," Andrew commanded.

The gargoyle rose. He went to cupboard and emerged with a rope. First he approached Drake.

"Careful, Ronnie," Andrew said. "Don't get in the line of fire."

Sick with hopelessness, Drake let himself be bound. He could do nothing else. Presently he lay motionless on the floor, gritting his teeth as he watched the gargoyle bind Myrna.

"Good," Andrew said at last. "Take them into the laboratory."

The monster opened a door, first dragged Myrna through, and then Drake. Andrew followed, holding the gun in his lean untrembling fingers.

They were in what apparently was Doctor Brunard's workroom. To operating tables stood side by side. Benches were littered with apparatus. A beaker filled with coagulating blood stood beside a hypodermic syringe.

Andrew went to the window, opened it, and returned.

"Simon and the doctor are still gone. I don't think they'll find my boat. It's

well hidden." He turned to eye Drake. "There's a searchlight on top of the island, you know—a beacon for signaling the mainland. But Simon will find it useless, I fear." He chuckled. "You should not have come here, young man."

"Well, I'm here," Drake said. "But don't think you can get away with wholesale slaughter!"

Andrew shrugged. "That doesn't matter. I may escape, or I may not. It's unimportant. But you two will not escape." He glanced again at the open window. "It's a long way to drop."

Drake's fingers were busily working at the knots that bound him. He glanced at Myrna's pale face and tried to smile reassuringly. It wasn't very successful.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Just what do you expect to gain?" Drake glanced at the gargoyle, squatting in the corner. "That's—Ronnie? Your son?"

"My son," Andrew replied. "Yes. The lad Simon sent to prison, and who vanished afterward. The son I could never find, though I tried. But how could I pay detectives, living on the pennies Simon gave me grudgingly?"

"I—I think I see," Drake said. "When Simon told you to bring his relatives here, the ones that had the right blood types, you saw your chance. He gave you money to locate the relatives who weren't easy to find. And you found—Ronnie, too."

"I found him," Andrew said grimly. "What was left. The boy always needed care I could have given him. But when he got out of prison, he went to hell. Look at him! He's dying of a dozen diseases, rotting with incurable plagues. Simon did that to him. Simon, my own brother."

DRAKE'S fingers were busy with the ropes.

"And you brought him here secretly, to kill, eh?"

"Yes. Ronnie's cousins. Why should they be alive and healthy, while he—It was justice for Ronnie to destroy them, and Simon as well."

"I don't believe you," Drake snapped. "If you wanted to kill Simon, you

could just keep him isolated here. He'd die without transfusions. You made Ronnie kill the others for some other reason. What was it? Had Simon, by an chance, already made a will dividing his fortune equally among those heirs who had the same type of blood as his,"

The chance shot hit home. Andrew's pallid face grew livid for a moment. Then suddenly he laughed with murderous harshness.

"You're clever, Drake. Yes Simon knew they'd all accept his proposition. If anybody had refused, a codicil to the old man's will would have cut him out. All my life Simon supported me, but he grudged me every penny. He had to include me in his will, though, because of my blood type. For me to get his fortune after his death—that's the last irony, isn't it? With every man on the island dead, I could tell my story and be believed. Nobody'd think a frail old man could commit those crimes. I'd simply say Simon went mad and turned into a killer, wanting blood. Everyone knows he's half crazy anyhow."

"I see," Drake gritted. "Then you'd say that after Simon killed all the others, you managed to down him before he got you. But he's feeble. He can hardly walk, you know."

"Who knows that? A month ago he was strong as a bull. No one has seen him since—no one who matters. As for Ronnie, I told you I have a boat hidden. He was to escape in it after the plan was completed. I'd be rescued eventually, and when it was safe, Ronnie could join me."

The old man's sallow face turned blue with rage again.

"And do you know how Simon's going to die? Ah, there's my real revenge! He'll need a transfusion in order to live. And do you know whose blood I'll offer him? Ronnie's blood—yes, Ronnie's diseased blood!"

The gargoyle suddenly cried out. He bent over, coughing violently. A torrent of blood gushed from the lipless mouth.

"Ronnie!"

Andrew leaped forward. He tore at the monster's shirt. A moment later he drew back, snarling an oath.

Drake remembered the knife wound he had given the gargoyle on the beach. "He's dying, isn't he?" Drake asked. "Come to your senses, man! Your scheme's useless now."

Andrew's smile was hideous. He helped the monster erect and to one of the operating tables. "Lie down, Ronnie," he said. "Be quiet for a bit."

Then Andrew went to Myrna and lifted her bound form. He carried her to the other table and turned to busy himself with some apparatus.

"My scheme is changed," he said over his shoulder. "I cannot torture and kill Simon exactly as I intended." He fumbled with clamps and tubes. But I know enough to make a transfusion. It'll amount to the same thing."

Black horror choked Drake. He knew, now, what Andrew intended—to infect Myrna with the gargoyle's plague-ridden blood! Through her veins it would reach Simon's, if he accepted her blood, as he must in desperation. And the old autocrat, in his condition, could not survive the toxins long.

Andrew strapped the girl tightly to the table and made an incision in a vein of the elbow. He turned to pick up a pipette and insert it in the wound.

Drake felt skin and flesh ripping from his hand as he struggled with the ropes. Abruptly bones cracked agonizingly, but his right hand was free. There was no time to do more. Already Andrew had almost completed his frightful task.

He looked up, saw Drake. A snarl twisted the wrinkled face. Snatching up a scalpel, he sprang forward.

At Drake's side stood the blood-filled beaker. His free hand lifted it. He hurled it straight at Andrew's face. The killer shrieked as the receptacle shattered, well aimed.

Blood blinded him. He lifted a clawing hand, scrubbing at his eyes. Then he cried out and desisted as fragments of glass dug into his flesh.

Drake's legs, and one arm, were still bound, but he was on his feet. He hurled himself at Andrew, and the two men went down.

Still blinded, the killer slashed out with his scalpel, sheathing it in Drake's forearm. Andrew sprang up, backed away.

He stood motionless, blinking.

Drake twisted to his knees. He dived straight at Andrew. The killer's body was flung back—

The open window was behind him. The sill caught Andrew's thighs. For a second the man toppled, clutching at air. Then he was gone from sight.

A thin scream echoed up from below. Drowning it came a bellow of rage. Iron hands gripped Drake. He felt himself lifted high. The twisted face of the gargoyle snarled in brute fury.

Two steps the monster took toward the window. The fingers tightened convulsively on Drake's helplessly bound body. Frantically he strove to writhe free. Then the grip was gone. He slid through the gargoyle's hands, fell heavily on the floor.

The monster stood motionless. His eyes went blank and blind. From his twisted mouth a torrent of black blood poured.

As a tree falls, he crashed down and lay without movement.

THE room was suddenly silent. Drake glanced at Myrna, and saw that she lay quiet, her eyes closed. She had fainted.

Weakly he struggled toward the scalpel, gripped it, and began to slash free.

Simon and Doctor Brunard would return. There would be explanations, and questions . . .

But the horror was ended. Andrew's boat was hidden somewhere on the island. Perhaps it could be located. If not, there was a searchlight for signaling the mainland. Andrew had wrecked it, but it could be repaired. If necessary, a fire beacon could be kindled to summon aid.

A picture came unbidden into Drake's mind—a vision of Andrew's body sinking into green depths, and gray, torpedo-like shapes that darted swiftly toward it.

He shivered as the last rope dropped from around his ankles.

Next Issue: DEATH TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER, by Wayne Rogers

SERVANT OF THE



A
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CHAPTER I

The Executioner Waits

IT is queer to be waiting here quietly in my own place, while every policeman in New York searches for me. It is like watching a moving picture which is very exciting, even frightening, but which, in the end, I know will come out all right. So I am not actually alarmed. I will get away.

Everything is arranged. My passport is ready, here close by. My bags are packed. In a matter of minutes now, Walter will telephone he has cashed the check. Then I will go downtown, get the money I have worked so hard for, and taxi to the steamer. A week from now, I will be lounging on the golden beaches of Honduras, safe. Marvelous, is it not, that there is yet one country which has no treaty of extradition with the

Max Vyrek, Blinded by Greed, Did Not See

AXE By STEWART STERLING

Author of "Dragon of the Gobi," "Coffin Candidate," etc.



I raised the lid and
knocked on the glass

United States? To me, anyway, it is marvelous.

There will be no traces to show where I have gone. The passage I booked, the passport I obtained, are not in the name of Max Vyrek. Once I have that ten thousand dollars in my hands—once I give the slip to my faithful Walter, I proceed to discard my identity as a chorus girl changes her costume.

High time, too. Another week, an-

other day of this strain—God knows what would happen to me. But now, in fifteen or twenty minutes, half an hour at the most, Walter will have received from the paying teller those crisp, neat packets of green and yellow. Meantime I check over things, make sure there have been no slips.

I am not so certain of my memory as once I was. Here lately my brain has played me curious tricks. It is peculiar—this not being able to trust

the Stalking Image of His Own Destiny!

one's senses and reactions. I suppose it would throw the average mentality into a panic—but I have observed too many disordered minds to be perturbed at the mild, temporary indications in my own case. A few weeks in the hot Honduras sun, plenty of glasses and a girl or so—all that will be corrected, *hein?*

And I deserve a rest after my so-hard labor, do I not? I have worked harder, here in America, than on the other side of the Atlantic. To be sure, I played in luck, back there in Vitcovici, when they first made me Servant of the Axe. Here, in America, I did not make such good fortune, at the beginning. But, now, since I received that slip of paper on which was written, "Pay to the order of Max Vyrek the sum of Ten Thousand Dollars,"—now, things will be different.

But I earned it. Just as I earned my success in Vitcovici. When they approached me with an offer many would have refused I did not hesitate. I am not exactly the type of person to spend his life as underpaid assistant to a struggling embalmer. A job offered itself with more pay for less work. To be sure, it had certain objectionable features, but a man must sacrifice something for success.

NATURALLY, not everyone possessed the qualifications. They needed one who knew something of human anatomy, one who was sure of eye and deft of hand—above all, one not troubled by juvenile squeamishness. I possessed these qualifications—otherwise I should not have been worth my salt as an embalmer's helper.

Yet when I had done well at the new work and received the praise of my employers, my friends misunderstood me. Often they failed to speak to me on the street, never did they come, as formerly, to chat at my table in the coffee house.

I remained untroubled—they did not understand. With times as they were, with a foreign power ruling our country, there must be many to suffer. Was it not better for them to go swiftly, cleanly, by way of my curved blade loaded with the twelve pounds of quicksilver, rather than slowly and

dismally, tormented by brutal whippings, half-crazed by cruel punishments, bleeding bitterly to death at the hands of torturers? To me, the work I did was merciful.

I took pride in doing it well. There were no clumsy performances in that little courtyard, beside the oaken scaffold, the tub of wet, red sand. Max Vyrek was no timid, trembling soul hacking the head off a garden snake with frantic chops of a dull hoe. I maintained always the impersonal attitude of the surgeon: cool and efficient.

And the money was good. It was my earnings, beyond doubt, that caused resentment among those who knew me while I was first learning my trade. From petty slights and annoyances, their treatment of me descended to downright insult and physical abuse. I was no longer able to reason with them, that a man must make a living in the way he best can. So it was necessary for me to leave the town of my fathers.

I cannot complain. Life has not been dull here in Yorkville. Business has not been too good, accidents are not so many as there used to be. And the hospitals will not turn over their cadavers to me. If it had not been for my new-found source of income, I should have been in as bad a way as many of my compatriots in the Fatherland, living on scraps of swill which once they would not have thought fit for their swine.

Thus far, I have managed to dine regularly and well enough. And now, once the sun of Honduras soothes my spirit, there will be champagne and caviar. I have not many regrets at leaving this place of mine.

My housekeeper, Frieda, is not intelligent enough to be suspicious, but she is often clumsy and annoying. Too, I am weary of her complaints—she does not relish making up my bed in the storeroom with those empty coffins in it. If it does not disturb me to sleep with a cadaver next me on a slab, why should Frieda object? And she has not been able to accustom herself to the unusual odors one must naturally expect in an embalming establishment.

I will be forced to leave behind many of my most prized possessions. Those bottles of preserved viscera, for example. Many a medical college would be glad to buy such a unique collection of human organs. But doubtless some stupid detective will dump them all in the incinerator.

YET, after all, why should I think ill of police intelligence? The men from headquarters catch many criminals. If they have not yet found the murderer of Jan Paldy, is this because they are dumbheads—or is it, perhaps, that the killer for whom they search is just a bit too clever for them?

The plainclothesmen did not have much to go on, to be sure. Only one man missing out of the millions here. No one had seen him go. I took good care of that. It had not been planned, it should not even have happened, but Jan, himself, was responsible. There would have been no need to slash Jan's thin, pale face to ribbons with my incision-knife—no necessity for finally thrusting that shining blade into his throat, if Paldy had only minded his own business instead of interfering with mine.

The young fool must have known it had taken me a long time to convince the widow Huss of the wisdom of entrusting me with the sum of ten thousand dollars. What concern of Paldy's was it, whether I actually should mortgage the release of Anna Huss's aged father from the horrors of the concentration camp at Dorzi?

Jan Paldy was an admitted failure in his own line of work—why he should have felt it his duty to prevent my being a success in *mine*, only the devil knows. He nearly undid all my patient weeks of persuasion, to prove to the little blonde widow I am no longer connected with the organization of political police in Vitcovi which appointed me Servant of the Axe.

In another hour, he would have ruined my hopes of convincing her of my special means of communication with the Fatherland. As an unpleasant matter of fact, it is Jan Paldy's fault that I am not enjoying

the tropic scenery of Honduras at this very moment. He cost me this last whole month by his unaccountable interference.

I was precisely on the point of informing the Huss woman exactly how large a sum would be required to effect her parent's release, through underground agents, when I ran into Jan, there on the street in front of her house. He accused me, bluntly. Said I had never been in touch with her father. He pointed out that no amount of money could bring about his release, since the old man had been roasted to death weeks previously, by being strapped to a steam radiator in his prison cell.

I had no way of knowing whether Jan was lying or not—he may have been making up his story, just as I had concocted mine. There was little to choose between us—except the ten thousand dollars.

So I did what had to be done—quietly and with as little blood as possible. He fought fiercely, there in the hallway of her apartment. Thus he prevented my putting an end to him painlessly. Before I finally plunged the scalpel into his throat, I was forced to mutilate his features, but it was not of my choosing.

It was night when I carried him out to my car. No one saw me. I drove him away, down to the pier, threw him in the icy water.

Under the circumstances, what else could I do?

JAN PALDY'S death disturbed me no more than the sudden extinction of those many on the other side of the sea who felt the kiss of my long-curved blade. Why should it? When you come to look at it right, they were the same thing, *hein?* Execution, in line of necessity—all in the day's work.

There was no cause for me to be afraid of discovery—no hue and cry from Jan's friends. For a day or so it was supposed he had gone visiting, or perhaps that he had been hurt and was lying in a hospital.

Naturally I joined in the search—myself took Anna Huss around to hospitals down to the Bureau of the Miss-

ing Persons. I had to attempt to console her. It was clear she had been in love with Paldy. Imagine it—a comely young woman with a fortune of not less than one hundred thousand fat American dollars—allowing herself to become emotionally involved with a stripling who was merely an unsuccessful radio singer and actor.

Weeks at a time Jan would earn no money—nothing at all. I have known when he carried bits of metal in his pocket to jingle so his acquaintances would not suspect he was penniless. Moreover, Jan had a false sense of honor. It allowed him to starve himself, or to exist only on coffee and *kuchen*, which he could have for the asking at Bretoff's Cafe-Europe.

So easy it would have been for him to borrow a few dollars—well, yes, a few hundred, from his enamoured. I could read in the widow's eyes she would have been overjoyed to hand it over to him. But the purse-proud idiot would not ask. The world does not lose much in such an imbecile!

But I—I lost something. Time, precious time.

CHAPTER II

Death Tips

MY negotiations for those ten thousand dollars were completely halted by the widow's grief and anguish, when Jan did not show up after the first twenty-four hours. She wasted much money on telephone calls to friends and acquaintances. Naturally, they came to nothing. She wept till her eyes were red and swollen.

When I tried to talk to her of the money for her father's release, she became so incensed I had to let the matter drop. All I suggested was that her poor, imprisoned parent might well be enduring the most fiendish torments at the hands of his jailers, while she concerned herself with the fate of her beloved.

I casually mentioned the device by which a prisoner is allowed no more than a few instants' sleep for a long

period, day or night. The sufferer is forced to sit at all times on a high, one-legged stool, braced against the wall. On such a stool the prisoner must constantly hold himself erect by the use of his arms. If he falls asleep, the stool topples to the floor. A fall from a stool like that has been known to break bones. Skulls, too, *hein?*

But I might have been talking to the stone statue in our village square at home, for all the good it did. Not until word came, a week later, that Jan had been found, did she commence to be again a human being.

When I heard that Paldy's body had been washed ashore in Hell Gate, I permitted the news to shock me visibly. But, inside, I was not alarmed. There was no way they could trace to me any connection between the bloated thing the police boat picked up and my act that night in the hallway of Anna Huss's apartment house.

I did not go down to the morgue to identify Jan. Doctor Gratz went with the Huss woman—he had been a friend of the deceased. The remains were scarcely recognizable, I learned from the good surgeon, but there was no doubt it was Jan. A watch which the widow had presented to him was still strapped to the wrist. The laundry marks on the underclothing were indisputably Paldy's.

They held a memorial service at the church on the Avenue—followed by a small funeral, which professional ethics kept me from attending. Since the regular church undertaker had prepared the corpse for interment, I was not even able to collect a fee from those of his friends who contributed toward the embalming expenses and the casket.

Ironical, was it not? While he was alive, Jan had been too poor for me to approach in behalf of his relatives still in the homeland. Now that Jan was dead, I was still unable to earn an honest penny out of him! Moreover, because of this poverty-stricken suitor, I was unable to further my interests with the widow for ten long days further.

Ordinarily, such a length of time would have passed as quick as the snick of a weighted axe on soft flesh.

But there are occasions which slow the hands of a watch, so a moment seems eternity. The condemned men whose cares and troubles I put an end to with one slashing arc of my blade, often told me they re-lived a year of their lives with each passing sixty seconds.

I learned to believe this, during those ten days. I was not like those others, not condemned, nor yet convicted, nor even caught. But something strange happened during that period—a circumstance which shook me deeply inside—as if some vicious dog of death had seized upon my soul and was shaking it to and fro in his teeth.

IT happened a couple of days after Jan Paldy's funeral. I was on Eighty-sixth Street, wondering which moving picture show was worth spending my well-earned cash upon. A sinister looking individual approached me. He was not tall, but yet so thin he seemed to be so. A long, straight, bony nose; a slit for a mouth; two eyes set far back in the sockets of his skull.

I knew this man, but under no circumstances would I have spoken to him on the street. For Manfred Carter is the agent for that dread organization whose members are more feared in my country than the black plague itself. I had no fear of him, for had I not received my pay from this same nameless source? Yet it is not wise, in Yorkville, to be seen conversing with one of these. But he hailed me.

"Max," he called. "I want to thank you, again."

"Well, that's fine." I did not know what he wanted to thank me for. "For what, precisely, Manfred?"

He lowered his voice. "That tip about Jan Paldy."

My heart skipped a beat or two, but my face could not have shown it.

"Oh—" I began, in doubt. I had given him no tip which I could recall.

"Your idea," he went on, "that Doctor Gratz put Jan out of the way—that's a good one. We can use that. In fact, we have used it."

"So?" I did my best not to let him see how his words affected me. "I do

not remember just how I put it, Manfred."

He punched me playfully in the ribs. "I bet you don't, you old fox. But never fear. We won't give you away. All we've done is to pass the information you gave me last night at the Cafe-Europe along to the city police. They will attend to Gratz. We've been trying to bottle him up and ship him back to the other side for a year. Now it will be easy."

"Ah-ha. I see." I did not see, exactly. "He is not a citizen—Gratz. You will have him deported?"

"Exactly. You don't have to play dumb with me, you sly dog. You know what we intend to have done with him, once we get him over there. We won't forget you had a hand in it, either."

Manfred went away, toward Lexington Avenue—and I began to breathe again, a little. But not freely. There was something constricted in my chest.

Because the absolute truth was, I had not seen Manfred Carter for at least a week! I had not been near the Cafe-Europe for several days, and I could take an oath on my mother's grave that I never mentioned Doctor Gratz to him. Certainly, in my most troubled dreams I never had thought of insinuating the famous surgeon had murdered the impoverished Jan Paldy!

Instantly I was on my guard. I had no illusions. It is the extreme of improbability that I should have a double. My features are cast in a rugged, primitive manner which one of my admirers, back in Vitcovici, approved highly.

Because, she said, it brings out the strong masculine force of my natural character. The robust plumpness of my cheeks and the agreeable fullness of my lips are not such as are met with many times a day on the street.

This sabre cut on my cheeks isn't what you might call usual in this country, either, though I did not get it in a student duel—that is only one of my pleasantries.

Actually, it resulted from a broken plate, thrown at me by a child's mother.

MY hair is an ordinary gray, to be sure. Many men have such gray hair, but few now brush it up in this stiff military fashion. So it is utterly incredible I should be cursed with the shadow of any person who looks and acts and talks as I do.

Even if such fantasies existed, outside of moving pictures, would it be likely that such an individual would be in this particular part of the world? In this very city? In this special section of Yorkville?

If the god of extreme probabilities should permit the existence of such a duplicate—still, would this alter ego of mine be likely to know Manfred? To talk to him? And, of all subjects in the wide world, about Jan Paldy?

There was the barest possibility Manfred was mistaken. Or that he had forgotten who gave him this information about Gratz. But I, well aware of some of the things which Manfred manages to keep in his head, I did not believe this.

No, I am no fool. I knew it was a trick. It must be a stratagem on the part of Manfred's *provocateurs*, to trap me into making a misstep. To send me, instead of the well-liked Doctor, back to the homeland and—what awaits there! Well, they would not succeed.

I would not be rattled nor thrown into a panic. I would proceed with my normal, natural procedure. I did so.

I immediately abandoned the thought of entertainment, though there was a feature picture concerning the noble sacrifice of a woman for the man she loved, which appealed much to my sensitive imagination. Instead, I went to the Turnverein, where all my mail is received.

I expected a letter. In fact, I had written for it, to an acquaintance of mine on the other side who has often proved useful. The truth is, we were once close friends. This was in the old days, when I was wearing the full dress suit, the silk hat and the black gloves, with resin rubbed in the palms so the helve should not slip. Hermann was then custodian of the condemned men's property—we shared much together. It was, in a way, a

defensive alliance—each of us knew a great deal about the other . . . also, we had not many intimates.

Now I had sent Hermann a whole hundred *kronen* note! In return for this, I instructed him to send back to me a letter of appeal which I intended to pass on to the widow Huss.

This masterpiece of an epistle—which was composed by me for Hermann to copy—described the most refined cruelties which the widow's father had suffered. It laid much weight upon the fact that payment of a paltry few thousand *kronen* would go far to ease the old man's pain and suffering. It obviously neglected to mention that her parent had been nourishing the worms these many weeks.

With this letter once in my possession, I should have no difficulty in securing the funds which I requested. But if the widow proved stony-hearted to all the expected instincts of a dutiful daughter—I had still one more resource. I would, myself, prepare a letter in the handwriting of her father. I took the foresight, some time ago, to secure a copy of his manuscript.

SO it was with a certain relish of anticipation that I passed up the stairs at the Turnverein—through the hall to the little wicket gate where the clerk sits all day long. There were many I passed who did not greet me, though I know them well. At these rebuffs, I could afford to smile inwardly. It will not be long before I will be popular enough—in Honduras.

Of the clerk, I inquired for mail. He seemed to be startled. Then he laughed, apologetically:

"Afraid you've forgotten, Mister Vyrek."

"Forgotten?"

"Yes sir. Already, you received your mail."

"I did?" I admit the hair on the back of my head was prickling. But it was only momentary. I maintained my usual amiability of manner. I am not the sort to become nervously unreliable. "When was this, my friend?"

He held his head on one side and

scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"That must be extra good stuff you're pouring out these days, Mister Vyrek. It was only half to three-quarters of an hour ago, you were in here."

"Oh, yes." There was no use arguing—that was plain. I knew him well—he had no ability to dissimulate. He was clearly laboring under the delusion he *had* seen me and handed me my correspondence a half an hour earlier. So I concealed the pounding of the blood in my veins. "I did get some letters then, eh?"

"One, sir. Only think for a second. A very fat one it was. You must remember it. Postmarked Vitcovici."

"Ah, yes. Yes, indeed. From home, of course." I found it advisable to use my handkerchief to hide the trembling of my lips. "To be sure."

"I understand, sir. It must have been good news, that letter. Wonderful how such mail stirs a man up. You've been celebrating a bit, eh? You and Doctor Gratz?"

"Hein? You said 'Gratz'?"

"But exactly. The Herr Doctor was here at the same time. You jested with him. Think back and you'll recall. You went downstairs with him. I'd like to see him now, if you've treated him to the same quantity of *schnapps*!"

I laughed. There was nothing else for it. But I did not feel like laughing, you may be very sure of that.

CHAPTER III

Looming Shadow

BY the time I had reached the street again, my clothes were dripping with perspiration. Nevertheless, that clerk had given me an excellent idea.

I went into the nearest bar; ordered *kirchwasser*. As I sipped, I looked at myself in the mirror behind the bar. My face was so white I was positively unable to recognize myself!

I confess the unpleasant thought occurred to me: "You, Max, are simply suffering from an aberration."

I have always been an exceptionally clear-headed individual, but the necessity of scraping together a few paltry dollars has, before this, proved the collapse of many intellects. I remembered something which once I had read,—dealing with repetitive thought processes. Some people, when seeing an absolutely new place, have the uncanny sensation of having observed it at some previous time. It is, of course, merely an illusion of the gray matter.

Possibly this fog of uncertainty through which I was groping was the reverse of such a tangling of the brain-wires. People with amnesia forget all. Might it not be conceivable that I was forgetting only a part of what happened?

But then I gripped the glass tightly to keep my fingers from shaking—it was no question of loss of recollection. I traced back in my mind's eye every step I had taken for the last few hours. No—there could be no slightest doubt—I remembered everything I did. There was no gap, no blank, which might have filled in with the clerk's story. So it was something deeper, something less understandable—more evil.

One thing only was apparent to me. If my thinking apparatus was beginning to be false to me, I must get away from Yorkville at the earliest moment. Get away and rest. I had not been sleeping well of late. That was it!

Once or twice I had been persecuted by nightmares. In these damnable dreams, I was back again in the little courtyard at Vitcovici. Once more I wore the black dress suit, the formal tie, the top hat and sombre gloves.

But I stood there alone—or rather, I was standing above *myself*! I was a dual personality, at once balancing the weighted weapon in my hand, gauging the exact spot where the hair thins upon the back of the neck, and at the same time, I knelt before the scaffold, my hands tied behind my back, my neck thrust into the half-collar of wood.

I would swing the blade up—watch it glitter down! But all this interminable time, I would cringe and tremble, waiting blindly for the ter-

rible shock. Always I awoke in time, sopping with perspiration, my mouth hot and dry.

These nightmares must be the answer. I had not been relaxing sufficiently. But if I could only secure that comparatively insignificant sum from the widow Huss, I should be able to rest for the remainder of my life.

I considered, coolly and calmly. There was no hope of getting the widow's funds unless I was able to produce that letter from Vitcovici. Perhaps it was only my keen imagination, but I fancied lately the Huss woman had a certain distrust in those limpid blue eyes.

I DETERMINED to go to Doctor Gratz. If he was with me when I received this letter, it might be possible he knew what I did with it. Or, if by some unlikely chance, the clerk at the Turnverein was hoaxing me, I should be able to discover this.

I found Doctor Gratz at home in his luxurious office apartment. Fortunately it was not during his office hours. His nurse was out to lunch. The surgeon was not too cordial in his greeting, but I did not allow this to make me lose my temper. I am not so popular among our little colony as some who throw their money around in lavish entertainment.

I sat down in the consulting chair beside his desk. When I am after something, I am not one to grumble about an invitation.

He smiled unpleasantly, and stroked his glossy black beard. "Don't tell me there's something wrong with you, Herr Vyrek?" he said. "I could stand a little good news."

I laughed politely. One must expect such remarks from one whose tongue is as keen as the instruments in his glass case.

"There is no need for insult, *herr Doktor*. After all, you and I are in the same business, after a fashion."

He stopped smiling and waited for me to explain.

"We are not unlike two workers in a sausage factory, *Doktor*. You prepare the meat; I preserve it. We should not be too antagonistic."

He demonstrated the absence of a

sense of humor. "I don't like you, Vyrek. I'll be obliged if you'll state your business."

"It is not exactly a matter of business, *Doktor*. When I was with you, a little while ago, at the Turnverein—"

I watched him closely, but my statement did not startle him in the least. Again I have that queer, crawling sensation;—this time it runs up and down my back like a spider on my bare flesh. But I go on, smoothly.

"I received a letter, a thick letter from home. Doubtless you recollect."

Gratz nods, brusquely. "I saw you open it and read it."

The air must have been close in the doctor's office, because I was breathing fast.

"Yes, yes, *Doktor*. I read it, of course. But then I misplaced it—now I cannot find it. It occurred to me you might have noticed what I did with it."

He stared at me with those extraordinarily brilliant, dark eyes.

"I don't see what difference it makes. You read it—told me what was in it, Vyrek."

Something in his manner, or perhaps his tone, warned me he was lying. His eyes stared fixedly into mine. I began to feel faint. The room receded into a curiously distant perspective. The possibility of hypnosis chilled me as if I had been suddenly doused with spring water.

IF Gratz has exercised any mental powers of that sort, he may even have taken that letter from me; may now plan to use it to discredit me—to destroy me. For if once it becomes known my reports from the old country are—well, not exactly the strict truth,—then there will be those who will hunt me down. They would put an end to my existence with no more compunction than they would drown an unwanted kitten. It is urgent for me to find out. I shut my eyes, momentarily, to regain my balance:

"Which part of the letter did I tell you about, *Doktor*?"

He shrugged. "Whether it was the first or the last part, I don't know—but it was about the father of Anna

Huss. It said the damned crew of cutthroats who infest our country like poisonous lice are feeding him only food with much salt in it; then they allow him no water to drink."

Ah! Now at last I have something. I know he is telling the truth about the letter, because this was, in fact, what I had directed by friend in Vit-covici to send back in his epistle. But one other thing I know positively, too. Never while I was sane and in possession of my faculties, would I have told what was in that paragraph to any living soul—except to Anna Huss, herself. Certainly not to this doctor who was a close acquaintance of hers and of Jan Paldy's.

"That was it." I acted relieved. "You didn't happen to notice what I did with the letter?"

I reached into the pocket of my coat, as if to make one final search for the envelope. But what I am actually grasping for is a short, leather truncheon, weighted at one end, with lead. They gave it to me for self-protection, in case of assault, back when I was the Servant of the Blade.

"By mischance it might have slipped among the mail you received, since we were talking together." I leaned forward. "Isn't that it—there under that top envelope?"

He turned around, facing his desk. "Certainly not—" he began but he did not finish.

I hit him over the right ear with my leather club—

He jumped once; his arms jerked convulsively the way a rabbit's legs do in the death spasm. But the Herr Doktor was not dead; I had only stunned him. I did not propose to leave him so, however. It was necessary to destroy him—no longer should he be allowed to exercise over me the baleful influence of those penetrating eyes. It was vital for me to be cautious.

The slight concussion from my leather-bound truncheon would hardly be noticed in an autopsy. But the method of finally extinguishing the spark of his vitality must also remain unnoticed.

I had with me just the weapon for such an emergency!

A HYPODERMIC syringe is a remarkable instrument. To the dead, it is a kindly tool with which to puff out sunken cheeks, fill up those ghastly hollows in cold flesh. But to the living, it can be deadly. One needs not even to load it. The lethal properties are there already, in the empty instrument.

I lifted the Doktor's arm, opened his shirt, inserted the point of the syringe through the skin of the armpit, to the artery that passes close beneath. Even the Doktor, himself, could not have used his knowledge of anatomy more accurately. I pushed home the plunger.

Nothing went into the doctor's system—nothing but air. Only air—a single tiny bubble of which, carried by the blood stream, might stop the beating of his heart forever. Not certainly. Not always, perhaps. If the Powers above wanted the good Doktor to live, perhaps the bubbles of air would be absorbed in other tissues, en route to the vital organs. I, myself, had never known these Powers to save anyone who had been punctured by my hypodermic.

I went through his clothes. The letter was not in any of his pockets. I buttoned his shirt again, left him so, sleeping.

I searched the office. There was nothing of interest to me, except a ring on his desk. I knew that ring. Not so long since, I bore the bruises of its signet on my jaws. It was the one Jan Paldy wore the night I killed him; the one which was green with verdigris when they rescued him from the scum and slime of the harbor.

For a moment I wondered how this piece of jewelry came to the good Doktor's office. Then I knew. Anna Huss gave it to him, in memento of Gratz's aid in searching for her loved one.

Could it have been that there was anything between the surgeon and this blonde widow? Perhaps he would have prevented my security the funds I need so desperately.

I observed the pulse in his throat. There was none;—I laughed and patted his stiffening shoulder.

Quietly I departed. Not through

the front door. Down the hall I moved like a cat. To the basement, up a cement ramp, out through an alley. I did not run, naturally. I strolled, casually, as if out for pleasure.

No one observed me. Now I was safe. There would be no further talk of any letters from Vitcovici—not, at any rate, until I had had time to sit down and prepare such a letter, myself, in cunningly-disguised handwriting.

I returned to the basement home where I make my dwelling and do my business. The blue neon sign:

MAX VYREK
LICENSED EMBALMER
FUNERALS ARRANGED

greeted me cheerfully in my front window.

I entered, lit a bunsen burner, heated the end of the hypodermic until it gleamed red hot. There would be no prying detective to examine it under his microscope; to say "You are the man!" I was content. I called Frieda—ordered her to buy eels for dinner, I would be hungry.

It was then that I received the worst shock. My slovenly housemaid clumped in from the kitchen—merely a stove and sink in one corner of my laboratory. She wiped her skinny, red hands on her dirty apron. Her hair was untidy—there was a smear of grease on the point of her sharp chin. I was about to call her down, because I cannot bear uncleanness, but she spoke first:

"Eels, Mister Vyrek? Why should I now order eels from the butcher?"

"Because I command you to, fool!"

She shook her head slowly, like a cow.

"I do not understand. You telephoned me only few moments ago, you would not be home for dinner—you would be eating at th' Cafe-Europe."

I felt like screaming at her, like pummeling her with my fists until that scrawny face was mashed to a bleeding pulp.

But I restrained myself. I did not even raise my voice.

"I telephoned you?"

"But of course."

"You are mistaken."

"I could not be, Mister Vyrek."

"I tell you I did not use the phone today."

She sighed, made a sad face. "I don't like this kind of joke. I recognized your voice well. Besides, no one else would call me such nasty names as you."

She eyed me as one does a half-wit. I could not permit any suspicion to enter her mind. She must not see that I was upset, or alarmed. So I made a little grin.

"It's all right, Frieda. Don't mind me. I was fooling. Anyway, eels for dinner." I smoked a cigarette; tried to see the whole thing without prejudice.

Something terrible was happening to me. The suspicion that I was going mad would not leave me . . .

A customer arrived. There was a body to be prepared for the shroud. I was glad. The work occupied my mind. When I got the cadaver back to my establishment, I even sang a little.

Because, after all, no one could possibly connect me with the demise of the Doktor Gratz.

IN this I was wrong. I did not find it out until I read the evening paper. The story of his death was on the first page.

They did not come right out and say "murder" but a high police officer was quoted.

" . . . the demise is still under investigation, as there are certain peculiar circumstances surrounding it."

I smiled to myself. They would never know the truth about those "peculiar circumstances." But a paragraph later, I was chilled as abruptly as if I had suddenly stepped into a butcher's refrigerator.

"Passersby stated an unidentified man was seen leaving Doctor Gratz's office a few minutes after the time the medical examiner has fixed as the moment of the famous surgeon's death. This man was of medium height, broad-shouldered, pale complexion. He wore a dark suit; a hat of oyster-gray; spats of the same color. He carried an unusual walking cane, made apparently of bone."

CHAPTER IV

Slim Alibi

THE blood froze in my veins. That description, in every particular, might have been me. The height, the extraordinary breadth of my shoulders, the very dark suit I wore as I read the paper. Even the soft hat—the spats. But the item which sent a cold shudder through me was that mention of the cane. Surely there can be no other cane like mine in all this country, let alone this small section of Yorkville!

I got it from the closet, where it had been lying for several days, covered with dust. When people ask me of what it is made, I say it is the spine-bone of a shark. Only to physicians I do not explain this—they would know better. A medical man is trained to know human vertebrae when he sees them. Even if they have been ground down, so as not to be too heavy to handle.

This walking stick of mine is, in plain truth, the backbone of a poet who made ugly verses about the dictator who now rules our land. I was kind to the scribbler—he asked me if I cared to have any of his possessions by which to remember him. I told him what I wished. He gave me permission.

The cursed thing was—everyone in Yorkville knew about this cane, even if they did not recognize its origin. This, even, would have been no frightening matter if I could have proved I was not near Doctor Gratz's office that noon. Such proof was impossible. I had no alibi.

I remained indoors all next day. A hundred times I was prompted to slip, unnoticed, out my back door—to mingle with crowds on the subway, get to one of the terminals, leave New York. But always my good judgment prevailed. I would not stamp myself as guilty, by flight. After reading that description of the man who walked out Doctor Gratz's front door, there might be many who would point the finger at me. But they could have no proof. I could deny everything.

What troubled me was the presence of this other self; this uncertainty as to whether I could depend upon my own senses any longer. But perhaps it *had* been hypnosis—now the Doctor's eyes no longer could influence my actions without my will—possibly these curious coincidences would cease.

There was nothing specific in the printed column—mere innuendoes.

"The police expect to make an arrest within twenty-four hours—"

Nevertheless, there was a hard lump in my throat; the pits of my palms were clammy. I needed a stimulant. There was nothing in the house.

I got down on my knees; reached under the upholstery of the big leather chair in my mortuary parlor. The Luger was there.

I stuck it under my belt, pulled my vest down over it. I paused at the mirror, by the front door. I am a good actor—when I strolled out, there was no visible tremor on my countenance.

I WENT to the Cafe-Europe. Fat Bretoff, himself, served me.

"Where have you been, Vyrek?" he asked.

"Oh, about—"

"So?" He narrowed his eyes, shrewdly. "What do you know about this affaire Gratz?"

"Only that it is sad."

"Indeed." Bretoff polished the wine-colored wood on the bar, already so gleaming he could have trimmed his moustache in it. "You know, Vyrek, you look considerably like the individual who was seen leaving Gratz's residence."

I drank to conceal my fear. "I did not see such a description—but—"

He finished it for me. "—but of course it could not have been you."

"No," I said. "It could not."

"Not when, at that very moment, you were here in my restaurant, raising such a disturbance."

I dropped the glass, broke it.

"Sorry, Bretoff. The glass was slippery."

He swept the pieces into the sink.

"One glass I do not mind, but I will

not have any more of that political argument in my restaurant," he said.

"No — no, certainly not," I stammered.

Political argument? Disturbance? I had not been in the Cafe-Europe for two or three days. There he was, insisting that I had been here yesterday, at the exact time when I must have been in the office with the good Doktor.

"Well, then — that's settled." He slid out a bottle. "Pour one on the host. Privately, I agree with your denunciation of Manfred and all his group. But I cannot afford to be connected with a public statement of this sort."

I did not delay in pouring myself a stiff one, gulping it down. What had I done? What did Bretoff think I had done? Challenge Manfred? Publicly denounce his band of bestial assassins? Fires of hell. For this, they would waylay me in the dark, strangle me, throw me down a sewer!

They would sneak upon me in the night, in my bed and garrot me! Worse even, they might kidnap me, send me back to the other side, to Vit-covici! Perhaps even to the little courtyard, to the basket which has to have fresh sand every few days!

I staggered blindly out of the Cafe-Europe, though I was not intoxicated. At all costs, no matter what the risk, I must get away.

It was no longer possible to deceive myself. It was not—had not been—any subconscious action of mine, influenced by Doctor Gratz which had produced the baffling occurrences.

And the hand of Fate was against me, that was clear. In one breath, Bretoff had furnished me with an alibi so I need no longer fear arrest for the doctor's murder, while at the same time he cast over me a shadow much deeper, much more deadly.

I WENT home, set to work. For two days, without ceasing except for necessary food and sleep, I wrote. A thousand sheets I covered with scrawlings—at the end I had four pages. But they were good. It would take the most expert of the experts to discover that these pages were not

written by the father of Anna Huss.

I called her up. Reluctantly, she agreed to meet me. I went to her home. It was an elegant dwelling, expensive furniture, rich rugs, handsome paintings. There was a bowl full of fruit, carafes on a side table glowing scarlet and amber in the flames from the fireplace. But she did not offer me food or wine!

"I will tell you how it is, Max," she said. "I have decided to have nothing more to do with you."

"But Frau Anna—"

"It is no use pleading."

A less perceiving man might have called her beautiful, in her severe black dress with the neck cut in the deep V in front, the single chain of silver beads around her slender throat. But to me, she was merely an idle woman who enjoyed all the luxuries of life, while I, a citizen doing useful work, was compelled to exist virtually on a pauper's stipend.

I tried to keep my eyes fixed on hers, but against my will they kept straying to that so-white throat.

"I have something to show you." I took out the carefully prepared letter.

"It's no use, Max. I will come right out and tell you what my friends are saying. They suspect you."

"Me?"

"Of being implicated in poor Jan's death. Some of them say they talked to Jan upon the day he disappeared. He told them he was searching for you—he had something perhaps not too pleasant to say to you."

A little of the color drained out of my face. But I made no other sign.

"It is false, Frau Anna. How could other than a heart-true friend come here, as I have today, with this message I have risked so much to get to you?" I held it open, so she could not but see her "father's" writing.

Against her will, Anna Huss seized it. She read it through. Then she turned from me, collapsed into a chair, her arms covering her eyes. Her shoulders shook with a tremendous convulsion of sobs.

I waited. I could hardly bring myself not to ask immediately for the money, but it would have been fatal. I bit my lips—and waited.

Finally, I cast the dice. I moved toward the door.

"I had thought you might want me to do something for him, Anna," I said. "That bit about the red-hot needles — it actually tore my heart. But since you do not care enough—"

"Wait!" Her voice was muffled. "Wait, Max!"

I repressed all indications of a smile. "Yes?"

"I will do whatever you suggest. I will give you the money."

MY spirits rose. I would collect the money, vanish from the streets of Yorkville. In ten days, a stranger will appear in the sleepy towns of Honduras—a stranger with plenty of money in his pockets, nothing to worry about, no work to do.

He will much resemble Max Vyrek, but he will not be Max. For I, myself, will have eliminated that individual. All that bothers me is that already there seems to be another Max. Before I am prepared to shed one identity, I have unwillingly acquired another. It remains to be seen whether I can deal with him so easily.

Woman-like, the widow Huss had said "Yes," but she did not mean yes! Not yet, not right away. Days passed. Still she promised to get the money, but it was not forthcoming. She had a thousand excuses. She had to see her banker—to consult with her lawyer. It was necessary to sell securities—her funds were tied up. She was ill, unable to discuss business. Accursed woman! No cat ever played with a mouse as tantalizingly as she played with me.

Every time the phone rang, I leaped eagerly to it, hoping it was the long-awaited call. One time I answered that *Verdammt* black instrument it was Manfred. He was jovial—yes, too jovial.

"Want to see you, Max."

I told him I was busy.

"But it's important—it would mean something to you."

I could understand it would be important, but I regretted my inability.

"A little job in your line, Max—know what I mean?"

"Indeed, yes." I knew what he

meant. A job involving a corpse, but, this time—I feared—my own.

He said he would come around to see me if I could not come to him. I insisted I should be out. Finally, he laughed softly, and hung up. I did not like the sound of that laugh.

I carried the gun with me constantly. I would scarcely unlock the door for Frieda. I was so jumpy the sound of a rat among the bottles of embalming fluid nearly drove me frantic. I decided to escape from the house in some manner, money or no money.

CHAPTER V

Crimson Shadows

I DISCHARGED Frieda—paid her up to today. She grumbled because I did not give her any warning or pay her a week's wages. I was in no frame of mind to allow such petty annoyances to rankle.

Then I arranged for the garage where I hire my hearses to send one to my place for a coffin. I would leave it right inside the door. There would be a note on it. They were to take it. They couldn't know the body inside would be alive.

While I was waiting for the hearse to come for me, the telephone rang. I threw back the lid of the coffin, climbed out; answered. It was Anna Huss.

"At last," she said, "I have the money, ready. Come quickly—I will give you a check."

A check? What I needed was cash. But a check I can get cashed, *hein*? So back in the coffin I concealed myself. The hearse arrived. I was loaded in and driven away. A quarter of a mile from my establishment, I raised the lid and knocked on the glass behind the driver. He nearly ran into a truck, he and his helper were so scared.

"To the house of the widow Huss," I told him. "And wait for me."

Anna may have been surprised at having a hearse drive up to her front door—she must have been more so to

see me descending from the rear step. But she did not show it.

"Promise me you will hurry this money, with all possible speed, to my father?" she said.

I looked her straight in the eye.

"On my word as a gentleman," I declared.

She seemed satisfied. She handed me a slip of paper. I could scarcely read it. My eyes were blurry.

Pay to the order of . . . MAX VYREK
The sum of . . . TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS—(\$10,000.00)

"But where would I get it cashed," I asked.

She had thought of this.

"I have arranged with the bank," she said. "They will turn over the money to you."

"You have been very thoughtful."

I bade her goodbye. I do not expect ever to see her again. I trust she will not even hear from me, or about me. She can well afford the money. And if it makes her feel better about her father, it is well spent.

I returned in the hearse. I was not in such a bad way, after all. The police were after me. Jan Paldy's crowd might like to get me alone for a little questioning. Manfred's assassins would doubtless slit my gullet if they had the chance. But I have friends. Indeed, yes. Ten thousand of them.

I paid the man at the door for driving the hearse and tipped him a little extra for keeping his mouth shut. Then I called the janitor of my building—a white-haired, pink-cheeked old man with the face of a saint; and the mind of a child of ten. Walter has been very useful to me—people trust him so readily. Also, he never asks embarrassing questions, and a little money pleases him much.

I explained why I cannot go to the bank, myself. I was very careful to give him explicit instructions. He is to go to the bank, get the money, telephone me. I will then tell him where to meet me downtown.

ALREADY, he had been gone half an hour. He ought to have phoned me before this, but I knew I

must not become agitated. Nothing could have happened to him. Unless he had suddenly dropped dead or been held up by bandits. It was not likely. This city was quite free from crime.

A knock on the door! There was a sinking sensation at the pit of my stomach. That can't be Walter; he'd have phoned. I took off my shoes and tiptoed to the door. The knock again! It must be police. Manfred's men would not trouble to knock. They'd break down the door.

I poised the gun. Perhaps the easy way is to pull the trigger, now. The man outside was speaking softly.

"Frieda!"

What infernal trickery is this I thought! Frieda no longer works for me, since this morning. Possibly it is some relative.

"Who is it?" I asked boldly.

"Walter," came the answer.

My senses staggered. *Walter!*

I flung open the door, and stood glaring at him.

"You blockhead oaf! I ordered you not to come back here. You were to telephone when you had the money."

He stared at me, eyes popping out of his head.

"I—I haven't got the money, Mister Vyrek."

"You haven't *what!*"

"I—I gave it to you."

The room began to whirl around me, dizzily. I dragged him inside, and slammed the door.

"You gave me no money, you thieving idiot!"

"I swear I did, sir. Down there at the bank. How did you get back here so quickly?"

"I haven't been out of this place since you left, numbskull!" I had him by the throat.

"But I saw you," he gasped. "You came up to me, after I had the money. I was about to phone you. But you said, 'Give it to me; I will take it now, Walter.' I can prove this."

"You prove only you're an utter imbecile."

"Look!" He pulled out a five dollar bill from his pocket. "You gave it to me. Half of it for me; half, you said, for Frieda. You told me you would

not be home for a while."

Now I knew he was lying. The colossal effrontery of the doddering ignoramus! To steal ten thousand of my money and give me back five of it!

I flung him on the floor; shaking his feeble frame so that his head banged on the boards. I did not stop until he was limp, his tongue lolling out, his eyes glazed. When he was dead I searched him. It is then I heard a voice—a voice that almost stopped the beating of my heart. It was my voice!

tie. They are the ones I have on! Even the pin, the little American flag which I wear in my lapel, I see there, as if I am gawking in a mirror which has no frame and no substance. There is the livid scar from my right cheekbone to the point of the jaw; there the discolored tooth which that cheap dentist put in for me.

But it is no reflection at which I am looking. For in my hand I had no gun—but in the hand of this other man there is a pistol!

It does not shoot, this automatic;—it clouts me, stuns me. Instantly, I

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PRICE



FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"There's no money in Walter's pockets, Max."

Slowly, fearfully, I looked up.

I WAS gazing at myself! For one long paralyzed moment, I was transfixed. There was only one difference between me, as I know myself through all these years, and this replica of me at which I gaped. The suit is of the same cloth as mine, so with the shoes; the spats identical with the ones I am wearing this very minute. The lilac shirt, the dark purple

was fighting for my life, with fists, feet, teeth. But it was as if there was a venom in my veins. I could not fight with the brutality the occasion demands. I had the inescapable sensation of living that hideous nightmare of the Axe. Again, I was trying to kill myself.

I struck, kicked and tried to bite;—I managed to drag the knife from my pocket, but I could not stab myself through the heart!

This other-me was showering fierce blows upon my skull. Shooting flames

exploded before my eyes. I collapsed in agony on the floor. I did not care. I could no longer comprehend. My soul must be inside the body of the devil I now saw dimly through a haze of blood.

There flashed through my mind, as pictures on a screen,—the faces of Manfred, the clerk at the Turnverein, Doctor Gratz, Frieda, Bretoff . . . they could not all have been wrong.

Here, now, above me—hammering blows upon me—upon this defenseless carcass—was the evidence they were not!

I slumped face down upon the floor, unable to stir. I did not even know whether I was yet alive. I felt a fist under my chin and my head was forced up. I opened my eyes to see myself, but the fiend was speaking—and it was no longer my voice!

Son of Satan! It is the voice of Jan Paldy—

"You are right, nevertheless," it said to me. "You thought you trapped yourself, Max. And you were correct. Ever since the beginning, when first I suspected you, it has been your own greed, your own cruelty and calousness that has trapped you."

"You are dead," I mumbled thickly.

"No. I was near dead when you threw me in the river. But I did not depart this world—there was a spark left. The shock of cold water brought me to. A passing garbage scow saw me struggling feebly to remain afloat, pulled me in. I was rushed to a hospital."

"You are a ghost!" I insisted weakly. "You could not have gone to a hospital. I went the rounds with Anna; you were not there."

He nods at me. "Under a false name. I had just sense enough left to give it, instead of my own. To ask for Doctor Gratz."

"He is dead," I whisper. "I killed him—as I killed you!"

"There you tell the truth," Jan Paldy gritted. "You murdered my friend—the surgeon who made it possible for me to bring you, at last, to justice."

Dimly I began to comprehend.

"With Gratz' aid," he continued calmly. "I was patched up. It took

a while. I was in the hospital when my funeral was held."

MY last hope that I was insane, that I was imagining this, that it was not actually happening—now departed. There was a funeral then—but it was not Jan Paldy's cortege that went to the cemetery, not his bones that rested in the casket.

"It was necessary," Jan rolled me over with the toe of his shoe, so I sprawled on my back and looked dumbly up at him, "that you should believe I was dead. Gratz secured another corpse from the charity ward of his hospital. On it was strapped my wrist-watch; my clothes were given to the dead man and he was set afloat in the water.

"No—you are right—it was not lawful, not exactly decent. But if that poor nameless devil, whose body we used to trick you, had known what a monster you were, he would have been glad to have his rotting flesh used for such a cause."

I could do nothing but groan.

"Myself," he said, "I would have gone to the police. But I, too, like you, risk deportation. And then I had no proof. But there was another way. The throat wound which you have given me, healed well—the blade had not severed an artery, had torn only a long gash. But the slashes upon my face—they would not heal. There had to be skin-grafting.

"So, since the long nights of pain had to be endured, why not have some good come of them? Why not have the skin-grafting, the plastic surgery, done to remake my face *not like mine but like yours!* Doctor Gratz had pictures taken of you, many of them; Anna wrote down details about your clothing. The rest was easy."

I was coughing blood now. "Why—why did you not kill me, Jan?"

"I am not like you—a creature of the cave. I don't want to have blood on my soul. If I had known that in your madness you would kill a poor harmless old man like Walter I never would have let him come back here. I followed him but I was too late."

I could not think very well now. Something puzzled me.

"But you must have saved me from the police, yourself," I said. "It must have been you who went to the Cafe-Europe and denounced Manfred—you who furnished me with my alibi."

"Alibi?" his tone was mocking. "To make Manfred believe you had publicly denounced him and all he stands for? It would have been better for you if the police had found you guilty."

He laughed. Through the mist of crimson which was over my eyes he had the face of a demon. It was my face, but somehow different—His words were like the waves of a black sea roaring in my ears.

"I knew you'd killed Gratz, when I found him dead. I had not expected that to happen, the doctor had been so sure he could handle you. But I knew when I found him. That's why I let myself be seen leaving his office—so they would suspect you. But then they could find no proof that the doctor was murdered so I gave you respite.

"Bretoff knew it all the time—like Anna. He only said I was at his place at the same time I was seen leaving Gratz' office. It was later when I denounced Manfred. He was not there but Bretoff and the others who heard me and told me hate you—they were careful to lie about the time. Manfred will get you, even if the police do not

take you first for murdering poor Walter. Manfred will have you sent back—to the other side. You know what will happen there!"

I KNEW, but I did not care any more. The crimson haze still lingered, as it does now. I am confused, as is natural when one has lost all sense of time.

There are heavy footsteps in the hall, outside. Or is it still the hall? It is hard to see—to remember. Perhaps that was long ago—perhaps but a few moments. I cannot tell whether it is a trick of my brain which makes me hear, too, the "*Marsch! Marsch!*" of knee-booted feet, the clump of rifle butts . . .

But Jan is wrong. I will not go back—why should I hear him laugh so mockingly? I twist my head. Here on my left lapel, just above the little enameled flag are two pins. The heads of those little pins are not white glass—no!

I bite them . . . so! There is a roaring in my ears. My world is falling in upon me. Suddenly it all comes clear . . . I am in the little courtyard at Vitcovici once more. I am down, caught—trapped. Above me, I myself, stand—swinging something which glitters. I struggle. I try to rise. There is a flashing arc—*The blow falls!*

NEXT ISSUE

WINGS FOR THE DEAD

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MADNESS FOR MILADY

By
ARTHUR K. BARNES

*Author of "Zombie! Zombie!",
"Wings of the Harpy," etc.*

The Dread Night of Lunacy
Looms Over Neva Turner
When Cobwebs of Greed
Entwine Her Life!

THE body was dismembered, more completely than by the blast of a Nazi bomb. An arm, its slender fingers outspread as if in protest, lay on the floor. One leg, severed below the knee, stood weirdly on its toes poised for instant flight. While the head rested upright in one corner, eyes staring blankly through the window, lips curved in a secret smile, trembling it seemed on the verge of laughter at some horrid jest.

Light footsteps sounded in the darkness, a curtain rustled. Then a small figure stepped upon the hardwood platform and snapped a switch. Electricity burned dimly. Over the huge plate glass window facing the street a neon sign began to blink. "Milady, Inc.," it said.

Inside the show window, Neva Turner stood with hands on hips surveying the waxen forms which it was her task to clothe appropriately with milady's accessories—hats, hose, gloves, jewelry in the height of fashion.

Neva was tiny, a bundle of nervous energy as her thin fingers flew about her task. The head was placed upon its pedestal, covered with a rakish pill-box hat with veil. The basilisk eyes seemed to follow the girl as she moved about the window - display. The frozen smiling lips almost twitched in delight at the macabre joke which was about to be revealed.



Did Neva Turner harbor a monster in her subconscious?

Neva hated the head. It gave her the creeps. It took a definite effort of will to tear her eyes away from it and concentrate on the rest of her job. She forced herself to anticipate her regular Friday night dinner date with her fiance, Jack Frampton, which would follow as soon as she was through.

Next came the two graceful arms, both fitted with smart kid gloves and elaborately carved bracelets. Finally Neva approached the knee-length leg, balanced so carefully on its invisible pedestal. She carried a sheer silk stocking, preparatory to slipping it on the sock-form. Pausing, Neva playfully extended her own leg beside the artificial one, comparing the two with humorous judiciousness.

"Not so bad," she decided with a giggle. "A little slender, perhaps, but not at all bad, Miss Turner!"

Suddenly there was a distant rumble, the sharp rattle of a window pane. The head began to nod rhythmically on its stand. Neva's hand flew to her throat as her pulse leaped in fright. Then she smiled sheepishly. It was only another little earthquake, one of many that shook the town these recent hours, indicating that the Beast still stirred beneath the earth's crust.

The day before, a devastating quake had rocked the entire Imperial Valley, leaving towns in shattered ruin and taking a staggering toll in death and injury. Milady, Inc., smartest lady's accessories shop in the entire Valley, was housed in a modern quake-proof building—so the lease read, at any rate—and had suffered negligible damage. It was one of the few businesses in that town which remained open.

NEVA shook off her nervousness and picked up the bodiless leg, started to slip the silken stocking over its toes. The limb was ice-cold to the touch. It was heavy. It gave slightly under the pressure of the girl's fingers. It dropped to the floor with a soft thud.

Horror welled deep in Neva's chest like slow-boiling lava. It crushed her fluttering heart with iron grip, bubbled into her throat. Momentarily terror throttled it down, leaving Neva's mouth working silently and awfully in a vain endeavor to scream.

The painted eyes in the head seemed to wink with unholy joy. Then Neva's horror burst through in shriek after insane shriek, shattering the quiet of the shop with a wild cacophony of fear.

The leg was human.

Lights blazed in the rear of the building; voices shouted, questioning. Footsteps pounded. Two men burst into the main room of the store. The leader was a short but very muscular young man with violently red hair. He was Jack Frampton, Neva's fiance, and he stared with a sense of shock at the girl's face working in an ecstasy of terror.

"Good lord, Neva!" he cried, gathering the girl in his arms. "What's happened, kid?"

"Oh, my God, Jack!" she moaned. "It's human! My God, Jack, it's real!"

She burrowed shuddering into the man's arms, sagging in a half faint. Frampton stared around in bewilderment, then raised his eyebrows at the man who had followed him in. The latter, heavy-jowled and in his early forties, was Dr. Erasmus Pearce. His eyes were intent upon the girl, and unspoken thoughts glittered in their roving depths like salt on candle flames.

"Something," hazarded the doctor, "has scared the daylight out of her. She's overworked, anyhow, nervous. Shouldn't be here slaving day and night. Ought to be resting. Put her down here."

Frampton deposited the half-conscious girl on a couch. While the doctor ministered to her, he went to the window. Ten seconds examination gave him the complete picture. His stomach crawled as he hefted the dismembered leg.

Dr. Pearce, when Frampton called him over to see, was less concerned. Dead flesh held no terrors for him.

"Most theatrical," he said drily. "If it's a joke, it's in very bad taste. Of course it was a nasty shock to come across this while working, and no doubt Neva is still upset from the nerve-racking experience of a major earthquake, but doesn't it strike you she's a little too overwrought?"

From a medical man of Pearce's standing, this suggestion came as a disturbing one to young Frampton. He gazed covertly at the girl, obviously on

the verge of hysteria. He bit his lip thoughtfully, then crossed to the sofa and sat down gently beside her. Dr. Pearce joined them.

"Now look, Neva," Frampton urged quietly "It's not so bad as all that. Try and get hold of yourself. I'm here, and nothing's going to hurt you. After all, it's just an old—er—" He swallowed.

Neva Turner then looked up, tried a shamefaced smile. It was not a great success.

"It wasn't so much the leg," she said tremulously. "But last night I had a nightmare in which I cut off the leg of a girl and put it in the show window. Finding it there just like I dreamed—Ugh!" She shivered.

"Nightmare!" Pearce essayed a hearty laugh. "Well, I should think, after what we went through yesterday! Still. . . It was quite a coincidence, though. Shouldn't the police be notified at once?"

Frampton stared from one to the other. Was there an undercurrent here, or was he fancying things? On the pretext of examining the limb again, he got Dr. Pearce away from range of the girl's hearing.

"Something is on your mind," he said bluntly. "What is it."

"Well, after all, how did the leg get there? And why? Something to do with Neva's dreaming? I'm wondering if perhaps she didn't mention that nightmare to that precious guardian of hers, Carl Grandin, and he—"

A third voice broke in, dripping with scorn.

"The wicked guardian, eh? Oh, my dear doctor!"

Pearce and Frampton whirled to face the newcomer who had come up toward them unheard. He was tall and thin, with dark hair forming a widow's peak to give him a slightly satanic cast. He was Carl Grandin, Neva's guardian. He, together with Neva and Dr. Pearce, was an equal partner in the shop enterprise. His quick-darting eyes took in the stricken girl, the dismembered leg, the wary expressions on the other two men.

"I see. Someone has frightened Neva, possibly with a memento of the quake. You suspect me, believing I tried to scare the poor girl to death

so as to come into control of the Turner fortune, or some such rot. Well, Frampton," he turned to the younger man, "for your information, the fund I hold in trust as Neva's guardian is not large, and is shared by her half-sister, Norma. To dispose of them both is a bit too melodramatic for me. No, the shop is my livelihood, and I'm too good a businessman to dress my windows with human legs, thus inviting ruin within the space of a month."

Pearce and Grandin glared at one another in mutual dislike. Frampton had to admit to himself, however, that Grandin had no apparent motive for such a ghastly joke as putting a human leg in the show window. Neva and Norma Turner, he knew, would come into some twenty thousand dollars on their twenty-fifth birthdays, moneys now administered by Grandin.

Neva, already having received a small amount upon reaching her majority, had invested it in the accessory shop with Grandin and Pearce. Since then she had worked night and day to make the business go. Its success was still in doubt.

The whole thing was distasteful to Frampton because Neva was not one who could stand prolonged hard work. She was underweight, highly emotional, not at all strong. The red-haired youngster was eager to protect the delicately beautiful girl for the rest of her life, but she wouldn't marry and quit the shop so long as the possibility of success hinged on her.

NOW Frampton poured oil. "Let's not fly off half-cocked. No one is accusing anyone else of anything. There's an explanation of this and we'll probably regret harsh names later on. Right now I think the most important thing is to get Neva in bed and to sleep. Dr. Pearce, will you—" There would be no dinner date that night.

Pearce nodded. "Of course. A sedative at once. I'll help her upstairs." He supported the still dazed girl as they slowly left the shop by a rear door.

All three lived in rooms above the shop. Dr. Pearce, specialist in psychiatry and nervous disorders, had his office and living quarters overlooking the street. Neva and Grandin each had a

separate four-room suite at the rear of the two-story building.

Grandin turned to Frampton when the two were alone.

"At the risk of seeming to take petty vengeance for Dr. Pearce's nasty remarks about me, may I point out that he might know something about this?" He pointed to the gruesome leg.

"I realize that a doctor has access to dead bodies more easily than anyone else. But for what motive? The whole thing's crazy."

"Pearce invested two thousand when we started the shop, largely because he was infatuated with Neva, and agreed to double the amount if there was any promise of success. Now that Neva's affianced to you, he wants to get out of his bargain. The only way is to wreck the shop's chances. I overheard his quick suggestion that the police should be notified at once. Remember?"

"I see." Frampton nodded thoughtfully. "Unfavorable publicity. Quick ruin."

"Exactly." Grandin smiled knowingly.

It was only after Frampton was driving home through the night that he saw the real significance of those brief passages with Pearce and Grandin. There was friction between them; each obviously suspected the other. The only conclusion was—Frampton's heart began to thump—someone else with access to the shop must have put that leg in the show window. And although he naturally discounted Neva's silly dream, he was suddenly glad he had postponed immediately informing the police. For who, besides Neva, Pearce, and Grandin, could have a key?

FOR seeming hours Neva Turner lay in the darkness, wide-eyed and fearful of sleep, fighting the soothing action of the sedative. Gradually, however, her eyelids drooped and her breathing quieted. And presently the trapdoor of her mind opened to plunge her into the black depths of slumber...

She seemed to dream. She was moving through the musty dimness of a cellar, vaguely reminiscent. In the center were the outlines of a massive table. On the table was the figure of

a young woman; she was squirming nakedly in great pain, pawing pitifully at the stump of what had once been her right leg. It had been cut off raggedly and still bled slowly, like newly-butchered beef.

As in a trance Neva felt herself going through actions automatically, as if forced by some power stronger than her own will. Somehow there was an ugly cleaver in her right hand. She advanced upon the nude girl, striving to twist the latter's head around to see the face. A vague horror pervaded her. She seemed to suspect the injured girl's identity, yet revolted at the thought of making sure.

The girl refused to turn her head. Then Neva's right arm rose, chopped sharply down—

There was a hiatus in the terrible nightmare, and when Neva dreamed again she was creeping through the front of the shop. Though it was dark, she sensed familiar objects with the peculiar illogic of dreams. She tiptoed up to the show window and slyly inserted an object therein. She giggled horribly

Neva sat bolt upright in bed with the sound of horrid laughter ringing in her ears. There was a banging on her door and Grandin's voice shouted,

"Neva! Open up! What's the matter?"

It was only then that the girl realized that she herself had been laughing wildly in her sleep. She stumbled in fright to the door, opened it to let Grandin and Dr. Pearce, pajama-clad, come in.

"My dear!" cried Grandin. "What on earth is the matter? You were kicking up such a fuss that I thought surely there must be a prowler!"

Neva smiled shakily. "Another nightmare, I guess." She gave an incoherent account of her dream. "I—I even thought the mutilated girl was Norma, my own sister. It must have been caused by what—what happened earlier this evening, because I even dreamed I put the—the arm in the show window." She shuddered violently.

There was a sudden pregnant silence. Grandin and Pearce exchanged questioning glances, then carefully veiled the thoughts in their eyes when they

looked back at the girl. Grandin excused himself. Dr. Pearce essayed a hearty laugh.

"Must've been that sedative I gave you. Sometimes they backfire and cause nightmares. Nothing to worry about." He was completely unconvincing.

Then the doctor leaned forward abruptly. "Say! You cut yourself thrashing around in bed, didn't you? Let's see that hand."

Neva raised her right hand. It was covered with drying blood. Her eyes dilated at the sight. Professionally Pearce steered the girl into the bathroom and sponged the hand with warm water. With patent puzzlement he examined her skin.

"That's odd—no wound. Must have closed up already." He avoided looking directly at her.

THEY stood about awkwardly, waiting for Grandin's return, in a mounting tension. Presently the girl's guardian reappeared. There was shock in his eyes. In a strangled voice he asked,

"Does Norma have a birthmark on her forearm anywhere?"

"Why, yes. A little blue-black spot the shape of a half-moon just below the . . ." Neva's voice trailed off to nothingness as a terrible realization dawned on her. "You mean—the arm was really—"

Neva Turner knew untouched depths of horror then. The room swam, and tides of darkness rose up to swallow her reeling senses. Her scream of fright sounded distant and unreal to her own ears. The last instant before merciful unconsciousness claimed her, she heard Grandin's worried voice.

"I think we'd better get young Frampton over here right away."

Within the hour Jack Frampton was back again in the main salon of Milady, Inc. He showed the results of hasty dressing, and his uncombed hair stood up like a shock of fiery wheat.

Carl Grandin and Dr. Pearce were seated uneasily, and at their feet lay a human arm. Its delicate structure and white skin proclaimed it feminine. It had obviously been recently hacked

from its owner. There was a dark spot a few inches below the elbow.

Frampton was speaking. "You're a psychiatrist, Dr. Pearce. What about this dream business?"

Pearce frowned. "The dreams could have been ordinary nightmares. I've had ones nearly as bad myself. But there's no explaining away the ghastly coincidence of finding this human arm in the window where Neva said she put it—in her dream."

Frampton gave a short bark of protesting disbelief.

"I refuse to be convinced Neva had anything to do with this. I know what you're thinking—that she's gone crazy and is murdering her own sister. Why, that's ridiculous! She's no more capable of—"

Dr. Pearce interrupted somberly: "All the facts point to an inescapable conclusion. Neva is very high-strung and excitable. Overworked as she is, run-down, she's unquestionably a borderline neurotic case. Has been for some time. I've warned her myself. Mental disorders are on an alarming increase these days because of the depression and war worry. Cases of split personality are by no means rare, I assure you. For Neva's sake I'm reserving final opinion till all the evidence is in. But I'm afraid she has developed, possibly under the immediate stress of the quake and its attendant terrors, a dual personality."

"Jekyll and Hyde stuff?" Frampton snorted incredulously.

"Jekyll and Hyde stuff, as you contemptuously call it, often finds its counterpart in real life. I can show you a tome full of authentic cases, split personalities with every bit as much evil in the abnormal existence as in the instance of Dr. Jekyll."

Frampton looked from Pearce to Grandin. Both seemed frankly worried. An awful doubt began to seep into his own brain. Could it be that Neva Turner, delicately beautiful as a cameo, harbored a monster in her subconscious—a sinister something that sent her skulking through the night to wreak gruesome and bloody havoc upon those she loved?

Frampton fought against the ter-

rible idea, but the more he reviewed the facts, the larger became the cancer of horror in his mind. There was an ugly pattern beginning to show through the cobweb of mystery, as yet incomplete and nebulous. But Frampton stubbornly clung to his belief that nothing was yet proved definitely against Neva. Then he had a sudden thought.

"Say! If Neva's half-sister turns up untouched, that'll prove Neva is doing nothing wrong!"

Grandin jumped up. "Of course! Why didn't we think of that? I'll get you Norma's address. She lives on a grapefruit ranch a few miles away." He hurried into his office at the rear, returning in a moment with the address on a slip of paper. "I—I hope you find her all right."

Frampton broke speed laws getting out to Norma Turner's place. It was early morning when he arrived. But he might as well have taken his time—Norma was not at home. According to the sleepy-eyed housekeeper, she hadn't been home since the day of the earthquake, two nights ago. No, she wasn't worried, as Norma often stayed away from home a few days at a time. Usually with her sister Neva, in town.

Frampton was nearly frantic then with doubt and fear. He had to find out, had to learn the truth. He scared the housekeeper to tears with his urgent questioning and demands for a list of all possible places where Norma Turner might possibly be located. Then, hounded by a driving compulsion, he dashed madly about checking up.

His amateur detective work was awkward but effective. At the end of a wild twenty-four hour search somewhat slowed down by a minor auto wreck and a traffic citation, there was no question about it: Norma Turner had vanished.

Now he was forced to risk the services of the police and the possible consequences to Neva. Posing as an insurance investigator, he inquired whether the police had record of Norma's car being damaged by the quake. They had. Badly mashed, it had been

dug out of its tomb on a side street just around the corner from Milady, Inc. It could be had by calling at the lot at the rear of the Motor Vehicle Bureau.

Frampton mumbled his thanks and lurched out. This confirmed his worst fears. Obviously Norma Turner had visited her sister on the evening of the earthquake, and had never been seen again!

It was dawn once again when he staggered into Milady, Inc. It seemed years since he had last slept or eaten or shaved. The shop was closed, on the pretext of inspection of possible damage. Tired as Frampton was, however, the sight that met his eyes as he came to report, straightened him up as if an electric bolt had passed through his body.

Dr. Pearce was waiting for him in company with Carl Grandin. They, too, were red-eyed from lack of sleep. On the counter lay another human arm, white and delicate, recently cut from the body of its owner.

"Good God!" Frampton groaned. "Another? How'd it happen? I supposed surely you'd keep a sharp lookout—"

GRANDIN ran one hand through his hair distractedly.

"We mounted guard, taking turns, but I fell asleep during my watch. It must've been hours later when Neva's screams roused us. She—there's a separate outside exit from her suite, of course. The door stood open. God only knows where she'd been. She kept moaning about the head, saying next time it would be the head. I gathered she meant that next time her subconscious fixation, or compulsion, or whatever you call it, would force her to cut off her victim's head to put in the window. There are only four forms in the window, you know: a leg, two arms, and a head. So far the first three have—" he swallowed noisily.

Dr. Pearce nodded, then added: "She's asleep now, heavily drugged. She won't stir for hours. But I examined her somewhat, and I'm forced to advise that Neva be certified at once and taken to an asylum, much as we all

love her. She's already killed her sister, we can't doubt—"

Frampton, somberly dwelling on the fact that the grisly pattern seemed to be nearing completion, suddenly broke in:

"You mean this latest arm came from a dead body, not a live one?"

"Of course. All the members were cut from a dead woman."

"But how?" cried Frampton wildly. "How did Neva do it, if she did? Where is Norma's body hidden? It can't be far from here. Neva couldn't"—he forced himself to admit the possibility—"couldn't wander through the street in nightclothes going to and from wherever she has the body concealed. Say! What about the storeroom in the basement?"

"We went all through it yesterday. All through the entire building. Nothing doing. If we extend our search further, it'll mean police interference. And if we simply do nothing, there's no telling in what direction Neva's mania may turn next. No, our duty seems clear. She should be confined somewhere, quietly in order to spare her and all of us the torture of a formal hearing. Besides, though it sounds callous to mention it now, if there's no publicity the shop may not be ruined after all."

"The shop!" Frampton was savage in mingled scorn and despair. His mind scurried about like a rat in a trap, trying to find a way out of a situation which had but one outlet. Deep in his subconscious there was a half-remembered item, stowed away earlier for examination at a later and calmer moment. He tried to pin it down, but failed.

WAS Neva insane? It was incredible. Yet, there were the facts. They admitted of but one rational explanation. Gladly would Frampton have embraced any other solution, no matter how fantastic. But there was none. He even considered the possibility of hypnosis, but he knew that no person can be hypnotized against his will, especially a nervous, energetic girl like Neva. Besides, a hypnotized person cannot be forced to

do something essentially repugnant to him. No, that was not the answer.

Frampton would even have been willing to suspect either Dr. Pearce or Carl Grandin of unholy machination. But, although their animosity apparently had lessened under the stress of common trouble, the fact remained that they had each suspected the other at first. How could that be reconciled with complicity?

Grandin terminated the brief council of war by urging that they wait a little longer before taking action, in hopes that Neva, carefully watched, would lead them to her half-sister's body. On this horrible note they broke up. Frampton left, with only that one tiny forgotten fact, nagging deep in his subconscious for expression, to give him hope.

And then, quite suddenly, he thought of something else. There was another person who might have access to the shop. Why not Norma Turner herself? Did this fit in anywhere? Frampton pressed his fingers to his temples. He must think . . . think . . .

NEVA TURNER lay in the blackness of her bedroom, fighting a desperate but losing battle against the powers of darkness that besieged her mind. It was three days now since her last dreadful experience in the half-dream, half-real world through which she moved as a murderess.

They had watched her. Night and day she had been conscious of eyes following her warily. Outwardly bluff and hearty and reassuring, Dr. Pearce nevertheless noted her every movement with clinical sharpness. Her guardian, Grandin, while trying to relieve her of her shop duties as much as possible, continually stared at her with a horrid, fascinated expectancy. She had even detected growing doubt and incipient loathing in the eyes of her lover, Jack Frampton.

Her insistent questions—about her nervous condition, or about her sister's whereabouts—were skilfully parried. She was told she must rest. Yet it was impossible to be calm while intercepting glances of suspicion and horror.

She knew what was in their minds.

She had overheard them talking about dissociated personality. They thought she was going insane by degrees, unbalanced. The idea struck her as ludicrous and she tittered loudly in the darkened room. The sound rattled oddly about the walls and frightened her to silence again. There was a sense of watchfulness, of tense waiting. Outside her suite, Neva knew, the men were awaiting in dread—what? Something, she remembered drowsily, about a head. Outraged nature asserted itself. Neva Turner slept. . . .

She moved again through the terribly familiar cellar, dim and reeking with the unforgettable odor of blood. The same heavy table was mistily outlined there. On it was the incredibly mutilated body of the girl. Both arms, as well as one leg, had been hacked off at the joints. Neva felt a vague amazement that the tortured creature could still live, whimpering in her agony.

Driven by an invisible power that was irresistible, Neva again approached the naked girl. With one hand she seized the girl's hair to pull the head back, exposing the throat. In her other upraised hand was the inevitable red-stained cleaver.

Even in her seeming dream, successive waves of sheerest terror swept over Neva. She was—she was about to complete the pattern of horror, slice off the girl's head and carry it to the shop window. Desperately her saner self fought against the urge to kill, tried to stop herself from twisting that pitiful head around. If it proved to be her own sister—Neva Turner's mind rocked on the verge of total madness. One more shock was all that would be necessary to push her over the brink into irrevocable insanity.

The victim's quivering head slowly twisted round, the cleaver raised as if drawn by invisible strings. . . .

A sudden burst of alien sound shattered Neva's trance-like condition! She felt herself roughly jerked. Awakening ever so slowly, she stared with drug-dazed eyes at the scene before her.

She was in the cellar, all right, and she recognized the heavy table. But she was not standing above a chopped-up

human body, nor was there any bloody cleaver in her hand. Instead, she lay upon a pallet, slightly upraised as Jack Frampton's husky arm held her close to him. In his other hand he held a contraption resembling an elaborate pair of headphones attached to a microphone.

FRAMPTON spoke, to someone out of Neva's line of vision, and his voice trembled with contempt and fury. "So it was the wicked guardian, after all! And conniving with a doctor so utterly depraved that he would use his weapons of mercy and healing to destroy the sanity of an innocent girl! Your plot was diabolically conceived, Grandin, and cleverly executed. Especially the little scene where each of you pretended to suspect the other. That anticipated all my possible suspicions, set them up as straw men, and knocked them flat. That really threw me off the track. You almost had me believing the whole thing."

Neva struggled to a sitting position, her head clearing.

"What is it, Jack? What's happened? Have I done anything more . . ." Her voice trailed off in horrified despair.

Frampton squeezed her reassuringly.

"You've done nothing, Neva. Now or any other time. You're the intended victim of as despicable a plot as any I ever heard of. Grandin wanted control of your and Norma's money. Together with Dr. Pearce, they wanted control of the shop, which was obviously headed for big financial success, especially since the quake smashed up most of the competition. He didn't have the guts to murder you outright, so he planned with Pearce to drive you insane, have you placed in an asylum out of the way, and retain complete control of everything. See this outfit?"

He waved the headphone-microphone device savagely. Neva nodded without comprehension.

"Well," grated Frampton, "it's a hypnobioscope. With it a skilled operator can reach the subconscious of a sleeping person. Its primary purpose was to teach during sleep, and has been used notably at the naval training school at Pensacola. It has lately been developed into a method of breaking

down subconscious phobias and harmful inhibitions. But—and here's the point—with this gadget, the operator can control a person's dreams!"

Neva's eyes widened. Frampton nodded bitterly.

"Get it now? Our kindly physician here drugged you to sleep, then slipped into your room to put the hypnobioscope on you, then made you dream a ghastly nightmare in which you cut off the living arms and legs of your sister and stuck them in the show window. Then they added a subtle build-up of horrified looks and purposely false-sounding reassurances. Combined with your overworked, neurotic condition, it was guaranteed to send you stark, raving crazy, convinced you were living a dual existence, one good and one evil."

Neva Turner shuddered as she realized how dreadfully near she had been to a living death, a mad girl caged with a pack of other insane persons, dwelling in a world of phantasms. Then she remembered.

"But—what about the—the arms that were found in the window? Were they—What about Norma? Is she—"

NNEVA clambered unsteadily to her feet, to get a better look at the heavy table and what lay on it. She had one horrified glimpse of a mangled body, with Grandin and Dr. Pearce standing in confused and uncertain watchfulness in the shadows. Then Frampton swung her sharply around, buried her face in his coat.

"Yes," he said in a low tone. "It's Norma. But you had nothing to do with it. She came here to see you the night of the quake, and was caught in it. She was either killed outright or badly injured. If it was the latter, then she managed to make her way here to seek her guardian's help.

"Grandin saw a ready-made opportunity to achieve a desire he'd long been thinking about. He hid the dead girl down here, and he and Pearce swung into action with their hasty but well-planned plot. You were made to dream horrible things, while these butchers made them seem to come true bit by bit. Tonight was to be the payoff—you were to awaken holding Norma's chopped-off head in your hand.

"They made only one or two small mistakes. The first was that you had apparently attacked a living girl, whereas Pearce let slip that the arms and legs were from a dead body. He overplayed his hand a bit there, trying to make your dreams as horrific as possible. That set me to thinking. So I did a little hurried research on split personality, and found that in such cases the patient never remembers anything that he has done in his other state. So I—"

There was a stir across the dim cellar. Grandin, recovered from the shock of exposure and frustration, had made silent contact with Dr. Pearce.

"We shall have to alter our plans," he said significantly. "We wanted the young man for an unbiased witness, but he is not vital to our success."

He and Pearce moved apart, began to circle the table with Norma Turner's body on it. Neva choked back a scream.

Frampton shoved his fiancée into one corner and whipped off his coat. His teeth flashed.

"I hoped you'd try something like this. Kill us and hope to blame it on the quake. You should've done it to begin with, only you lacked the guts for outright murder of someone who could fight back."

He seized the table, jerked it so that the hideous thing upon it rolled to the floor. Then he swiftly swung the heavy piece of furniture at Pearce to smash him, trapped, against the nearest wall.

From far down in the very bowels of the earth came an all-pervading rumble. As Grandin leaped forward with the naked blade of the cleaver shining wickedly, a brick dropped resoundingly before him, then another and another in measured rhythm like the footsteps of doom. The floor suddenly heaved like a storm-struck ship. Plaster began to trickle rapidly down.

"Quake!" Grandin cried in quick fear. "The building's going!"

Abandoning the others, he ran crazily toward the stairway in the rear. He was too late. The walls, weakened by the previous shocks, suddenly gave way at the far end. Bricks burst out into the room in a veritable geyser as the back of the shop collapsed inward under the weight of tons of ruined wall

above. The ceiling gave partially with a scream of tortured metal beams.

FRAMPTON made a flashing estimate of the situation, saw that the stairs were an exit only to annihilation, then grabbed Neva and dove underneath the heavy table. The light went out with the tinkle of broken glass. All the world seemed to be crashing in roaring ruins about their ears as falling stone hammered a deadly barrage on table and floor.

Then it was over. As if a giant hand had interposed to put an end to the carnage, a deathly silence suddenly clamped down over everything. Only a faint rustling was audible as plaster settled, hidden in the darkness and behind clouds of choking dust. Then distantly came shouting and the noise of running feet, the far-away scream of a fire siren.

Frampton cautiously pulled himself free from the débris which spilled in under the protective table and struck a match. In its wavering light, Neva stared up at him wide-eyed. She was undaunted; her courage was equal to anything tangible. It was only under the threat of unknown horrors that her mind had wavered.

They smiled at each other. Then Frampton took her hand and, picking his way delicately over the débris, led her to safety. After lifting her out to the hands of the first of a rescue party, he borrowed a flashlight and turned it

into the cellar of Milday, Inc. for a last look.

Dr. Pearce, pinned upright against the collapsing wall, was bowed over upon the table upon which Norma Turner had been dismembered. His skull was a bloody pulp. Over by the obliterated stairs, a queer quirk of the temblor had uncovered the battered body of Carl Grandin where it had been smothered under a ton of falling bricks.

Then even Frampton could not repress a shudder at what he saw. For the grim pattern of horror had been fulfilled to the last detail. Earthquake had set the machinery of terror into action, and by earthquake had it been ended. The plan called for a climax in which a human head should be detached from its parent body—this, too, was completed.

For Grandin had fallen throat downward on the razor-sharp cleaver in his own hand. Half-open eyes shining faintly in the glow from the torch, sitting almost upright upon the brickpile in a macabre freak of the quake, the decapitated head of Carl Grandin faced with an expression of baleful ferocity toward the man who had wrecked his ugly schemes.

Frampton shrugged violently as if to rid himself of an unclean burden, then climbed out into the fresh night air. Together he and Neva turned their backs on the ill-starred shop and walked, arm in arm, toward a life of sanity and happiness.

TIP!

FLIP!

PIP!

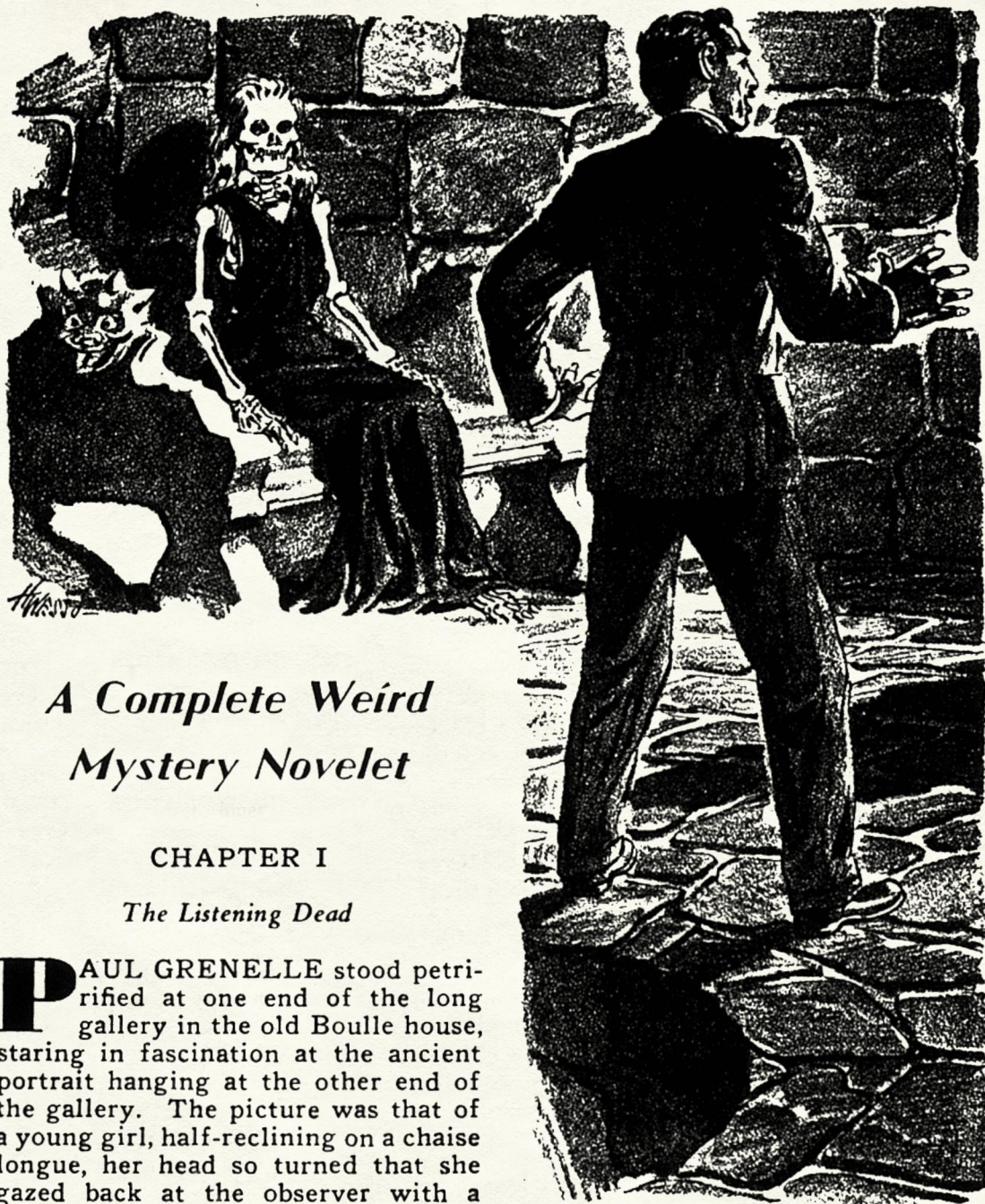
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THE TALKING



A Complete Weírd Mystery Novelet

CHAPTER I

The Listening Dead

PAUL GRENELLE stood petrified at one end of the long gallery in the old Boulle house, staring in fascination at the ancient portrait hanging at the other end of the gallery. The picture was that of a young girl, half-reclining on a chaise longue, her head so turned that she gazed back at the observer with a peculiar listening air on her long-dead face.

The early morning sun, shafting down through the skylight in the roof, fell full across the ancient portrait. It glowed upon the lovely listening face, glinted off the heavy golden hair that grew back from the broad brow in five precise waves. Then it was lost in the wide-set eyes which were the color of deep, clear amber.

A strange quiet hushed the old house. Outside, all France seemed

tensely waiting. There was not even the sound of a street vendor calling, or the *clop* of horses' hoofs, or the rattle of cartwheels on the cobblestone streets of the drowsy old town of Jamais. Like the girl in the portrait, all France seemed to be listening with dread.

Paul Grenelle was totally oblivious of everything around him, utterly lost in his absorbed contemplation. He was unaware even of Lucien Boule,

TOWER

By **EARLE DOW**

Author of "Death Docks at Dawn," "The Gallows Gheist," etc.



They stopped short at the end of the passageway

**When the Captive Dead Cry
Out for Release, Paul Grenelle
Smashes the Grim Shackles of
a Baffling, Ancient Secret!**

dragged his gaze from the lovely pictured face and turned to Boulle. A thin, whimsical smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"I'm afraid I am, Lucien. I've been in love with her since that first day I came up here to the gallery, saw the portrait and envied you the possession of it."

Boulle shrugged. "No one has a better right to it than I, Paul. After all, it was my grandfather who painted it, you must remember. Why shouldn't it come down to me? He painted it shortly after Anne was married to Louis d'Arlant, about two years before she—died."

Paul Grenelle's dark, handsome face grew troubled.

"But I can't understand why the portrait wasn't retained in either the Duvernois or Arlant family. Por-

who stood almost at his elbow. Boulle spoke in an amused, indulgent tone.

"You are quite enamored of that old portrait of Anne Duvernois, are you not, my friend? I think this is at least the twentieth time that you have come up here to stand and stare at it with your soul in your eyes. You are not falling in love with a woman who has been dead for a hundred years!"

With genuine physical effort, Paul

traits are usually painted for the sitter."

"So was this one. But you see, Paul, that was almost immediately after old Duvernois learned how useless it was to force his only daughter to marry Louis d'Arlant when she had loved another man. He had learned of her clandestine meetings with Francois de la Lune. And do you think that, after he had avenged the honor of the family by shutting her up in the old tower to die, he would allow a portrait of the shamed woman in the old Duvernois château?"

Paul turned toward the staircase leading down from the long gallery, rebellion and bitterness in his eyes.

"They were heartless barbarians in those days. Think of it! A young and beautiful girl, shut up in a dungeon tower to die, merely because there was a love in her heart that could not be denied. Killed wantonly, brutally, by a despotic old man whose soul was stiff with pride. Every time I walk the paths in the hills and look up at the towers of the old château, crouched back there in its isolation on the cliff, I wish Duvernois were living today and I could get my hands on him!"

Boulle laughed lightly as he followed Paul Grenelle toward the staircase.

The two of them started down the winding flight together.

"Francois de la Lune avenged her for you, Paul. He threw old Duvernois to his death from the top of the Talking Tower, then killed himself. Louis d'Arlant went mad and died of grief. I beg of you, don't take it so seriously, my friend. All that happened a hundred years ago. To witness your reactions, one would think it had occurred but a month ago."

They reached the foot of the staircase. Paul Grenelle paused and gazed intently into Boulle's thin, amused face.

"To me, it is as if it did happen only a month ago," Grenelle said tensely. "She has made an uncanny impression upon me. I can't bear to think of what they did to her. So young and lovely, walled up in a dungeon to starve to death! I have a peculiar sen-

sation that I cannot shake—a feeling that she is still alive. It's as though somewhere she is waiting, listening for someone to come and bring her release." He shuddered, his hands clenching. "I can't help it. Perhaps it sounds insane to you, but to me she is still alive."

Boulle's amusement faded. He took Grenelle's arm and urged him down the wide hall. Beneath Boulle's sparse, graying hair, his lean face had grown anxious.

"You aren't the only one who believes that," he whispered. "There are any number of people in Jamais who believe that she still haunts the Talking Tower. If you doubt it, just try to get somebody to go up there with you. People shun it as they would a spot accursed. Perhaps one reason is that no trace of her body was ever found. She vanished into thin air."

Grenelle stopped short, staring.

"What? But surely all they had to do was open up the old dungeon and the remains would be there!"

"Of course," Boulle agreed. "But they could never find any trace of the sealed dungeon. The only one in the Talking Tower, reached by a winding staircase that leads up through solid masonry, has never been walled in. One can walk right up the staircase and into it. If there ever was a trapdoor at the top of the staircase, it is long since gone. The dungeon is quite open to anyone who has the temerity to indulge his curiosity and obviously always has been."

"You have been there?" Grenelle asked quickly.

BOULLE'S laugh was shaky, nervous, without mirth.

"Not I, my friend! I have a fancy for healthier pursuits. After all, it is an unsavory and gloomy old place. A woman was walled up to die there. A furious old man was hurled from it to his death. Another killed himself and still another died insane with his grief."

"What became of Anne's child?"

"Paul, you are becoming obsessed with ancient history. For your own good, you should put it out of your mind. All the actors in this old

tragedy are mere fleshless skeletons now. Perhaps the best way to help you forget it is to tell you everything that anyone knows about it. I have already just about done that.

"No one knows what became of the boy. He was, of course, scarcely a year old when Anne died. Some distant relative of the family took him and nothing has ever been heard of him since. It is thought likely that they went away from France. No one knows and I'm afraid no one cares, unless it is you, my friend. Dismiss it once and for all and center your thoughts on less gloomy subjects."

"I can't," Grenelle admitted somberly. "It's impossible to rid myself of the feeling that she still lives! Somewhere she is waiting, listening and hoping." His voice lowered, grew hard. "I'm going up to the old tower, Lucien! There must be a trace somewhere of what became of her. Because no one has found it yet is no proof that it does not exist. I might manage to stumble upon it. Will you go with me?"

Boulle stared, the blood draining from his face.

"*Dieu*, no! I tell you, I prefer saner, healthier amusements. Even for a woman a sixth as old as Anne Duvernois and the treasure of a king, I would consider twice before going near that place. Come along into the gardens with me. They're terribly run down, I know. I am so poor these days. Yet it is a pleasant place to sit—"

Grenelle shook his head in refusal.

"I can't now, Lucien. I am in a hurry. I came only to see the portrait. I have several small errands to attend to. Then I have to go to the train to meet an importer who has just come over from New York and is en route to Limoges to buy porcelain. I must not be late to meet that train. Since I am the only man in *Jamais* who speaks English, our importer might get lost if I failed to be there. It is quite possible that he does not speak French."

Lucien Boulle shrugged in capitulation.

"Well, I suppose you must go, but I shall look for you soon again. If

you cannot spare time to talk with me, at least you will come to see the portrait of Anne Duvernois, eh? And I beg of you, stay away from that unholy château. Surely not for nothing is that part of the dungeon called the Talking Tower. Something must be there to give people the idea that a voice from long ago haunts the place. Stay away, my friend. Stay away!"

But as Paul went out of the old Boulle house, he was determined that that was the one thing he would not do. Before he went to the train in his official capacity of guide and interpreter to meet the importer from New York, he was going up to visit the old Château Duvernois and climb the staircase in the Talking Tower.

CHAPTER II

The Voice from the Tomb

WITHIN two hours Paul Grenelle had attended to his various errands and was climbing the last steep path that led up to the old Château Duvernois. The gaunt, old stone building, half-overgrown with vines and towering trees, gave plain evidence of its decades of desertion.

The stones were moldering and moss-grown. Not a window or door was intact anywhere in the building. Time and destructively curious people had seen to that. But time had had the château to itself for a long while now. No one wanted to encounter the wandering spirit of Anne Duvernois, since the countryside had become convinced of her frequent visitations.

Paul Grenelle passed on through the yawning entranceway, into the gloomy interior. He had counted the towers as he approached. There were thirteen of them. The last, built against the sheer cliff before which the château abutted, the gloomiest and most forbidding of all—was the dread Talking Tower.

He advanced through the echoing empty rooms, involuntarily shrinking from the dank, moldering walls, until he came to the base of the Talking Tower.

It appeared little different from the rest. There was no reason for this horror that had suddenly invaded his mind. It was there only because he knew this was the tower in which Anne Duvernois had died. The stone steps of the old staircase, leading up the narrow tunnel-like opening left through the masonry for them, were dark and shadowy, lighted only by infrequent high apertures that once had contained small windows.

His footsteps echoed down that narrow way as he ascended hurriedly, forcing himself not to look back over his shoulder. Racing up the last few steps, through the opening in the dungeon floor, he had an uncanny sensation.

This was Death's abode. It crouched there like silent doom, waiting for him to enter. . . .

He laughed and stepped out upon the floor. Low as the sound was, it crashed and reverberated through the bare, sinister dungeon like the cackle of a maniac. He shuddered, looked around hastily.

The room was no more than sixteen feet in diameter. The floor was a solid sheet of mortar, broken only by the opening through which he had just entered. Two small windows, ten feet from the floor, pierced opposite walls of the tower. The light they admitted seemed to slink in furtively, fearful of the hideous shadows. Even the ceiling, at least fifteen feet above his head, was a single sheet of mortar.

Anyone walled into this place would have no chance for escape—but it had never been walled up. That fact was as apparent as Boulle had told him it would be.

His gaze searched the grim, ancient dungeon room, hopeful, yet afraid of what he might find. He found nothing, though.

There were only the two narrow window apertures and the stairway in the entire—

His shocked gaze came to rest on what might at first glance seem to have been meant as a decoration. But Paul recognized it instantly as a gesture made in mockery, a terrible reminder of the swift retribution of an old man's wrath, though it was merely a name

written upon the wall.

It was the name old Duvernois had given the tower, after he had sent his daughter to her death. Written in thick, heavy letters of bronze, each a foot high and fully two inches wide, it was set deep into the mortar so that the letters and the face of the wall were almost flush with one another.

LE TOUR DARLANT

The Tower of Arlant. In all that shunned and deserted estate, the malignant old tower was the only reminder of Anne d'Arlant that had been allowed to exist. All the rest of the building was the Château Duvernois, but this tower in which she had died was scornfully made a thing apart. Because people said her spirit walked here and wept and cried out for release, it had also become the Talking Tower.

PAUL shook his head slowly. Remembering all those stories he had heard, he wondered why there was not at least a trace of what had become of her.

He walked across the solid floor, toward those mocking bronze letters on the wall. He halted and stood staring up at them. He could read them quite easily, but he could not reach up and touch them. They were set into the wall, ten feet above the floor, on a level with the lower casing of the window apertures.

There was nothing else to see here. There was no clue of any kind as to what might have happened here so long ago, nothing for which to stay.

Paul felt weighted down by a sense of disappointment and futility. He turned to retrace his steps toward the opening in the floor from which the staircase descended.

He stopped short and a chill fell upon him, as though he had suddenly been wrapped in a blanket dipped in ice water. He felt the hair crawl on the nape of his neck. He had heard a woman's voice, thin and faint, seeming to come from nowhere, yet to come from every cubic inch of air imprisoned in the old dungeon.

Paul felt his face blanch. His feet

seemed glued to the floor, all power of locomotion gone from them. Then the voice came again, out of nowhere, everywhere. This time it spoke intelligible words.

"Who's there?" A woman's voice, a ghost voice, there in that gloom-ridden old tower, was asking: "Who's there?"

Paul gazed wildly around the blank face of the circular walls. His ears had not tricked him. He had heard that voice. But where did it come from? Were those walls not as solid as they seemed? Had there once been an opening in them somewhere?

He flung himself into a frenzy of activity, pounding frantically upon the smooth mortar face, banging upon the walls with both fists. But in the end he stopped in hopeless resignation.

The walls were just as solid as they seemed. There was no place where an opening had been sealed up and patched over. Besides, he reminded himself with a rueful smile for his own lack of thought, even if there had once been a door in those walls where it would lead to? The tower was forty feet high and the dungeon was at the top of the tower. A door opening through those walls could open onto nothing but thin air.

He was still cursing his own stupidity when he heard the voice again, even more clearly than before. That voice, which came out of nowhere and everywhere, was begging plaintively, wearily:

"Let me out! Will no one let me out? I have been waiting so long!"

Paul felt like a man in a wild dream. Even as he did it, he wondered why he should commit so mad an act. He raced to the center of the floor and cried aloud, in answer to the voice:

"Anne! Where are you? Tell me where you are, so I can set you free!"

THEN he stood like one bereft, straining his ears, wondering if it could be possible that she might hear and answer. After a long minute the voice came again, but it merely repeated that plaintive cry:

"Will no one come to let me out? I have been here so long!"

Suddenly Paul Grenelle was afraid. Before, his nerves had been intimidated by legends and the gloom. But this was almost tangible horror.

He turned and ran across the floor to the opening from which the flight descended. He plunged down the stairs with reckless eagerness to escape from that dwelling place of doom.

When he gained the outside, his breath was rasping in his throat. He was shivering in the warm sun, yet cold sweat stood upon his forehead. An unreasoning terror possessed him. He felt that never could any imaginable circumstance drive or lure him back into the Arlant Tower.

As he turned and walked away, glancing back over his shoulder, he remembered that portrait in Lucien Boulle's gallery. He saw again the lovely listening face, with the golden hair growing back from the broad brow in five precise waves, and the clear eyes of dark amber.

He told himself that he was a fool to fall in love with a woman who had been dead for a hundred years. But he told himself in the same breath that he would exert every possible effort to solve the mystery of the Talking Tower and give that weary spirit rest. If there were no other way, one could at least blast the gloomy old pile to the ground.

He turned his gaze straight before and swung into a long, purposeful stride, back toward the drowsy little town of Jamais.

Five minutes before the time of train arrival, Paul Grenelle was at the station, pacing restlessly back and forth on the platform, waiting to meet the importer from New York. But his thoughts were not on the importer. They kept picturing that ancient portrait of Anne Duvernois, the grim, old dungeon in the gloomy Arlant Tower, and the thin voice out of nowhere that had pleaded:

"Let me out! I have been waiting so long!"

He was still trying to convince himself that his wits had been bewitched. The attempt was unsuccessful. It should not have been so difficult. This was a sane, everyday

world. Around him were all the familiar things of the twentieth century. There was the same line of ticket gates, the procession of blue-smocked porters, the watchful *gendarmes* twirling their waxed mustaches, the naked girders above him and the P.L.M. travel posters plastered on the walls of the station.

It was a sane world and he was a sane man. The fourteen-eleven was just due in from Paris. Already he could see the puffing engine and the long train of carriages coming down the track. Presently the train would be here and the importer would step out of his compartment. Most likely, like most of the Americans Paul had met, he would be laughing at the idea of the fourteen-eleven train and saying jovially:

"That's two-eleven P.M. in God's country."

YET Paul Grenelle could hear in his mind that voice of the Talking Tower. Just as clearly as he heard the familiar sounds around him now, he had actually heard a woman's voice when he had stood in the dungeon. He had never believed in the supernatural, which troubled him still more. He knew that he could not let it rest, that he would have to do something about it. After he got rid of this importer, he'd see Lucien Bouille and get his advice. Lucien was shrewd and had a level head.

Paul tried to dismiss the troublesome subject from his thoughts as the train slid smoothly to a stop. There came the noisy clatter of the train guards opening the compartment doors. The passengers began streaming toward the gates, accompanied by porters with bags slung over their shoulders at the ends of their leather straps.

Paul shook himself into attention and began to watch for a man who would look like an American. He suddenly drew himself erect and stood rigid and staring, swept by a wave of consternation and a feeling of unreality.

A girl had just got off the train and stood on the platform, looking back into the carriage as if waiting

for someone else. It was as though the girl in the portrait had emerged from the canvas, donned modern clothing and stepped onto the platform there before his eyes.

She wore a smart traveling suit and a small off-the-face hat that left all her features open to the gaze. Her hair was pure gold and it swept back from her broad brow in five precise waves. Her eyes were deep, clear amber. There was about her face a peculiar listening air.

Line for line and feature for feature, she was Anne Duvernois, come alive!

CHAPTER III

Return of the Dead

PAUL GRENELLE blinked his eyes and raised a shaking hand to brush from his brow the rime of cold perspiration that had started there.

The girl smiled suddenly as a tall, brown-haired girl emerged from the train compartment. The two young women started up the platform together, followed by a porter with two bags slung over his shoulder.

Like an automaton, forgetting all about the importer he was to meet, Paul Grenelle turned and followed the two girls toward the gate. When they reached the ticket collector there, the golden-haired girl handed over the tickets for both. Grenelle heard her say clearly:

"A man was supposed to meet me here—a Mr. Paul Grenelle. Could you point him out to me?"

The ticket collector spread his hands bewilderedly.

"*Pardon, mademoiselle. Je ne comprends pas—*"

Paul stepped forward quickly and forced his tongue to speech.

"I beg your pardon, *mademoiselle*. He does not understand English. I am Paul Grenelle. But I was supposed to meet—*Bon dieu*, you are not the importer from New York?"

The girl smiled in quick relief.

"I certainly am. The tourist office

in Paris gave me your name when it arranged to have you meet me here."

Paul bowed, his fascinated eyes clinging to her face, the face of Anne Duvernois.

"You will excuse me if I seem surprised. I was expecting a man. I was assigned to meet you and devote myself to your services during your stop-over in Jamais. You are continuing on to Clermont-Ferrand by the twenty-thirty-two train, where you will stay overnight. In the morning you will make the final run to Limoges. I will reserve your places on the train to Clermont-Ferrand."

"Then everything is quite all right," the golden-haired girl said briskly. She nodded toward the tall, brown-haired girl who had followed her off the train. "This is my friend and business associate. Olga Volhynoff, Mr. Grenelle. I am Joyce Arlant. Please, whatever does the twenty-thirty-two train mean?"

Grenelle found himself staring uncontrollably. Joyce Arlant? The Arlant Tower! He had to call upon all his reserves of sanity, force himself to civility and coherence, to answer her question. Yet he stammered a little as he spoke.

"The—the twenty-thirty-two train, *mademoiselle*? It means that— We have different train time here. We use all the hours. In your country that would be eight-thirty-two P.M."

Joyce Arlant laughed.

"Oh, I see. Thank you. I think first we ought to hunt a café, Mr. Grenelle. We weren't able to get a bite of lunch on the train, you know. The dining car was too crowded."

They went on through the gates together, talking prosaically of luncheon. Paul Grenelle's heart was hammering wildly. Over and over in his brain the thought was repeating itself monotonously:

"I knew she was still alive! I knew she was still alive!"

HE tried to maintain a casual and sane attitude. He succeeded rather well, until they were seated in the café. She turned to him with the words that he had been half-expecting, half-dreading to hear.

"By the way, Mr. Grenelle, do you know of a château—a very old and ruined château in this vicinity—known as the Château Duvernois?"

Paul Grenelle could feel the flesh crawl beneath his jacket. He caught his breath and for a moment remained perfectly silent, mustering all of his courage. Then he said levelly:

"Yes, *mademoiselle*. It is only a few kilometers distant. There is no road leading to it, only a footpath. At places the ascent is quite steep."

Joyce Arlant gazed at him steadily, her amber eyes deep. Again on her face there was that peculiar listening air.

"It would be a place like that. I want to go there as soon as we've eaten. I came quite a bit out of my way, just to see that ruined old château."

"I would advise you to stay away from there, *mademoiselle*," Paul said hoarsely. "It is an unholy place. Dark deeds were done there long ago. The influence of them still lingers there. It is a shunned and feared spot."

The amber eyes still clung to his face.

"I expected that. You see, I know what happened there. My great-grandmother died there, imprisoned in a dungeon. I know the whole story. My grandfather told it to me before he died. That's why I want to see the château."

Paul swallowed and held himself in hand only by tremendous effort.

"Your grandfather—was Anne Duvernois' son?"

"Anne Duvernois Arlant, yes. The people who brought him up told him. They were distant relatives of the Duvernois family and there were a lot of things they thought he should know. They are all dead now. He is, too, and so is my own father. I am the only one left to—to do the things my grandfather wanted done. I must go to the old tower."

"*Mademoiselle*, I beg of you—" Paul swallowed again and forced himself to coherency. "I beg of you, do not go there. It is said that the Spirit of Anne Duvernois still haunts the place. I myself, *mademoiselle*, have stood in the dungeon and heard her speak.

There is something terrible and evil there. I beg of you, do not go!"

The wide, amber eyes stared at him. Unthinkingly she raised one hand to smooth back the gold hair which grew from her forehead in five precise waves.

"I must go. I gave my grandfather my word that some time I would come here."

"But something might happen to you," Paul Grenelle interrupted desperately. "There is nothing to see. The body of Anne Duvernois was never found. No slightest trace of her was ever discovered. It is said that she was walled into the old dungeon to die, but that is not true. The old dungeon is quite open. It has never been walled up at all."

A faint curiosity came into the girl's wide stare.

"You are very vehement, Mr. Grenelle. You speak as if it were a personal matter."

"Very personal, *mademoiselle*," Paul said huskily, humbly. "For a long time I have loved Anne Duvernois, because of a portrait which hangs in the gallery of my friend. This friend is a grandson of the man who painted the portrait. And you, *mademoiselle*, are the living image of Anne Duvernois!"

JOYCE ARLANT'S voice was suddenly gentle.

"Why should that be so strange? After all, she was my great-grandmother. Anyhow, what you say only makes me more determined to go." The girl suddenly stopped short. Her gaze widened again, as if she abruptly remembered something he had just said. "You said—you said she haunts the tower? You heard her voice?"

"Yes, *mademoiselle*, only this very day."

"What did she say?"

Paul repressed a shudder, recalling with stark clarity the plaintive voice that had seemed to come out of nowhere and everywhere.

"She said: 'Will no one let me out? I have been waiting so long!'"

Joyce Arlant caught her breath.

"And you want me to stay away? More than ever now, I must go!"

"Then you must let me go with you," Paul Grenelle said unsteadily, "every step of the way."

When the three of them entered the forest on the way to the Château Duvernois, Paul Grenelle was in the lead. The path, deeply shadowed and pungent with the rotting layers of leaf mold which crunched underfoot, was so narrow that they had to proceed in single-file. Joyce Arlant was directly behind Paul and Olga Volhynoff brought up the rear.

They came into the middle of a wild, wooded valley, from which reared a rocky cliff. The plateau stood out as plainly and as sheer-sided as a huge table. Near the top of it, sunk in a deep ledge sheer against the cliff face, stood the château.

Around it were heaps of savagely strewn rock, the network of ruined foundation from which portions of the wall had long since fallen. From the main structure of the building, which was still fairly intact, reared the thirteen towers, as straight and as round as the inverted legs of a monstrous table.

The two girls stood staring up at the ancient ruins. It was Olga Volhynoff who asked:

"How did you get up there?"

Joyce Arlant said nothing. She was motionless, her deep, amber eyes intent. The strange listening look was again on her face.

"This path will take us to the north side of the hill," Paul answered, "where there are some old Roman steps hewn out of the rock. They're in a fair state of preservation, but it will take a little time to ascend them. We had better go on now."

He glanced at Joyce. She still said nothing. When she followed him as he again swung into stride, it was almost with the automatic gait of the sleep-walker. Something chilled in him as he heard her mutter under her breath:

"How sad, to see it like that, so ruined and tumbled down! It was once so beautiful!"

He repressed his impulse of fear and tried to tell himself that anyone might make such a remark, that somewhere she might have seen a picture of the old château in its original state.

But he knew there was more to it than that. The fear was growing in him as silently they climbed the long ascent, and came out at last upon the ridge where the ruins stood.

He started to speak, to say that he would lead them to the Arlant Tower. Before he could utter a word, Joyce Arlant swung past him and took the lead. There was nothing of the sleep-walker about her look or her gait now. The deep, amber eyes were alert and eager. Her step was purposeful and sure. And she moved as surely as if she knew every foot of the way, straight toward the Talking Tower.

PAUL looked at Olga Volhynoff, but she did not seem aware of him, either. She had started directly after Joyce, a curious, slightly startled expression on her face.

Now it was Paul who brought up the rear, following with feet that were strangely reluctant. His heart was pounding wildly again and he felt that the air had become heavy with menace of the unknown.

That had not been a chance move Joyce had made. She did know exactly where she was going. She took the shortest route possible through the barren, dank and gloomy old ruins, past fallen stones and the debris of time, straight to the winding staircase that led up to the dungeon in the Talking Tower.

He followed her up the narrow winding stairs as silently as the two girls had followed him up the plateau. As they stepped out into the dungeon, impelled by some impulse they could not name, Paul Grenelle and Olga Volhynoff stopped short. They huddled together close to the head of the stairs and remained immobile, watching Joyce.

She walked slowly around the bare dungeon room, with the air of one returned after a long, long time to a familiar place. She stopped and stared up at the lettering on the wall, then turned to face Olga and Paul. Slowly she shook her head.

Paul said hoarsely, in a desperate attempt to achieve the commonplace:

"You see, there is nothing here. I told you that. No trace of anything

that might have been removed."

The wide, amber eyes gazed back into his. They seemed to probe through him, into some long gone and far distant time.

"No, there is nothing. But this is not right. They could not remove the well. It was sunk into solid masonry. It was right over there." She pointed with a small, white hand to the north side of the tower. "And they could not remove the stock pole. It was there."

She pointed to the western side of the tower.

"It was heavy and tall. The chains and leg-irons on it were red with rust. At the base of it there was a heap of bones, a ghastly reminder of the other poor wretches who had died there. They could not remove that pole. It, too, was sunk deep into the masonry."

CHAPTER IV

"I Am Anne Duvernois!"

GRENELLE felt his face blanching, his skin crawling and he was cold to the heart. He tried to tell himself that somewhere she must have read that. Perhaps her grandfather had told her. Yet he knew that she was talking as one who had seen the things she mentioned. His voice shook.

"But maybe they did remove them. Maybe it's just that all traces are gone, after so long a time—"

"No!" Joyce interrupted sharply. "I tell you, this is not the place. This is the other dungeon. It was always bare, just as it is now. In the dungeon proper, there was no window, no light at all, except from four little candles. After one hoarded them and hoarded them, burning them barely an inch at a time, they were gone and there was nothing but the eternal dark.

"The only place to lie was on the stone floor. And the only place to sit was on the stone bench, with the leering satyr's head at each end of it. The stone bench was cemented to the wall, across the dungeon from the pile of

bones."

Olga Volhynoff went white as a sheet. With one trembling hand she gripped Paul's arm for support. He stood rooted, staring into Joyce Arlant's face. He could feel the veins throbbing in his neck as he set his jaws against the terror that rode him.

"But how could there be another dungeon? The only one was in the Talking Tower. This is the Talking Tower and this is the only dungeon there is."

"No," she said clearly. "This is the other dungeon. You think I would not know?"

"How could you know?" Paul said in a whisper.

A smile of ineffable yearning grew on her face. She looked upon him as one looks upon a person who has been long beloved and dearer than all the world.

"Why, my love, have you forgotten so soon? I have not. I cannot possibly forget, even if you were not standing there before me. You have changed not at all. Every line of your face is quite the same as it was then. Do you not know me, Francois, my love? I am Anne Duvernois!"

Grenelle felt a dazed comprehension creep over him, a dim sense of reminder. Was this why he had been so sure that he had loved her so long? But his tongue was stunned to silence and he could not speak.

She walked slowly toward him, her wide gaze brooding upon him.

"It is becoming clearer now. It was a terrible thing that my father did, but he was angry with us for having loved. We must hold no bitterness toward him any more. Even as he left me there to die, I forgave him. I knew that the Duvernois pride was a merciless master. And I thought of you. I thought of you to the last, Francois. To the last I had but one unalterable intent—to come back and find you again."

"And now that you have found me?" Paul asked shakily.

She smiled again and suddenly grew brisk.

"I must also find the jewels he hid in the tower—the family jewels of the Duvernois. They are worth enough

to keep us all our lives, Francois. Some of them had been handed down for generations. Many of the jewels were almost priceless. But he said that because I had shamed the name of Duvernois, no descendants of mine should ever claim the Duvernois heirlooms.

"He hid them somewhere in this tower, till he could make other disposition of them. But you hurled him to his death, Francois, and he never had opportunity to take them away. They are still here. He hid them well."

IT was Olga Volhynoff who spoke then. Her practical question seemed to make her one with the uncanny scene.

"Did he have them in a box, a case of some kind?"

Joyce Arlant shook her head.

"No. He removed them all from their cases to make a smaller bundle. He tumbled them all together and rolled them up in my shoulder scarf. It was a brocade scarf—blue brocade, as blue as the bluest sky. He whipped it from my shoulders and rolled the jewels up in it in sheer mockery. The scarf matched the gown I had on then, the gown I wore when he left me to die. But he did not hide the jewels until after he had shut me up in the dungeon, so I have to think where he might have put them. I have to think. . . ."

Paul looked dazedly around the bare wall.

"There is no place he could have put them here. Are you sure this is where he hid them away?"

"He said so." Her gaze traveled around the grim, old room. "It was the last thing he said to me, before he shut away the light of the sun forever from my face. He said that he had hidden them here in the tower. Rather than have them fall into the hands of any descendant of mine, they could remain here forever. And they have remained here, waiting for me. For you and me, Francois! We must find them, my love. We *will* find them, only I must think."

She started to walk around the floor. Her gaze went up to the nar-

row window aperture, then fairly leaped to the lettering on the wall.

"*Le tour darlant!*" she said breathlessly. "But that is not right. It was not the Arlant Tower that he named it. It was the Talking Tower." Her voice rose in a cry of triumph. "But that is it! Do you not see, Francois? Look! Do you not remember what he did? Do you not remember the fissure? Do you not remember *why* he called it the Talking Tower?"

Grenelle's eyes were upon her, transfixed. It seemed to him that far back in his brain some dim recollection stirred, but it would not grow clear. He shook his head slowly.

"No. I cannot remember."

"Then I will remind you." She broke into swift, eager speech. "When they built this tower, the last of the thirteen, they had to build it right up against the cliff wall. They had not allowed enough room for it. All this stone around here is ancient volcanic rock. The cliff against which the tower is built is volcanic formation. When they were building the tower, he discovered the fissure there. Can you not remember the fissure now?"

"I—I can't remember," Paul said dully.

"The fissure up through the rock, Francois. That long, clean fissure through which gases had escaped when the rock cooled. When the wind blew into the fissure, it sounded like voices whispering. He took a great fancy to it. Do you not remember now?"

"There seems to be something, somewhere in my head," Paul said. "But it is not clear enough for memory."

"You do not remember how, when they built the tower against the cliff face, it sealed the fissure and the wind could whisper through it no more? He missed it. He had them open it up again through the walls of the tower, so he could hear his whispering voices."

"Look, Francois. Look at those letters—*le tour darlant*. Do you not see how they are wrong? If they were meant for the Arlant Tower, every initial letter would be capital-

ized? That first 'a' would be a capital. There would be an apostrophe between it and the 'd'—*Le Tour d'Ar-lant!* As it is now, if that 'd' were a 'p,' what would you have?"

Paul started, staring in wonder.

"You would have *le tour parlant*. The Talking Tower!"

SHE moved toward him eagerly. "But of course that is what it is. That is not a 'd.' It is a 'p' upside down. Do you not remember that the opening into the fissure is hidden under that 'p'? He had it fixed so he could open or close the fissure at will, could listen to his voices or silence them as he would. That is where he has hidden the jewels! And he left the 'p' upside down purposely, in bitter mockery, when he closed the fissure for the last time. You must bring stones, build something to stand on, so you can reach the letters."

Paul did as he was told, rushing up and down the narrow stairway, fetching stones and building a platform. When it was finished and he climbed onto it, the two girls stood staring tensely up at him. All that time, though, his subconscious mind had viewed the scene with horrible detachment. A ghost, a half-ghost and a girl of today were working frenziedly to destroy the revenge of a man long dead. Was the ghost of old Duvernois helpless? If they could return from the hideous past, why could he not come back to protect his vengeance?

"The 'p' turns to the right," Joyce said. Her voice, as real as the heat of the sun, was like the shock of freezing water on his mind. "It may turn stiffly now, after all these years. But if you pull on it and twist it hard, it will move."

He stared down at her lovely face, her amber eyes and the golden hair that swept back in those five beautiful waves. Dead or alive, she was here with him now. What he had longed for so hopelessly had actually happened. He was hers blindly, completely—if only she would not vanish to yesterday!

He seized the heavy strip of bronze that formed the letter "p" and tugged

and twisted with all his strength. At the third try it loosened and moved slightly. In the next instant it was right-side up. In turning, it had moved almost an inch away from the wall.

"Keep turning it," Joyce said breathlessly. "All you have to do is keep turning it around and around until the fissure is open."

Paul revolved the letter faster and faster, until it almost began to spin before his dazed eyes. As it turned, a solid square of masonry, eight inches square, slid rapidly toward him. Its presence had been completely disguised by the rounded part of the "p." It operated simply by the expedient of a great bronze screw.

Suddenly the block dropped, letter and all, and hung there, caught upon its two sliding groove hinges.

Paul peered into the opening the block had filled. It was only a dark hole in which he could see nothing. Out of it abruptly came the ghostly



whispering of the wind in the fissure, like voices just distant enough so that no distinct word was intelligible.

Paul had felt the cold breath of the wind on his face. He looked down at Joyce.

"I can't see into it. It's too dark. But I have a flashlight in my pocket. Wait."

He took the flashlight from his pocket, snapped it on and directed the beam into the opening. He caught his breath at what he saw in the revealing ray of the little electric beam! There at the bottom of the fissure, which widened perceptibly beyond the opening made by the removal of the block, lay a bundle.

It was coated faintly with the fallen dust of ages, but its color was a bright and unfaded blue, deep as the deepest sky.

It was a bundle of something, wrapped in a roll of blue brocade.

CHAPTER V

The Forgotten Dungeon

PAUL reached in a hand, gripped the bundle and drew it out of the fissure. The brocade, protected from the elements and the agencies of decay, was still stiff and strong in his grasp. He thrust his flashlight into his pocket. Leaping to the floor, he extended the bundle toward Joyce.

"Take it. It is you who must open it. It is yours."

"Not mine, my love—ours!"

She laid the bundle upon the stone platform they had built and began unrolling the old brocade scarf with eager fingers.

"Ours, Francois!"

The bundle fell apart. There upon the bright blue of the brocade burned the thousand fires of a jewel heap, necklaces and bracelets and rings, priceless stones in their settings of heavy gold. Joyce drew a long, deep breath.

"Ah, Francois, we will never need to want for anything again—What is that?"

As one edge of the heap of jewels, the corner of a sheet of paper thrust out. She pushed the jewels aside and drew it forth. There was something written upon it. Protected and unfaded as the brocade had been, it was perfectly legible.

Olga frowned. "What does it say? I can't read it."

Paul took the paper from Joyce's fingers.

"It is written in French. I will translate it for you." He read aloud that mocking taunt out of the years.

I, Raoul Duvernois, am placing these jewels in the one spot where I believe that they shall never be found again. There is but one heir to the fortunes of the Duvernois and he is the disowned son of my unworthy daughter. So, here in the fissure of the whispering voices, may all memory of the Duvernois die, even as she is dying now in the *oubliette*.

Joyce stiffened, her eyes filled with horror. When she repeated that last word, her voice was bitter with agony.

"*Oubliette*—but of course it was the *oubliette*. Listen! What is that?"

For there suddenly had come that thin voice Paul had heard before, the voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, uttering the plaintive words:

"Let me out! Will no one let me out? I have been here so long!"

Joyce's eyes flashed in swift indignation.

"Is that the voice you heard, Francois, the voice you thought was mine? That is a human voice, a voice of this world. And it comes from someone hidden in the *oubliette*! After he had sealed me in and I cried out, begging to be set free, he shouted at me and told me to hush and said that I sounded like a voice from nowhere. Then he went away. He did not come back again until I could talk no more."

"But where is the *oubliette*?" cried Olga. "What is an *oubliette*?"

"A dungeon that opens only at the top. A dungeon where human beings are shut away to die and be forgotten. The very word 'to forget' is in French *oublier*. Oh, I remember now how it was sealed at the top and I could see his face peering down at me, from this very dungeon floor here. "The *oubliette* is under our feet!"

"Can you not see what he did, Francois? He closed down the trap-door. He sealed it all over with a complete new floor, a layer of mortar from wall to wall, in the hope that it would be forgotten and never found by any man."

Paul seized her supple arm in his tense fingers.

"But do you know where the trap-door is? The layer of mortar must be thin. We could dig through. Do you know where it is?"

JOYCE turned slowly, and pointed to the far side of the tower.

"It is there, directly under the east window. The light of that window shone directly down into the *oubliette* when the trap was open. Yes, we must dig through, but we will have to fetch implements. There is nothing here with which we can dig."

"There might be something lying

around outside," suggested Paul. "We could go down and see, but we will take these with us. We're not going to let them out of our sight again."

He rolled the heap of shimmering jewels tightly into the scarf of brocade and tucked the bundle under his arm. As they started down the stairway together, he said uneasily:

"But who can be down there in the *oubliette* now?"

"That is why we must dig through," Joyce stated. "We must know. Let us hurry. As soon as I can, I want to go away from here. Hurry, Francois!"

They went hastily down to the base of the tower, Paul gripping the brocade bundle zealously. They began looking all about for some piece of metal to dig through the mortar.

It was Paul who found, at the back of the tower next to the cliff, a yawning opening into the tower itself. He shouted to Joyce and Olga and they came rushing toward him. He pointed at the opening.

"See? We will not need to dig. Some one else has done it for us. Someone has made passageway into the old *oubliette*. Stay behind me. Let me go first."

The passageway that had been crudely fashioned there was not long. Its length was merely the distance through the old wall, less than eight feet at most. At the other end of it a dim light was burning.

Paul plunged into the opening and was through it in a few long strides, the girls close behind him. They all came to a stunned halt together when they had gained the interior of that terrible place where dark and unspeakable wrongs had been done.

At the north side of the round room was the opening of the well, sunk in the solid masonry. At the western side of the room was an iron post, fitted with chains and leg-irons, red with bloody rust, heaped at the base with human bones. Straight across the dungeon from the pile of bones was a stone bench, mortared to the wall, with a leering satyr's head at each end of it. And between the satyr's heads was all that time had left of Anne Duvernois.

A grinning skeleton, its head was

leaning back against the wall, a fleshless skull capped by shimmering golden hair that swept away from the bared bone in five precise waves. The skeleton was held upright on the bench by the stiff bodice and stays of the bright blue brocade gown. At its feet two candles burned.

But what held Joyce and Olga and Paul Grenelle speechless and staring was the upright figure of a man, confronting them from across the floor.

"Lucien!" Paul gasped. "What are you doing here?"

BOULLE smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of defeat. His face was white and his eyes were fastened unblinkingly upon Joyce Arlant.

"I was playing ghost, as I have done for many years. I was trying to find the heirlooms old Duvernois had hidden here. That was why I dug first into the *oubliette*. I thought perhaps he had buried them here with her. I meant no harm. I needed money, for my fortunes were failing and I did not know there was any heir to claim the jewels. I did not know that"—his voice sank to a whisper—"I did not know that *she* would come back to claim them herself."

"That was your voice crying 'let me out'?" Paul said. "But that was a woman's voice."

Boulle shrugged again and wet his dry lips with his tongue.

"It was very simple. I can imitate a woman's voice quite easily and the distance and faintness complete the illusion."

Joyce put her hand on Paul's, her fingers gripping his tightly.

"You know him? He is a friend of yours?"

"A very good friend. He is the man who owns the portrait of Anne Duvernois. He is the grandson of the man who painted it. I do not know what we shall do with him, though.

That is for you to say."

The amber eyes widened and rested on Lucien Boulle in a kind of gentle pity.

"Why should we do anything with him? He meant no harm and he has done none. If I had not come, the jewels might as well have been his as any other man's. We shall give him some of them, to show that we hold no resentment. We do not need them all. And is he not your friend?"

Paul's breath caught in relief and his eyes rested glowingly upon her.

"That is worthy of you, my lovely one. He is a good man. Now you and Olga shall go out and wait. Lucien and I will carry her out and lay her to rest." He gestured toward the still figure upon the stone bench, the golden-haired skeleton in its bright blue brocade. "And when it is done, we will go away forever and let this terrible spot really be forgotten."

But he was startled when he and Lucien finally joined the girls and they started toward the steep descent leading away from the old chateau. For Joyce Arlant was merely Joyce Arlant.

All memory of the grim old tower had gone from her completely. She had forgotten everything.

PAUL said, looking at her anxiously:

"But you loved me when you thought you were Anne Duvernois. Have you forgotten that, too?"

Her smile was deep in her amber eyes as she answered.

"No, Francois. That is something I can never forget."

The intently listening look vanished from her beautiful face when he said:

"And I love you, my darling of yesterday and today."

He knew she had at last heard the statement for which she had been listening for a hundred long years.

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THREE PILES OF GOLD

By **ROBERT WALLACE**

Author of "Death Over Puget Sound," "The Thousand Island Murders," etc.

**A Man Can Live a Thousand Lifetimes
in Three Years—and He Can Die a
Thousand Deaths in Twenty-Four Hours!**

SCOTT ROBINSON, his young face corpse-pale, his lips twitching, his hands trembling, sat on the floor in the middle of a large room—a room so large that its walls faded away into darkness. Before him, on the floor, was a pile of gold. He played with the pieces as a child plays with blocks, making separate piles. And always he made three piles, no more, no less.

"One . . . two . . . three," he counted. And then he pointed to each pile in turn and said in a small voice:

"One year . . . two years . . . three years."

Sometimes he varied it. He pointed to one pile and said, "Wine"; to the second and said, "Women"; to the third and said, "Song."

Then he stared away into the distance. He seemed puzzled by the distance, as though he had been long accustomed to much closer quarters.

He looked at the gold and chuckled. Then his lips began to twitch again and fright came into his eyes. He pushed the gold away from him. It seemed that he was undergoing an inward struggle. But the gold won. He drew it to him once more and began to build up the three piles.

He looked up fearfully. There was a dark shape at his side.

"Come, Scott," a voice said.

He struggled against the command but rose as if impelled by a force greater than his will. He was not aware that time had passed when he found himself in another room, dimly lit.

He was not alone. There was a corpse in



At his feet was the body
of a girl

the room with him. The odor of corruption assailed his nostrils. It came to him that he had seen that corpse before. He fought against the realization that he had killed this man, that he had transformed a living human being into this cadaver. Then he remembered the gold and he knew why he had done it. But the gold was not gold—the gold was time. He had counted the pieces in each pile and there were three hundred and sixty-five pieces in each.

AN odor of death was in the room. He choked on it. He tried to turn and get away, flee from this charnel chamber, but invisible hands seemed to hold him rooted. He wanted to give life back to the unburied horror, but how could he give back its life when he had the gold? And this corpse—it meant only one pile, and he had three! So there must be others.

The walls of the room seemed to close in around him. He cried out, but no sound passed his lips. Overwhelming terror seized him at the prospect of being paired with a corpse while the process of a body's decay went on and on. Then, when he felt he could no longer breathe, he lost consciousness.

He awoke to find himself sitting in a chair. Opposite him, in another chair, and staring at him with glassy eyes, sat a man whose mouth was open in the awful, slack-jawed way of sudden death.

Scott Robinson's lips moved, he was talking but he was making no sound.

"I didn't do it," he said. "You're wrong. I didn't do it. You don't have to look at me like that."

The corpse continued to eye him. He strove to wrench his own eyes away, but could not. He closed his eyes, but the vision of the corpse beat upon his inward vision.

When he opened his eyes again, he was on his feet, and at his feet was another body—the body of a girl this time, a girl whom he had once known and loved. This, he knew, was the third corpse he had made, and all three piles of gold were now accounted for.

He was walking now, down a long hall. Immediately ahead of him was

light, but all around him was darkness. And suddenly there was a door in front of him, ghastly green in color. The door opened, and he saw—an electric chair.

All his inward being shrieked against continuing his walk, against sitting down in that chair. But he was in the grip of some powerful force that urged him on against his will. He seemed to hear a voice saying:

"When you are asked, here, to have a seat, you cannot refuse." It was a familiar voice, but he could not identify it. But it spoke truly, for he sat down.

There was a sudden flash of blinding brilliance, in which he was almost glad. It was over and the horror would end.

But the horror did not end. There was yet a fourth corpse upon which he must gaze, and it was his own. It was on a table, and ghostly figures in white were cutting into it in various places with sharp steel knives of various shapes and sizes. This was the culminating horror.

But in the midst of that horror, in the midst of that mysterious life in death existence that was now his, Scott Robinson felt the faint stirrings of memory. For one flashing instant he saw three piles of gold, and in that same instant all desire for that gold went out of his heart. He remembered, though very faintly, walking down a hall toward a door, but the hall was not dark, it was light all the way, and the door was not green. He remembered putting his hand on the knob, opening the door by himself, and slowly entering, with his hat in his hand. . . .

THE brown suit he had on was the same one he had worn upon entering the prison three years before. So was the hat he held in his hand. But his face had been tanned then; now it was pale. His eyes had been bewildered; now they were bitter. His lips had been capable of a grin; now they were mirthless. He glanced at the calendar on the warden's desk. It said June 2nd.

"Sit down, Robinson," Warden Massey said.

"I'll stand," the convict, soon to be an ex-convict, said shortly.

Warden Massey smiled. "Impatient to get on the outside," he said. "But I want to warn you, Robinson—the world is going to seem pretty unreal to you for a time. It always does. In here, you get used to the routine, the regularity—"

"I never got used to it," the prisoner interrupted harshly.

"You were a model prisoner—"

"I wanted to get out on the minimum."

"What do you intend to do?"

"That's my business."

"Not altogether," the warden said mildly. "As an ex-convict, the State retains an interest in you."

"I was innocent."

"You must be aware, Robinson, how often a warden hears those words, and how seldom they are true. Besides, they're irrelevant. I'm not the jury which convicted you or the judge who sentenced you. I'm only the warden who put you up—and who put up with you—for three years. That was my job, plus some attempt to prepare you, physically and mentally, for the resumption of your life on the outside. You're in good health, but I'm less confident about your mental attitude. Innocent you may have been, but innocent or guilty, I've seen too many men go out of here with that 'I've got the name, now I'll have the game' attitude. If I'm not mistaken, that's your slant, right now, this minute. If it is, you'll be back, as surely as night follows day. I don't want to see you come back, Robinson."

"I'm not coming back," Scott Robinson said levelly.

When was the sermon going to end? When would Massey stand up, shake hands and give him the usual "good-by and good luck" stuff? Talk, talk, talk—one year, two years, three years—kind words could not now cancel out those years. Get up off that chair, give me the good luck routine and let me get the hell out of here. I got a lot of making up for lost time to do.

But the warden, watching him through narrowed eyes, spoke further.

"I'm a hard man to fool, Robinson. You say you're not coming back, but that declaration in itself is meaningless unless it rests on intention to commit no further crime. In other words, to go straight. But some men figure on keeping out by going crooked but getting away with it. Which is it with you, Robinson?"

The prisoner's lips tightened. "It's still my business, Warden. My term's up. I don't have to answer. I might be a liar if I answered one way, and I'd certainly be a fool if I answered the other. All I know is that when I die, no matter how soon, no matter how late, I'll be dying three years before my time. Those are the three years I haven't lived. I can't get 'em back. So they've got to be made up for some other way. I'll be dying three years ahead of time."

HE fell silent in grim significance. "Why only three years?" the warden queried sharply. "Why can't it be ten, fifteen, twenty, as it might very well be if I read what's on your mind correctly. It's possible to make up for your lost time, Robinson, and I think it can be done by going straight, and I suspect you think it can be done by going crooked. If you do, then why only three years before your time, Robinson? Why not a week from now, dead with a policeman's bullet in some dark alley? Why not a bloated corpse in the East River a month from now, *forty* years before your time, because you quarreled over the division of some loot with 'friends' you made in this prison who are now on the outside, perhaps waiting for you to join them. Why not a cold body on a morgue slab, awaiting the cold steel of the autopsy surgeon? Think of it, Scott Robinson—*your* body.

"Or"—the warden paused for breath—"Scott Robinson, back here once more, with shaved head and slit trouser leg this time, and unable to refuse to sit down when asked. Tell me, Robinson, how many years before your time would *that* death be!"

There was silence in the room for a moment. Then Scott Robinson answered in a low voice:

"I don't scare worth a damn, Warden."

Warden Massey slumped back in his chair as though defeated. He swiveled around toward the window, looked out, and spoke with his back to the prisoner.

"Very well," he said. "What I've learned in this interview agrees substantially with the prison psychiatrist's summing up of your character. You're the type who has to be shown. In other words, experience alone can teach you. A harsh, sometimes a deadly, teacher."

The warden swiveled around again.

"Robinson, I'd be justified in sending you back to your cell to serve out your full term. But I'm letting you go. One reason is that outside the prison gate a girl's waiting for you. Alice Evans may be able to take some of the iron out of your soul where I've failed. She's all right, that girl. Three years is a long time, but it wasn't too long for her. Walk the path she picks, son. It'll be the right one. Good-by . . . and good luck. . . ."

Wordlessly, the prisoner took the extended hand of the now erect warden. He held it an instant, dropped it, wheeled, and swiftly left the office.

Simultaneous with the clang of the prison gate, Scott Robinson heard a glad cry at his side.

"Scott! You're free! Free at last."

For an instant, the ex-convict's heart leaped joyfully. The girl stood within the circle his arms would have made. But he kept his arms down, though it cost him an effort.

"Hello, Alice," he said, and he knew that it sounded as though he were addressing a passing acquaintance on the street. He saw a shade of disappointment film the happiness in her eyes, then quickly pass.

"It's so good to see you, Scott. The other times didn't count. I couldn't really see you in—in there."

"Call it by its right name—prison," he said almost brutally.

"I'll do better—I'll never mention it again. That's all in the past, Scott. It's the future that counts. I've a taxi waiting. It'll take us to the city. I've saved some money, Scott. We'll

be married, we'll go to another city, you'll get a job, and I'll give piano lessons. We won't have much, but we'll get along."

SHE had taken his arm and he let her draw him toward the road. But he seemed not to have heard her. His eyes were on the sedan parked about fifty yards down the road. There were two men in it. The two men waved at them. Or were they beckoning?

"Who are they?" Alice asked.

"Former stir-mates," he said coldly. "They were transferred down from Dannemora to serve out their last couple of months. They got out a month ago."

His easy use of prison slang chilled her. And what chilled her even more was that he had not re-acted to the picture of the peaceful future she had attempted to paint.

"You'd think that after serving out a prison term, they'd keep as far away from prison walls as possible," she said, trying to speak lightly.

"They're waiting for me," he said.

She hesitated. "Why, Scott?"

"We're going to do some business together."

"Oh, Scott—no!" She faced him, grasping his arms and looking into his eyes pleadingly.

"I'm going with them."

"Scott, it's the wrong choice. Come with me."

"I've got three years to make up. Something inside of me keeps repeating that. There's no way of clearing my name, no way of proving I didn't embezzle a red cent. Ben Slattery did it, Alice. But he died the day after I was arrested, with his tracks well covered, and dead men don't confess. My mind's made up, Alice. You'd better leave me. I'm going with Ames and Calder."

He tried to pull away from her but she held him with a strength that was more moral than physical.

"Those three years were long for me, too," she said. "You're not leaving me, Scott. I can make up my mind, too. If you won't come with me, I'm coming with you."

Again he restrained himself from

taking her in his arms. "All right," he said. "We'll be together for a couple of hours, anyway. We'll drop you in town."

They walked toward the sedan. One of the men in the front seat hopped out and opened the rear door.

"Hiya, Robbie," he said. "How do you like fresh air?"

The two men eyed Alice with a curious dead-pan stare.

"I'm Scott's . . . moll," she said, uttering the last word with an effort.

They grinned mirthlessly, as though they understood quite well that she was an amateur. The ex-convict and his "moll" got in, the door slammed, the motor roared, and they were off.

Calder, sitting beside Ames who was at the wheel, reached back with a flask.

"Three years is a long time between drinks, Robbie," he said. "Have one?"

And "Robbie" had one—a long one. . . .

"I'VE come to say good-by, Warden Massey," Scott Robinson said. The brown suit he had on was the same one he had worn upon entering the prison three years *and one day* before. So was the hat he held in his hand. He glanced at the calendar on the warden's desk. It said June 3rd. Somehow that fact tantalized him, he did not know why.

Warden Massey came around his desk.

"Good-by, Scott," he said heartily. "And good luck. I know you're one man who won't be back. And I won't keep you—I know there's someone waiting for you outside the gate."

"Guess you can bank on that, Warden. I won't be back." Scott Robinson hesitated. "You know, Warden, I guess getting out at last has sort of mixed me up. I thought I was to get out on the second, and today's the

third. That makes it three years and one day, instead of the three I thought it was going to be."

"The additional day was tacked on to comply with the mandatory nature of the sentence," the warden said smoothly.

"Okay, Warden. So long."

The warden was not alone long. Doctor Rolph, the prison psychiatrist, came in. The warden beckoned him to the window. The two looked over the prison's outer wall, whose gate had just opened to give egress to a young man in a brown suit. There was a waiting taxi, and fifty yards farther down the road was a sedan that also appeared to be waiting.

They saw the young man embrace the girl.

"He remembers nothing of yesterday," the warden said. "It was a daring experiment, Doc, but it worked. You're to be congratulated."

"Credit the acting abilities of our two stooges, Calder and Ames," said Doctor Rolph, "plus the very efficient action of that drug that is so much like the potion used in the zombie rites of the Indies. All the rest—the various stage settings—were based upon my knowledge of Robinson gained in my psychiatric treatment of him. He had to be shown. Well, we showed him. But wait—the experiment isn't over yet. Calder and Ames are beckoning to him."

"Just as they did yesterday. I almost believe it's still yesterday."

"No, it isn't. Look."

Scott Robinson and Alice Evans walked toward the taxi, got in, and drove off.

"He made a different choice yesterday," Rolph murmured.

"He'll never know that," the warden said quietly. "And we can forget it too. So far as we're concerned, he made only one choice—the right one."

MURDER AND SUPERNATURAL MENACE STALK A FLYING SCHOOL

in

WINGS FOR THE DEAD

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THE SNAKE MAN

By **JOHN S. ENDICOTT**

Author of "Crime Combine," "Medals of Murder," etc.

**Fate Chooses Partners for a
Grisly Dance of Death at the
Mardi Gras—Until Dixon
Unmasks a Weird Killer!**

AS Curtis Dixon headed down the long, dimly lighted corridor of the old New Orleans hotel, he heard a muffled shriek from a room just in front of him. Without a moment's hesitation, his lithe and powerful young body leaped forward. The cry had been a girl's call for help and he was positive he recognized the voice.

He burst open the door through which the cry had come, raced into the bedroom.

"Jean!" he gasped, stopping short.

It was the girl he'd come here to see, but not under these circumstances. She was backed against the opposite wall, her beautiful face stricken with horror. She was staring at a sheaf of red American Beauty roses which were scattered about the floor. They



Curtis had the impression that a man-sized snake was following him

had obviously just been lifted from the open florist's box that lay on a nearby table. Among the crimson petals there was a rustling movement.

From its bed of roses a snake lifted its head like a black fist, opened a fanged mouth. The interior of the mouth showed white. A cottonmouth moccasin, one of the deadliest snakes of the South—and this one was the girth and length of a strong man's arm!

"Were you bitten?" Dixon asked hurriedly.

There was no need for an answer. The girl's attitude, her frozen horror and that cry of hers were indication enough. As she shifted the grasp of her jeweled fingers, Dixon saw two tiny red spots on one of her wrists.

He slammed the door behind him. Without another glance at the rearing snake, he sprang to the frightened girl's side. From his pocket he snatch a clean handkerchief, quickly improvised a tourniquet. Swiftly and deftly he took out a small, clean knife and made a cut across the tiny wounds. Then he applied his lips to the wound, sucked quickly at it.

Curtis Dixon and Jean Revel had known each other since childhood. Both had grown up in New Orleans and each had won eminence in a way—he as one of the city's most brilliant young newspaper men, she as Hollywood's latest sensation on the screen. He had been delighted when he learned that Jean Revel had been called back to her native city to become queen of the Mardi Gras.

"You're all right now," Dixon told her finally. "But just the same we'll have the doctor give you a shot of serum."

"Curt," she moaned, "if you hadn't been here!"

He laughed easily, trying to reassure her.

"I've been keeping an eye on you all along," he told her. "You're my favorite responsibility."

BUT he didn't tell her all he knew, all he suspected. For months he'd been working on one of the most baffling and blood-chilling mysteries that had ever come his way in the

course of his career as crime reporter. Was he at last on the trail of that lurking, secretive terror who'd come to be known in New Orleans as the "Snake Man?"

"I've always been terrified of snakes," she sobbed brokenly, "ever since my brother was bitten by one and almost died when I was a child. I don't blame him for running away from the South. I was glad to go to Hollywood—to escape from the constant fear of snakes!"

Dixon drew the shuddering girl toward the living room of the elaborate suite.

"But the snake!" she cried.

"You first," said Dixon gently. "I'll see to that later."

Before they had crossed the adjacent private dining room, the maid showed up, then a secretary and a masseuse. It was like the mysterious assemblage of a crowd, out of nowhere, at the scene of an accident.

Dixon himself called the house physician.

"Snake bite," he said tersely. "Cottonmouth. Got the proper serum?"

"Of course," was the hasty answer.

"Then come right up. Don't lose a second."

Dixon hung up, then called Captain Clair of the New Orleans undercover squad, who had given him the tip that Jean Revel might be the next object of the Snake Man's unholy attentions. He was just replacing the phone after the second call when Dr. Roberts, the house physician, came in. Dixon took him aside for a moment, before letting him go in to attend the girl.

"Stall off any talk of snakes," he said. "Give the others a story of some kind and ask Miss Revel to keep quiet."

"The Snake Man?" whispered the doctor, his hands trembling as he opened the black bag he carried.

Dixon nodded swiftly. He glanced into the doctor's bag, was astonished at the complexity of instruments and medications.

"Well, I'm glad you came prepared," he said. "I feel better already."

"Nobody knows where the Snake Man will strike next," the doctor admitted. "It might seem silly to carry

so many hypodermics and serums around, but they can mean the difference between helplessness and saving lives. Most of the doctors in town are taking similar precautions."

"Good idea," commented the reporter.

He let the doctor go in. He hoped the precautions would be effective, for it was only two days before Mardi Gras and the city was already overflowing with visitors. If Jean Revel died and the story got out, it would terrify the crowds and ruin the Mardi Gras.

Dixon made several phone calls, then slipped away unnoticed and went out to the serving pantry, where the snake was.

He knew quite a lot about snakes. They'd always fascinated him with their grace, their sinister silence. It was partly because of this knowledge that the New Orleans police department had asked his cooperation on the Snake Man case.

The cottonmouth had left its hiding place among the fallen roses and had crossed the room. It was now groping about like fluid ebony, its graceful body reared against the farther wall.

Snakes and birds Dixon reflected, were both descended from a common ancestry. Birds had a homing instinct. Experiments had proved—

Before he could complete his chain of reasoning, a tap at the door interrupted him. Instantly the groping snake fell into a coil and faced the sound, its white mouth gaping. With his eyes still on the reptile, Dixon reached back and unlocked the door. He had recognized the pre-arranged knock.

"Good Lord!" breathed Captain Clair as he came into the room and stared down at the snake.

NEITHER spoke while the captain's quick, blue eyes scanned the place. He was like an old-time sea captain, inspecting the deck of his ship after a storm. He stepped warily to the table and lifted a card from the roses that remained in the box. Nodding grimly, he read what was written on the pasteboard!

COMPLIMENTS OF THE SNAKE MAN

He brought the card to his nose.

"The same smell," he said. "Not even roses can kill the odor of a cottonmouth."

"A smell of sour earth," agreed Dixon, "and death. I'm glad I happened to be around."

As a matter of fact, he had been patrolling the corridor outside this suite ever since the captain's tip that Jean Revel was in danger. When the announcement was made that she was to be this year's queen of the Mardi Gras, someone in New Orleans had air-mailed a curious present to her home in Hollywood. The present, at first glance, seemed to be a box of chocolates. But instead of candy the box had contained, bedded in a packing of Spanish moss, the head of a cottonmouth moccasin. And with it the Snake Man's usual demand for money—a hundred thousand dollars, in this case.

The actress had sent the box with its contents and the original wrappings back to the New Orleans police for investigation.

Captain Clair drew his gun as he looked at the snake, rearing viciously on its single, heavy coil.

"No!" Dixon ordered.

He put out a hand, grabbed the captain's arm.

"It's best to kill a snake like that," argued the captain. "They'll hardly hear the shot outside the room. Too bad it's not the Snake Man himself!"

"I've got an idea, Cap," Dixon said.

"What is it?"

"That snake can help us."

"Help us?" the captain ejaculated, a blank expression slipping over his face. "How?"

"By showing us where the Snake Man lives."

Captain Clair blinked puzzledly. He slipped the gun back into his pocket, but kept a wary eye on the snake. The moccasin seemed to be aware of the lessened tension and drew its wicked head down into its coil.

"What's the great idea this time?" Clair asked.

He had the professional's disdain

of the amateur's theories, but he was willing to listen to Dixon, who had several times in the past solved cases that had stumped the police.

"The idea is pretty simple," Dixon said quietly. "The killer doesn't use ordinary swamp snakes. He rears and trains them himself."

"What makes you think so?"

"First, swamp snakes are mostly dormant at this time of the year. Then you can't make an ordinary moccasin strike when and where you will. One girl was bitten on the shoulder while she was dancing on the dark porch of the country club. Another was bitten as she lay in her berth in a Pullman—"

Dixon pointed with a movement of caution. The moccasin had come out of its coil, its vigilance relaxed. It was groping again at the wall near which it had lain, as if looking for an exit in that direction. Dixon edged toward it, stood poised.

"Careful, Curt," Captain Clair warned. "Those things move fast."

With a movement quick as light, Dixon shot forward a hand and caught the reptile just back of its lethal head.

"I'm faster," he said with a grin.

IN the hours that followed, Curtis Dixon became sure that he had found a guide to the lair of the vicious killer known as the Snake Man. It was against the north wall of the hotel room that the snake had sought escape. At the police station the reptile again headed toward the north and tried to escape.

"Meaning," explained Dixon, "that the home it's used to lies north of here somewhere. In some ways the brain of a snake is similar to the brain of a bird."

"Show me," challenged Captain Clair.

They put the snake in a suitcase and carried it north of the city, where Dixon had a camp. For almost an hour it lay there on the floor of the tent coiled and rearing, with its white mouth gaping. But when it finally moved again, it headed south this time.

"Don't bother about the case, Curt," the captain said disgustedly. "You keep right on playing with your snake. I have some real trails to fol-

low. When you get tired of playing, let me know."

He went back to town.

There were parts of New Orleans where night came late, or not at all, at this time of the year. Visitors had been pouring into the city for the past two weeks—rich and poor, white and black—and the town was ready night and day to furnish entertainment for them all. Lights blazed. Orchestras hooted and drummed.

But it was weird how the ancient, primeval wilderness of the lower Mississippi could press in on the city after nightfall. There were areas of darkness and silence inside the wide loop of the old river, which formed the half-moon that gave New Orleans the name of Crescent City. In those dark, hushed places, it seemed as if nothing had changed since the days of De Soto.

Dixon felt the eeriness of age-old mystery as he stood in one such section, long after midnight. He had kept grimly to his theory and it was here that the snake had eventually steered him. In the thick, dark silence of swampy countryside, he paused to peer and listen.

He had taken time out to change into an old hunting outfit. The moccasin was now in a gunnysack, for greater convenience, as well as to avoid arousing attention. Strangers didn't go wandering about this part of the world at night with a suitcase, but anyone might be out with a gunnysack to catch a mess of frogs.

He was still convinced of one thing. This moccasin had a homing sense, all right, just as a pigeon did. He had carried it far over to the west of town, beyond Carrollton, and there the snake had headed back toward the center of the Crescent City. The same thing had happened when he'd carried it over to the section called Algiers, to the east.

Finally Dixon joined Captain Clair at Police Headquarters. On a map he drew the lines the snake had indicated. The lines converged, but Captain Clair was still skeptical. There was plenty of work for the head of the undercover squad, with all these strangers pouring into town. He was

disinclined to go off on wild-goose chases, as he called Dixon's theory. So the crime reporter had taken up the trail of the Snake Man alone.

Here, where Dixon stood in the dark, the unpaved road gleamed almost white. There was no habitation in sight. Bushes fringed a flooded drainage ditch to his right. There was a lofty fence of iron pickets to his left, with the faint outlines of grave-stones through the dark shrubbery beyond.

Dixon carefully opened the mouth of his gunnysack and gently shook the snake out onto the pale strip of dust. The snake was accustomed to the operation by this time and seemed to know what was expected of it. After a momentary hesitation it started to crawl—not toward the wet ditch, as Dixon had expected it might—but straight ahead, along the road.

He recaptured it and continued walking up the road. A high wall appeared suddenly at one side of the road. It was solid, too high to climb. Trees and vines overhung from its inner side, only their outlines visible against the sky. It was too dark to see anything else.

A GUST of air came to him, moist and fragrant with an odor reminiscent of the roses that had been sent by the Snake Man to Jean Revel. Then abruptly there mingled with the smell of the roses another scent, a well remembered smell that caused a slight prickle along his spine. He wondered if it came from the bag in which he carried the moccasin.

He put the sack down. As he did so he was aware, a half-second too late, that he had left the opening insecurely fastened. Something moist slid across his hand and was gone. It was so dark now that he could never find it.

"Don't move!" a voice said softly, like a chilling breath. "Don't move, unless you want my fangs in your back!"

There was a straining silence, during which Dixon wondered if he were going crazy.

"I've been following you for an hour," continued the voice, muted and

cold, but closer. It was right behind him now. "If you are looking for the Snake Man, you have found him."

Dixon hurled himself into a scrambling jump. He was out of luck and knew it the moment he was in motion. He must have caught a foot on a root, but it clutched him like a relentless hand as he fell. He knew how to take a fall. Hunching himself as he went and turning his body into a ball, he was reaching for the stiletto in his boot as he went down. He had it in his hand when he landed.

He heard a faint whistle which he had heard before and mistaken for a night raven. At the sound two heavy shapes jumped on him out of the dark, with such savage impact that he wasn't sure whether they were animals or men. But he was fighting like a wild-cat now, on his back and with all fours, using his knife. For a moment he was free and almost on his feet.

Just as he staggered up, a sack came down over his head. His chest and lungs were filled with the suffocating odor of snakes. It was as if he had been swallowed, head-first, by a huge cottonmouth. Powerful hands seized his arms and legs. He was disarmed and a tightening coil of rope was around his body.

When he felt he could bear the smothering odor no longer, miraculously the sack was lifted from his head. For seconds he stood there, pumping air into his lungs. Blinded by the dark, he was trying to get his bearings. He heard the dull voice of the Snake Man telling someone:

"Lay a moccasin around his neck. Maybe that will cool him off and keep him quiet for a spell."

Around his neck he suddenly felt the rough and nervous skin of a snake, flinched from the sagging chilly weight of it. He didn't move his head, but he strained the muscles of his arms against the ropes that encircled him.

Just as a vague shape loomed up in the dark in front of him, the full glare of an electric torch was flashed into his face. The torch held steady as he closed his eyes. The inspection seemed long.

Even the snake that had been hung
[Turn to page 100]

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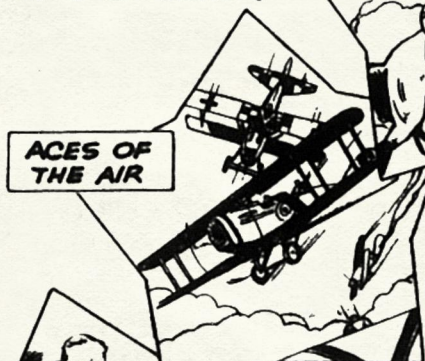
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about his neck appeared to resent the glare at last. There was an electric creep of scaly weight. Abruptly the snake slipped off and fell to the ground. No one tried to prevent its escape.

"Who are you?" came a whisper.

"Take that torch off my face and maybe I'll tell you," Dixon snapped angrily.

There was a pause, then the torch went off.

"It's all right," said the muted voice. "He's not the detective."

IN the swift fall of darkness after the torch went out, the voice had swung around behind Dixon. There was a moment of silence, as if he had been left alone. Again he strained at the ropes. There seemed to be a little give to them. He continued working to loosen them by tightening and relaxing the muscles of his arms and shoulders.

Suddenly the icy voice spoke again.

"Don't try that, or I'll fang you in the neck. Now walk straight ahead. I may want you to take the place of one of the brothers you just knifed."

They passed through a gate and entered the property beyond the high wall that Dixon had followed. As nearly as any ordinary person could have told in the heavy dark, it was a place of grass and trees and water, threaded by a path that was singularly narrow.

Time and again Dixon felt himself on the verge of stepping off as the path took a sudden turn. Each time this happened he felt a touch, as if the moccasin were again coiled about his neck. The feeling brought with it curious sensations that the mystery of the Snake Men had raised—about vampires, werewolves, snakes that were men, or men that were snakes.

Dixon shook off the hideous thought, concentrating once more on the ropes that held his arms. Though he was sure he had located the Snake Man, it was knowledge that would serve no one unless he himself could get free.

He felt a sudden slacking of the rope. It came just as the path emerged from a double row of high bushes—

oleander, to judge by the smell—into a broad clearing. Above the clearing, looming vaguely through the lessened dark, was the pillared front of a large, white house.

Just as Dixon was nerving himself for a final break, he felt something like the twin scrape of needles along his neck.

"Don't run," warned the cold whisper. "I can see in the dark. Maybe you'll have a better chance in the daylight. It is almost dawn."

It was true. This night of dread was coming to a close. In the east there was a spreading pallor in the sky.

"It's light enough for me right now!" flashed through Dixon's mind.

He jumped far to one side. Falling deliberately, he rolled and used the leverage of the earth to free an arm. He sprang up again.

Running in a zigzag course, looking back swiftly, he fought the rope that still encumbered him. He could see a vague shape behind him, but it was only in nightmare flashes, as something unreal and terrifying that came and went in the dark.

He had an impression of a man-sized snake, or a man who was tall and slender, dressed in black except for a shine of white in front, like the white underside of a moccasin. The man's gait, as he ran, had something about it of the limber grace of a snake.

Even as he fought and ran, dodged and stumbled, Dixon was remembering snatches of the things that he and Captain Clair had talked about. The snake that had found and killed a girl in a Pullman, another on the porch of a country club.

Over the man, or the thing that was chasing him, he saw what looked like the upreared neck and gaping mouth of a moccasin.

He began looking frantically for some way out of that tangle of brush and water by which he had been steered into this place. Suddenly he saw a house. What he'd find there, he didn't know.

He raced to a basement door that stood half-open. Through this opening he flung himself and slammed the door.

DIXON stood there panting, getting back his breath, waiting for an assault on the door by the Snake Man. But none came.

Who and what was the Snake Man? Why was he killing people with snakes? Dixon had a theory about this, based on his investigations, but he couldn't be sure.

He heard a shuffling movement somewhere in the darkness. He drew himself tight against the wall as a match fluttered not more than a dozen feet away from where he stood. The flare revealed the face of an aged Negro in the act of lighting a lantern. There was assurance in that, in the reality the scene presented.

The assurance melted away as the light brightened and steadied. Although the black face with its tuft of woolly white beard was stamped with a sort of savage kindness, in his right hand the Negro held a shotgun.

Dixon remained motionless. The Negro suspected his presence, although Curt was sure he hadn't been seen yet. Most likely the man had heard him enter and close the door. Maybe even this soon some sort of alarm had reached the house. If this were the house of the Snake Man, as it undoubtedly was, it wouldn't be long before the place would be in an uproar.

The Negro was peering this way and that. There was still a chance to rush him and grab that shotgun. But Dixon couldn't bring himself to take the step. Instead he called out softly: "Uncle!"

The Negro whirled, saw him.

"Who are you?" the old man asked, raising his lantern for a better look.

"Someone who's hungry and tired," Dixon whispered.

The old Negro seemed to take this as a reasonable answer, but he still held his shotgun ready. The bare forearm supporting the gun looked sine-wy and quick.

"What I mean is," the old man persisted, "what sort of brother is you?"

"What sort of brother?" Dixon asked, bewildered.

"Snake or servant?"

"Servant, I guess. I'm a stranger."

The old man stood peering at him,

twitching his gun. Its muzzle pointed forward and his nervous black fingers tensed in the trigger-guard. Just as Dixon was about to speak again, he heard a low whistle. The old man's head came up and around with a jerk.

"I'm here," he called quietly.

Dixon saw his opportunity. He slipped forward as fast as a jumping shadow and with no more noise. He wrenched the gun from the Negro's hand and held up a warning finger. The old Negro nodded understanding. They went tense, listening to the chill whisper of the Snake Man:

"Where'd he go?"

"Who?" the Negro asked.

A pause, then a colder menace came into the whisper:

"The person you were just talking to."

The Negro hesitated. His eyes met Dixon's, glanced down at the gun.

"I must have been talking to myself," he said.

"Old fool!" breathed the Snake Man venomously.

They heard his soft steps move off into the darkness. Dixon raised his gun threateningly.

"What are you?" he demanded.

"A servant of the snakes," the old man quavered, staring frightenedly at the gun. "I ain't a snake, mister. I swear I ain't!"

The words were meaningless, but the Negro's vehemence told Dixon they meant something important. How to find out without terrifying the old man into silence was a ticklish problem, though.

"Would you like to be a snake?" he asked cagily.

The worried eyes went wide with terror.

"Oh, no, sir! I don't want to go around killing people! Being a servant to the snakes ain't fun, but I don't want to kill nobody."

"You don't like being a servant, do you?"

The old man's eyes wavered, dropped.

"I'm a friend," Dixon urged. "You can tell me."

"How'd you like to feed and clean house for a mess of snakes that looks only for how to kill you?" blurted the

Negro savagely. "They pay me good, but a dead man can't use money. If you is a friend, get me out of here!"

Dixon almost smiled at the irony of that appeal, but it gave him an idea.

"Why don't you just pick up and leave?" he asked.

"They'd track me down, no matter where I went, and one day I'd be found dead of snake bite. I try all the time to figure out how I can get away, but it don't do no good. They'd find me and I'd be killed."

Dixon lowered the muzzle to prove his intentions.

"You want to escape, though. Well, I can help you. Do you know where Police Headquarters is?"

The Negro nodded warily, his eyes veiling with suspicion.

"You don't have to be afraid of them," Dixon said hastily. "Even if you have a record, they'd fix it up if you'd help them get the Snake Man. I give you my word that they won't do anything to you."

"I don't know." The old man looked unconvinced, more worried than before. "They might put me in jail."

"But there won't be any snakes in your cell!"

"Yeah, I know. Only—"

"And the Snake Man can't reach you there!"

THE Negro stiffened, his wrinkled face lighting with hope. He reached a trembling hand toward the lamp.

"I'll go to the police," he said through clenched teeth. "I don't care if they put me in jail. The Snake Man can't go through bars to kill me."

Dixon caught his hand.

"Do you have to take the lamp with you?"

"I can't get through the swamps without a light. I ain't no snake that can see in the dark. There's only swamps and bushes and mud where anybody can get lost. I gotta take the lamp with me."

Dixon released his hand, shrugged defeatedly.

"Go ahead. I guess I can manage in the dark till you send help. Tell Captain Clair where I am. Say that I'm staying here to keep an eye on the Snake Man till we can round him up."

The old man nodded, cautiously opened the door and slipped out. Dixon was left in the dark basement of the strange house, alone and surrounded by enemies.

The day passed in silence that pressed in with a terrible hush. He kept close to the wall, watching the outside door and the opposite one that led from upstairs. It grew dark again, but no help came. Had the old Negro really gone to Captain Clair, or had he taken his information to the Snake Man? Dixon shuddered. Perhaps the Snake Man was outside, waiting for Dixon's nerves to fray so he could spring from the blackness!

Convulsively Dixon tightened his grip on the shotgun, began moving noiselessly toward the darkest corner. There he would be invisible from even the Snake Man's incredible eyes and with his back to the wall he could hold off an attack until Captain Clair arrived—if he did.

Suddenly he stepped out into nothing. Reeling back, fighting to get his balance, he felt the gun fly out of his hand, heard it clatter against a wall. But his weight was too far forward. He fell through the air, smashed heavily to the ground far below.

He sprang painfully to his feet. His body was covered with bruises, but that was something he could ignore. He waited fearfully, every muscle tight against the expected slash of a needle.

There was a crusty rustle about him and that horrible smell of snakes. He knew he had fallen into the warm pit where the Snake Man kept his hideous pets. Why they hadn't struck at him yet, he didn't know, but it wouldn't be long. He stood like a statue for whole minutes, every muscle aching with tenseness.

When nothing happened, he relaxed slowly, then carefully moved one foot forward. Instantly he froze again. His foot had touched something that made a dry rustle!

He waited with teeth and fists clenched. Fangs did not lash out at his legs. There was no further sound. Cautiously he advanced his foot. When he heard the same rustle, he stamped down hard. Scales crackled

beneath his sole, but there was no snake in that empty skin.

The floor was covered with molted snakeskins. There were no snakes there at the moment. But something rustled up above. . . .

"Shall I leave you there?" came the Snake Man's ghastly whisper. "Or shall we help you out?"

Dixon hesitated. It was a choice between two deaths—here in the snake pit, or somewhere in the dark above.

"Before I started out from town," he said, straining his eyes upward into the blackness, "I left a map that shows where I am. You can't kill me and escape."

"There's a dead policeman in that pit with you," the whisper replied. "The police do not frighten me. Do you want to come up?"

"Yes," Dixon muttered in defeat.

A LENGTH of wood touched his shoulder. He grabbed it, found it was a ladder. Guiding it down and resting it solidly on the floor of the pit, he began climbing slowly, rung by rung. There was such a long silence that he began to hope he had been left alone.

"You appear to be tired," the Snake Man breathed at last. "I never grow tired. I can't even be killed. There is enough strengthening poison in my veins to keep me alive forever."

Dixon felt the stone floor of the basement under his hands. Just three jumps away was an unlocked door—and freedom!

He seized the floor, swung himself up and over. Instead of trying to rise, he rolled and kicked across to the wall. His hand touched the door. But an arm coiled about his neck with a choking pressure. He had to stop or be strangled.

"Too bad," said the Snake Man, "that you can't see in the dark as I do. I'll try to remedy that by making you a brother of the snakes. Unfortunately not everyone can stand the initiation."

It was as if some half-human monster had him in its grip as the coiled arm pulled him across a dark stretch of cellar. They mounted a flight of stone steps toward a partly opened door, through which showed a faint gleam of light.

[Turn page]

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In the dim light of an upper landing, the Snake Man turned and faced Dixon. The reporter saw a fearsome snakelike hood over the monster's head, its black eyes glittering hypnotically.

"Do you feel this pressure on your wrist?" the Snake Man whispered. "It is the fangs of a moccasin. If the poison does not kill you, you become one of us."

Dixon felt two sharp needles against the skin of his wrist, but he kept his nerve. He glanced down. What should have been the killer's hand was fashioned in the form of a huge cottonmouth's head and the forearm was covered with snakeskin!

"I hope you come through better than most of the initiates to my brotherhood. Only the toughest pull through and they remain partially paralyzed. Perhaps, though, you will be like me. If you are not paralyzed or killed, you will be immortal."

The fangs at the end of the Snake Man's arm started to pierce Dixon's skin. But the reporter had been waiting for the hooded head to lower and watch the operation. He snapped his head to one side, smashing against the monster's temple with a crack that dazed Dixon himself. At the same time he wrenched his wrist down, breaking the powerful grip.

The Snake Man staggered back. Dixon lunged in, his fists swinging murderously. He caught the grisly hood where the corner of the jaw should have been, felt thin *papier maché* crumple beneath the blow. Before he could follow up his advantage, the Snake Man's strong, sinuous arms coiled around him. The serpent hand lifted. The white, deadly mouth gaped, showing its lethal fangs. They came down swiftly. . . .

Dixon snapped his body backward. They were poised at the edge of the landing. The Snake Man instantly released him, his arms weaving as he tried to regain his balance. Dixon sprang, grabbed the monster's arm just below the head, as if it were a free cottonmouth. As they fell, he forced the fangs against the protected throat, jagged them deep through the material and squeezed the head with every bit of strength in his hands.

The Snake Man went stiff and a

shrill scream ripped from him. He snatched a gun from a concealed pocket, but his hand was trembling nervelessly. Dixon tore it away with scarcely any effort.

"You—you've poisoned me!" the killer gasped.

"Now that's silly," mocked Dixon. "You know you're immortal."

HE stooped quickly, pulled the hood off the Snake Man's head. Before he could say anything, shouts came from inside and around the house. Footsteps pounded toward them. Then sirens screamed through the night air from the road. Shots blasted and the pounding footsteps raced away toward safety. The firing continued for several moments. Then, as quickly as it had started, it ceased.

Men began pouring into the house through the door below Dixon. He fired a warning shot above their heads.

"Hold it!" he ordered. "Throw down your guns!"

They were exposed to his aim, while he was able to crouch at the head of the stairs. Helpless to fight back, they dropped their weapons. Dixon heard a choking gasp behind him, turned his head a little. The Snake Man was writhing in agony, trying to crawl up behind and attack him. He kicked back, caught the killer's shoulder. The Snake Man fell back.

At that instant bluecoats charged into the helpless mass of snake brothers who stood below. Without having to fire a shot, they handcuffed the entire crew and hauled them out to waiting cars.

Captain Clair ran up the stairs at the head of several people.

"Good work, son!" he cried, looking down at the twitching figure of the Snake Man. "You got him!"

"Part of him, anyhow," panted Dixon, glancing past the captain. "Jean, what are you doing here?"

The beautiful girl smiled and put her hand in his.

"Captain Clair told me you were in danger, Curt—dear. I made him take me along with him."

"Yeah," the captain grunted disgustedly. "I didn't have the heart to get rid of her. Dr. Roberts came along, though, so there wouldn't be any risk."

The hotel doctor nodded and smiled

deprecatingly. A gasp from the girl made Dixon glance sharply at her. She was staring at the unmasked Snake Man.

"Yeah, I know," the reporter said. "He's your brother, Leon, isn't he?"

She nodded blindly, wordlessly. The Snake Man was panting, staring around. His gleaming eyes fell on Dr. Roberts.

"Save me!" he screamed. I'm poisoned!"

"Go ahead, Doc," invited Dixon. "Give him a shot of serum."

Without hesitation the doctor opened his bag, drew out the antivenin and injected it into the agonized killer. As he straightened, he recoiled from the gun that Dixon was holding against his ribs.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. "What's the idea?"

The captain opened his mouth angrily to protest, but Dixon spoke first.

"Dr. Roberts is the brains of this crime ring, and the killer. Leon Revel was only his tool. I've been holding out on you, Cap. I found out, in the course of my investigations, that the two girls first murdered were distant relations of Jean's. The three girls and Leon were the only heirs to the dilapidated Revel plantation. Someone wanted to get rid of the girls, then force Leon to turn the property over to him by threatening to expose him as the Snake Man. Why'd he want the plantation? I checked on that, also."

"But you can't pin the killings on Dr. Roberts," Captain Clair objected. "They weren't done through a human agency at all."

For answer, Dixon stooped, tugged at the Snake Man's arm.

The moccasin head and scaly body slipped easily off the hand and forearm.

"A clever glove," he explained, forcing open the Snake Man's hand. He took a red rubber bulb from it. "Killing with trained snakes is difficult without exposing yourself. But a man with a pair of hypodermic needles, attached to a bulb filled with venom in the palm of his hand, can strike swiftly and accurately and never be suspected, particularly if a cottonmouth is found near at hand.

(Continued on page 112)

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TAKE ME WITH YOU

WHEN Dorothy Lewis was four years old, she was quite ill. One night she frantically called her mother saying that she was afraid of the dark and insisting that the mother take the child with her into the mother's room. The mother finally consoled the feverish little girl by assuring her that her mother was always near.

It was only a short time later that the mother died, and the child grew to be ten years old. By that time she had forgotten her mother and never spoke about her dead parent.

But last April, in a nursing home in New York City, doctors realized that little Dorothy was doomed. Her leg, which had been amputated, refused to heal and an infection of the bone defied medical science. Still, the child might live for months—so the doctors and nurses did their best to cheer up the little soul.

But suddenly, one night, Dorothy began to talk about her mother, telling the nurse that the mother was in the room. Finally, along about midnight, the child stretched forth her little arms and said:

"Take me, mother—take me with you."

The rest of the story can be told by quoting a news item from the New York Journal, as follows:

"At the House of Calvary Nursing Home, The Bronx, where Dorothy had been a patient for several months, attendants talked of the child's sudden yearning for her dead mother. 'She had never men-

tioned her mother till day before yesterday,' a nurse said. 'Then when a visitor gave her a dollar, she spoke up and said she wanted to buy some flowers for her mother . . . and then again, today, when she cried out for her mother to take her with her, and died with a smile of joy such as any child expresses when comforted in a mother's arms.'"

This is one of the few cases where a great metropolitan newspaper featured an instance of psychic phenomena. Perhaps children are closer to the supernatural than science knows!

THE STOLEN WALLET

A STRANGE story comes from the hills of North Carolina. It seems that about five years ago a chicken farmer was robbed and killed right after he had collected a sum of money. His body was found behind his chicken coop, where the killer had stabbed him in the neck.

Suspicious turned to a hired man called "Weasel Williams," but there was no proof. The sheriff watched the hired man for many months, believing that the killer would finally spend some of the stolen money. However, Williams continued to work on a nearby farm and was as poor as ever.

Then, one afternoon, Williams was killed in an automobile accident. The sheriff went through his belongings hoping to find some evidence that might point to the unsolved murder of a few months

previous. But nothing was discovered, so everybody felt guilty for having been suspicious of Weasel Williams.

Time passed. The son of the murdered farmer continued to run the farm. Then, a short time ago, just before dawn one spring morning, the son was awakened by a noise in the coop. He grabbed his gun, and ran out. All he saw was a big weasel scampering behind the coop just where his father had been found dead. The son took careful aim and fired. He knew he had killed the weasel. But when he went over to pick it up, there was no sign of the animal. All that could be found were the marks of the shot which had hit the side of the coop just under the rafters.

He couldn't understand how he had missed. And where had the weasel gone? Then something struck his attention. Just under rafters and behind a loose clapboard, he saw a dark object. He investigated. It was his dead father's wallet. It contained all the money his father had collected the day of the murder.

Neighbors are still talking about the strange coincidence. And there are some who insist that Weasel Williams was the killer and had died before he had come for the money which he had hidden while biding his time.

Had he taken the form of a rodent typical of his character, symbolic of his mad craving for the money which he had so long desired while alive? Who knows? At least the son insists that what he saw was a Ghost Weasel—not a live one.

BLUE REVENGE

EVER since Martha Gilling was found dead of gas poisoning, lying on her cheap bed in a lodging house, a girl friend had believed that Martha's former lover, Carl Dickson, had killed her. Martha never would have taken her own life—the girl friend was sure of that; and in her mind she was sure that Carl had drugged Martha and then turned on the gas.

But there was no proof, so Martha's friend kept this suspicion to herself. Somehow, down deep in her heart she believed that Martha would find vengeance and that sooner or later Carl would pay the penalty. The girl would often dream of Martha, dressed in a strange blue dress, and the expression on Martha's face was as though she were trying her best to give a message.

"If my hate will ever kill Carl—he will die soon," were the words which this girl said one day to a group of friends. But they cautioned her not to let herself feel that way or she might get sick. But her friendship for Martha had been deep and she continued to pray for revenge.

Then a strange thing did happen. Carl Dickson was found dead in his room on December 24, 1938—the third anniversary of the death of Martha Gilling. At first, the police thought he had been strangled because his throat had a strange blue discoloration. But the doctor reported that this was due to a throat infection which had caused a hemorrhage. [Turn page]

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But Martha's friend has never accepted this explanation. She was sure that Martha had strangled him in some strange psychic manner. And her friends became convinced too, when one night the young doctor who had given the death certificate on Carl Dickson said: "His throat was the same blue color as that shown on the face of a person who has died by gas poisoning."

This ties up with the belief of many psychic investigators that where a revengeful spirit makes itself known, it does so by giving some concrete evidence of color, sound or fragrance associated with the death of that personality.

FIEND AND SAINT

SCHIZOPHRENIA is the scientific word used for the Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde complex which often shows itself in one person. And usually when such a man has a dual personality, his better side is exceptionally saintly—and his evil side most fiendish. In both cases the characteristics are extreme.

But a new angle on schizophrenia has just been reported from Cairo, Egypt, by the British Press. It is naturally impossible to make further investigation and to verify details, so the story will have to be told as reported in the newspapers.

Malcolm Hale was a stretcher-bearer for the Australian forces. He had studied for the ministry and therefore preferred the medical corps to the active side of warfare. He wanted to do his bit, however, and faced death to carry wounded soldiers to dressing stations.

But one afternoon in the Battle of Africa, Hale saw an Italian soldier about to plunge a bayonet into a wounded Australian. Hale couldn't endure this, so he rushed the Italian and the two battled to death at close quarters. Finally, Hale, the heavier of the two, was able to grab the Italian's trench-knife and plunge it into the throat of Mussolini's soldier—but not before the Italian had severely wounded Hale by a knife thrust into the left shoulder.

When Hale's comrades found him, he was lying under the dead Italian whose blood had run into the wound of the Australian.

It was several days before Hale regained consciousness, and when he opened his eyes he was not the same soft man his comrades had known. He began to speak, but his language was a flow of curses in Italian. In everything but appearance and background he was an Italian—of evil spirit! He had to be held on his cot by force, for he made several attempts to kill his associates.

Doctors have examined him almost hourly from that day until the report of this story—but no explanation can be given for his change of personality, nationality and ideals. There were no head-wounds that might have distorted his brain, which explains many cases of schizophrenia.

But a theory has been advanced by an Egyptian mystic, who claims that in the

death struggle between the two soldiers, the more emotionally-powerful Italian spirit was able to overcome the spirit of the Australian and enter the latter's body, thus driving the true spirit into immortality. What do you think?

CEMETERY FOOTPRINTS

THERE are many strange stories of cemetery mysteries, but one of the most remarkable is reported by Ruth McPherson of Glasgow, now in America.

When she was a young girl in Scotland she attended the funeral of Nathaniel Burns, a great professor who had done much for advancing education among the poorer people of her city. But he had one sorrow—his only son had run away some years previously and the father had never heard of the boy again. When Professor Burns died he had no loved ones left—only a Collie dog which Ruth McPherson agreed to care for. The dog had loved the professor dearly and for weeks after the old man's death, the dog grieved, before he responded to Ruth's affection.

Several months later, an unknown young man was found dead—but in his pockets were a cheap ring and a small amount of money. The authorities decided to bury the young man in an unmarked grave and they put the cheap ring on his finger. Shortly afterwards, a cemetery attendant reported strange footprints always seen each morning on this unmarked grave as though some person had been standing there a long time during the night. The attendant wearied of removing the footprints so that the grass might grow.

This strange fact became of great interest to the townspeople and each morning spectators would go to the cemetery to see for themselves.

One morning Ruth McPherson went to satisfy her curiosity and she took the Collie with her. When the dog sniffed the footprints, his tail wagged and he appeared happy, then suddenly he walked off, still keeping his nose to the earth as though trailing someone. In a few moments he had come to a vault where he stopped and barked as though wanting to get inside. Ruth was astounded. The vault was that of Nathaniel Burns, his dead master.

People then began to wonder. Why had the dog picked up the scent at the unmarked grave and followed it to his master? Had the dead master walked to the mystery grave? Superstitious people pondered. Then they finally acted.

Friends of the dead professor believed that perhaps the young man in the unmarked grave was the son of the professor. So the grave was reopened and an examination made of the ring on the lad's finger. It turned out to be a ring that Professor Burns had given his son many years ago. Ruth McPherson ought to know, for she later married the son of the jeweler who had sold that ring to Nathaniel Burns years previously.

It was through this that she met her husband—and it was her husband who

[Turn page]

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financed the removal of the dead son's body to the vault beside his father. No one ever reported any strange footprints in that cemetery again.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra:

I read in the paper recently that two prophets in the Bible had predicted the second World War and that it would last for 42 months. Can you tell me where I can find those instances in the Bible?

Grace Hickey.

Dear Miss Hickey: Yes. Read Daniel 11th Chapter—and Revelations Chapter 12.

Dear Chakra:

I am a nurse in Chicago. I have seen many people die and have often heard strange noises which could not be accounted for. The young doctors laugh at me, but could you give me some actual case record that I might show them?

Helen Demmler.

Dear Miss Demmler: Mrs. V. J. Tucking of R.R. 1, Aitkin, Minn., has given permission to mention her case. She writes: "The third day after my operation I recognized my dead mother and heard her footsteps. The nurses

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9-41

were scared and looked out into the hall, but no one was there. But I rallied at once and began to improve. My sister had the same experience some time later."

Dear Chakra:

What is meant by "the in-between period" of life and death?

George Conrad.

Dear Mr. Conrad: That moment just before death when a person regains consciousness and reports strange visions as though observing things not of the mortal plane.

Dear Chakra:

I understand that certain savages will not consider a person dead until a light appears. What is meant by that?

Hobson Grane.

Dear Mr. Grane: Metaphysicians call it "the flash of death." It has been photographed and usually appears as a streak of light on the negative recorded just as the person dies. Ordinarily it cannot be seen by the human eye.

Dear Chakra:

I understand there is a mystic in New York City who can stop his heart by will-power. Can you give me his name and address?

Benjamin Trell.

Dear Mr. Trell: His name is Jacques Romano and he was recently written up in the New York World-Telegram. A letter addressed to him in care of that newspaper, will reach him.

—CHAKRA

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THE SNAKE MAN

(Continued from page 105)

"These fangs, Dr. Roberts, are special curved hypodermics, made at your specific order. I checked on that when I saw more like them in your medical bag at Jean's hotel. You had thought of killing Jean with an injection of poison instead of antivenin, for the cottonmouth had had its poison sac removed. I knew that when I realized later that there was no metallic taste to Jean's wound.

"But my presence there prevented you from carrying out your plan safely. What you were after was the plantation, wasn't it? You had discovered the lake of oil beneath the property and worked out a plan for acquiring it. You've failed, Doc, and it's going to cost you your life."

"But Leon!" the girl cried. "What will happen to him?"

Captain Clair snapped handcuffs on the wilted doctor and turned to answer that.

"If he'll turn State's evidence, I think I can guarantee he'll get off with a pretty tolerable sentence. What made him do it, Curt?"

THE Snake Man shakily raised himself to his feet. There was nothing sinister about him now. He was merely a criminal who had been brought to book and knew that only the truth could save him.

"Greed and gullibility," he said tonelessly. "I didn't know about the plantation, didn't even know my sister was involved. Roberts talked me into this scheme with the idea of extortion in mind. I didn't think there would be any killing." He did the actual murders, which were easy for a doctor to accomplish. I was only a symbol of terror to hold together the gang of thugs he assembled. He intended to get money through extortion after everybody was terrorized, I guess. And meanwhile, it looks as if he was after that oil on our property. I was just a sucker.

He put out a hand, rested it gently on Jean's which was inside Dixon's.

"I'm glad it ended this way," he said "I've learned my lesson."

Dixon looked tenderly at Jean.

"After he comes out," he suggested,

"couldn't you hire him as manager of your plantation?"

She smiled up at him and shook her head. Dixon was startled, till she said:

"We can hire him as manager of our plantation, darling. I'd never feel safe without you to protect me."

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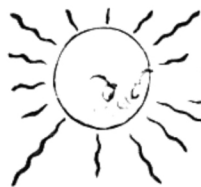
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