

THRILLING MYSTERY

10¢

MAR.

THE MAN WITH
TWO HEADS

A Complete Novel
of Sabotage

By G. T.
FLEMING-ROBERTS

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

FEATURING

THE MURDERING GHOSTS

A Complete Novel of
Death's Chamber

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

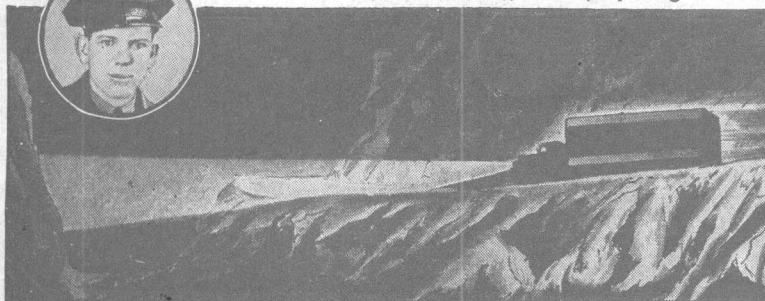
BEST ACT

DETECTIVE

"I RODE A JUGGERNAUT DOWN A CHUTE-THE-CHUTE!"

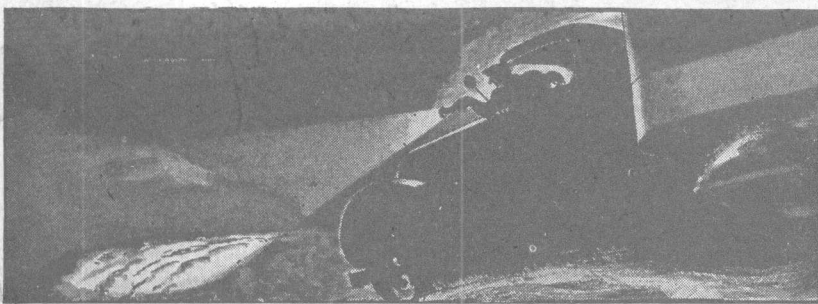
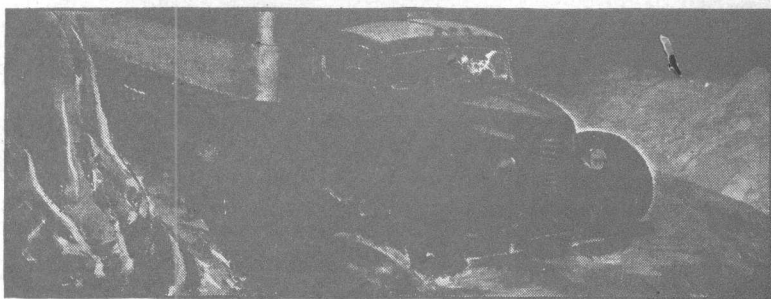


A true experience of L. S. VANDIVER, Laramie, Wyoming



"A WINDING RIBBON of glassy ice faced me as I nosed my big Diesel truck down Telephone Canyon, near Laramie, Wyoming, one dark winter night," writes Mr. Vandiver. "Behind me, on a twenty-eight foot trailer, rode 27,000 pounds of freight."

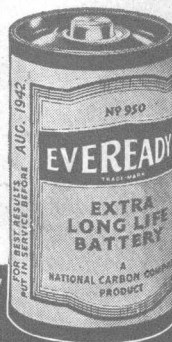
"WITHOUT WARNING, the lights went out! It was six miles to the bottom of the canyon... my left wheels were skirting a precipice... and those tons in back of me were shoving—and I mean *shoving*. It would have been suicide to use my brakes."



"I WAS SKIDDING TOWARDS ETERNITY when I remembered my flashlight. Its bright beam flooded the road ahead. Thanks to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, I drove the six miles safely, saving not only my life, but the \$12,000 truck and its 13½ ton cargo."

(Signed) *L. S. Vandiver*

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Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course: the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2C09
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Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

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I Trained These Men at Home I Will Train You Too



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Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open the door for you to a happier, richer life? Mail the coupon and find out how easily and inexpensively you can learn at home.

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THRILLING MYSTERY

Vol. XVIII, No. 2

March, 1942

Price 10c

A Baffling Complete Mystery Novel



THE MURDERING GHOSTS

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Anguish as a Sinister, Barbarous
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America Can't Wait *Industry needs you NOW*

Defense Program Needs Trained Men

There is a tremendous shortage of skilled men in almost all branches of industry. Draftsmen, electricians, machine designers, machinists, are wanted for good jobs at fine pay. Executives too; foremen, superintendents, managers, are needed right now to handle the enormous demand for finished products of all kinds. If you are already in one of these fields, you owe it to your country, to your family, and to yourself to make yourself even more valuable, to climb and climb fast and help put through the most important program we have ever had to face.

Opportunities Everywhere

Home building, ship building, manufacturing plants, great utility projects, road building—everywhere you look you find a demand for men—not just ordinary workers, but men who know more than their fellows, who are better at their jobs, who know both theory and practice and can therefore train other men, thus rising to more and more important stations and being of greater and greater help. Practically every industry is included in those needing MEN, trained men, skilled men, men with ambition and punch.

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Business Welcomes Applications from American School Advanced Students and Graduates

Whenever trained men have been badly needed, business has been quick to say, "We welcome applications from American School advanced students and graduates." We maintain an employment placement service to help put you in touch with the best openings, and we make no extra charge of any kind for this service. Write now for an outline of home study training courses; check the coupon indicating your preference and mail it promptly.

Rich Rewards

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Results
Come
Quickly

Get the Facts

(No Cost) All you have to do to find out about this type of training, to get the details and the outline of study, with histories of the successes of other men, is to write us or send the coupon. There is no cost and no obligation of any kind. Let this great school, one of the pioneers in the home study field, explain the methods which can do so much for you. Get this information now so that you can make up your mind quickly to get started on the road to the fulfillment of a real ambition, and so that you may be of the greatest possible help in this present emergency.

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Name.....Occupation.....

Address.....Age.....

City.....State.....

AMERICAN SCHOOL

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—and how *YOU* can take advantage of it

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And here's why:

In the first place, the defense situation has accelerated and complicated business. Hundreds of new plants, hundreds of others expanded, priorities, shortages of raw materials, some companies shifting to new products, and millions more men at work necessitate more bookkeeping and accounting—both by government bodies and by private industry.

Then our governmental policy forces the keeping of better and more complete records in every office and plant. It is not a matter of choice with any firm—it is necessity.

For instance Federal Securities Act, with its insistence upon publicity of *complete* facts about every company selling its securities publicly, compels more frequent and more accurate financial state-

ments—and these in turn call for more and better accounting.

Then the Social Security tax, the unemployment regulations, the Wages and Hours Act, the Excess Profits tax and other taxes necessitated by national defense—all center around more complete accounting records.

Thus there is an insistent and growing demand for bookkeepers and accountants, a demand that already exceeds the supply and is still growing. This goes all the way along the line from routine bookkeepers to executive accountants. And it seems likely to increase much farther.

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We need not tell you what that means in opportunity for the capable man already in accounting and for the able man who gets into accounting now. Nor need we argue for the practicality and value of LaSalle training in Accountancy—over 500,000 men and women, and 2,000 C. P. A.'s have already tested and proved that.

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You can answer that question wisely only when you know the facts. And the coupon below will bring you full facts about these demands and opportunities in accounting today together with the details about the LaSalle home-study training in Accountancy.

If you are dissatisfied with your present situation—and in earnest about achieving success—get the facts—use the coupon—**NOW**.



I'd like to see whether I should take up accountancy. Send me, without obligation or cost to me, your booklet, *Accountancy, the Profession That Pays*, and full information about your Accountancy Training program.

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How to Make YOUR Body Bring You FAME

... Instead of SHAME!

ARE YOU
Skinny?
Weak?
Flabby?

Will You Let Me
Prove I Can Make You
a New Man?

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

What Dynamic Tension Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, peepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details

about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

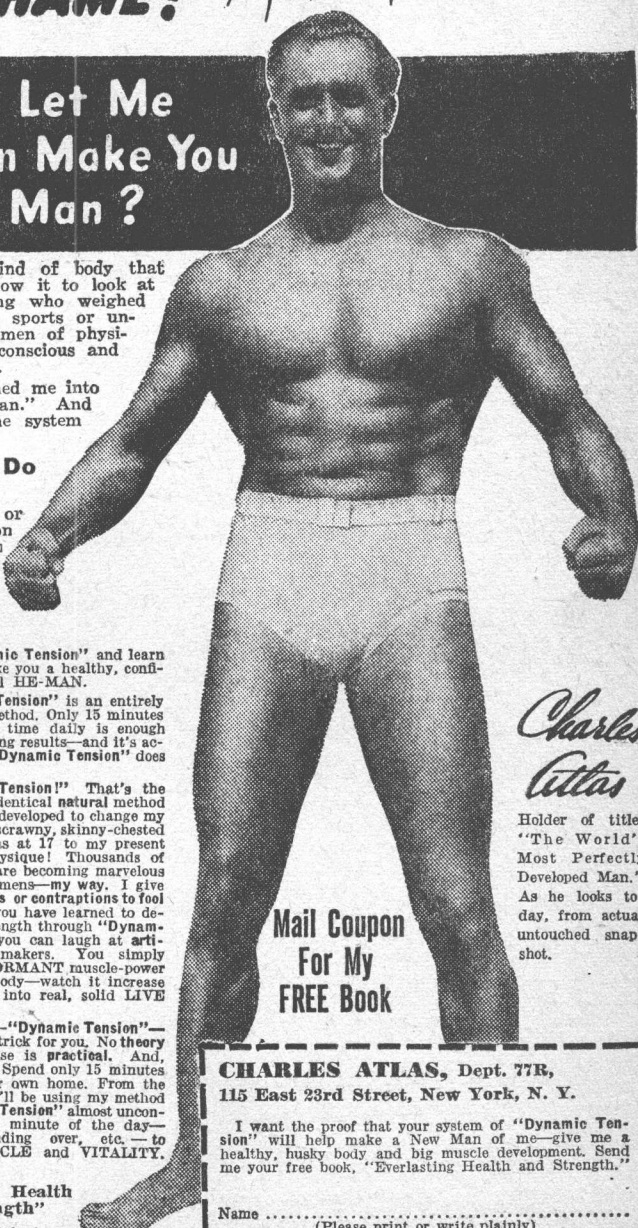
"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. "Dynamic Tension" does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension," you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in "straight-from-the-shoulder" language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today, AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77-R, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



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Atlas*

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"The World's
Most Perfectly
Developed Man."
As he looks to-
day, from actual
untouched snap-
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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name
(Please print or write plainly)

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By **CHAKRA**

Famous Mystic

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

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

Your CRYSTAL-SCOPE Reading Free!

Send in Coupon on Page 112

BURIAL DREAM

A FORMER Governor recently revealed a strange story concerning his grandmother, who had a terrible experience shortly after she married the Governor's grandfather.

The bride and groom lived on a large estate in the South—and were exceedingly devoted to each other. Suddenly the bride was stricken with a strange malady and for days lingered in a coma.

The young husband was prostrated with grief but the finest medical care could do nothing to save his beloved's life. He had to sit by and watch his bride die.

The weather was warm, so attendants placed the body in a casket within an old crypt in the garden to await funeral arrangements and the arrival of relatives.

That night the husband could not sleep. His grief was too great. He was lying on his couch looking out the window into the moonlight toward the crypt where his loved one lay in death. Suddenly he felt a presence beside him.

He turned, and in the dim light he saw his young wife alongside him. She seemed to be gasping for breath—and she was calling: "John, John, I can't breathe."

Terrified, he jumped up and lighted the lamp; but the bed was empty. The shock was so great that he rushed out of the house and ran to the crypt. He lifted the cover of the casket—and then in amazement,

he saw his wife's arm move to her throat as though suffocating. She was alive.

She tried to raise her head to speak but she fell back unconscious as her lungs filled with fresh air from the opened casket.

The husband lifted her gently and carried her to his couch. By this time servants had summoned the doctor, who endeavored to revive her and was succeeding.

The husband cautioned everyone not to tell his wife what had happened when she became conscious.

At daybreak she came to. Her first words were:

"John, I had a terrible dream. I thought I woke up in bed and something was covering me so I couldn't breathe. I reached over for you but couldn't touch you. It was torture as I screamed for you. Thank God it was only a dream."

But it was more than a dream—it was a miracle of thought projection.

THE KODIAK MYSTERY

NOW that the United States is fortifying Kodiak Island, Alaska, undoubtedly the famous story of the Kodiak killer-bear will be told around camp fires and in saloons in that wild country.

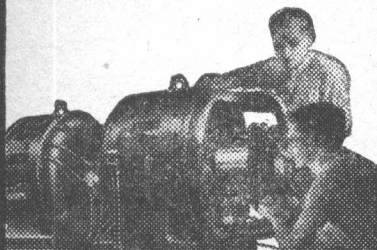
It was around 1880 that Martin Groder, the bad man of Kodiak, roamed those parts of the Northland, supreme in his glory of

(Continued on page 12)

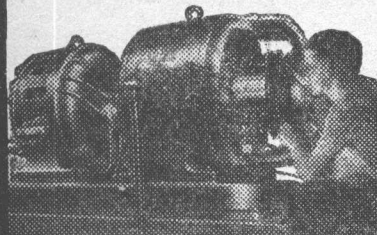


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MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Continued from page 10)

physical power. Everyone knew that Martin Groder had murdered his partner Scar-cheek Connor and had taken Connor's life-savings to spend in riotous living defying law and decency.

Groder often boasted that he could "kill a bear with his bare hands," and some people believed him. He would walk into a saloon, demand food and drink; and rough men would cringe and do his bidding. Then, half-drunk, Groder would brag how he strangled Scar-cheek Connor and many others who dared defy him.

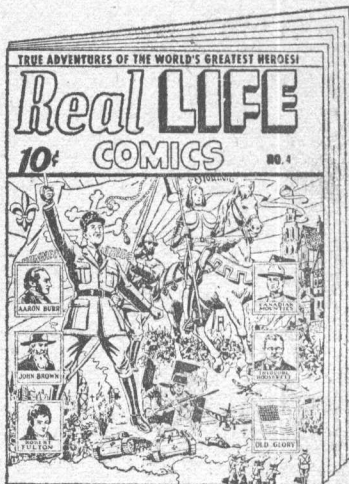
Then came one fatal night when Groder entered the Lone Hill Saloon where a half-grown trained Kodiak bear was chained at one end of the bar, a pet of the saloon keeper. When Groder saw the bear, he laughed in derision and walked over and shoved a lighted cigar into the mouth of the beast, who expected food.

The bear snarled in pain and tried to break its chains to get at Groder, but no man dared to say anything although they hated Groder for such cruelty.

For more than an hour, Groder drank and boasted and threatened the fate of Scar-cheek to anyone who dared to interrupt him as he continued to torture the bear. It was all the saloon keeper could do to restrain himself when suddenly everyone looked toward the bear.

Some old prospector had come in the side door and walked to the bear unafraid. Then, before anyone could stop the stranger, he unhooked the iron collar around the bear's neck.

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It's New! It's True! It's Different!

Instantly, the animal rushed with all its pent-up fury at Groder, who desperately tried to reach for his gun. But too late—the huge paws of the mad bear crushed Groder's body—and his backbone snapped like a piece of dead pine!

As Groder dropped to the floor dead, the bear sniffed him, then went back to its place in the corner of the saloon. The keeper snapped the collar back on the bear and the beast was quiet.

When astounded spectators looked for the man who had dared to release the bear, he was nowhere in sight.

"Strange," said the saloon keeper, "I never saw that fellow around here before. I surely would have remembered him by the big scar on his cheek."

To this day, natives will tell of the ghost of Scar-cheek Connor who came back from the grave for revenge.

THE CUP OF DEATH

FEW people put much stock in tea-leaf prognostications, although as in sand-reading, or in cards, the vibrations of coming events affect a person's subconscious mind, and through the involuntary energy of his hand muscles can cause him to create designs or select cards depicting the future.

But whether or not one has faith in this theory, a most outstanding case concerning tea-leaves has just been verified. The story is reported by a Miss Harriett Scott, a traveling representative of a well known cosmetic house.

Miss Scott was ordered to interview a prominent society woman who lived in a
(Continued on page 109)

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THE MURDERING



Forty people—all deceased—screamed in frantic dread

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

Author of "Corpse Masquerade," "Death Preferred," etc.

CHAPTER I

Murder by Ghosts

THE three hundred and seventy-two employees of the Allied Chemical Works filed out of their new building at five o'clock. It was a spotless, four story structure built on the site of an ancient building of the same size. There were no traces of the fire which had burned the original building to the ground.

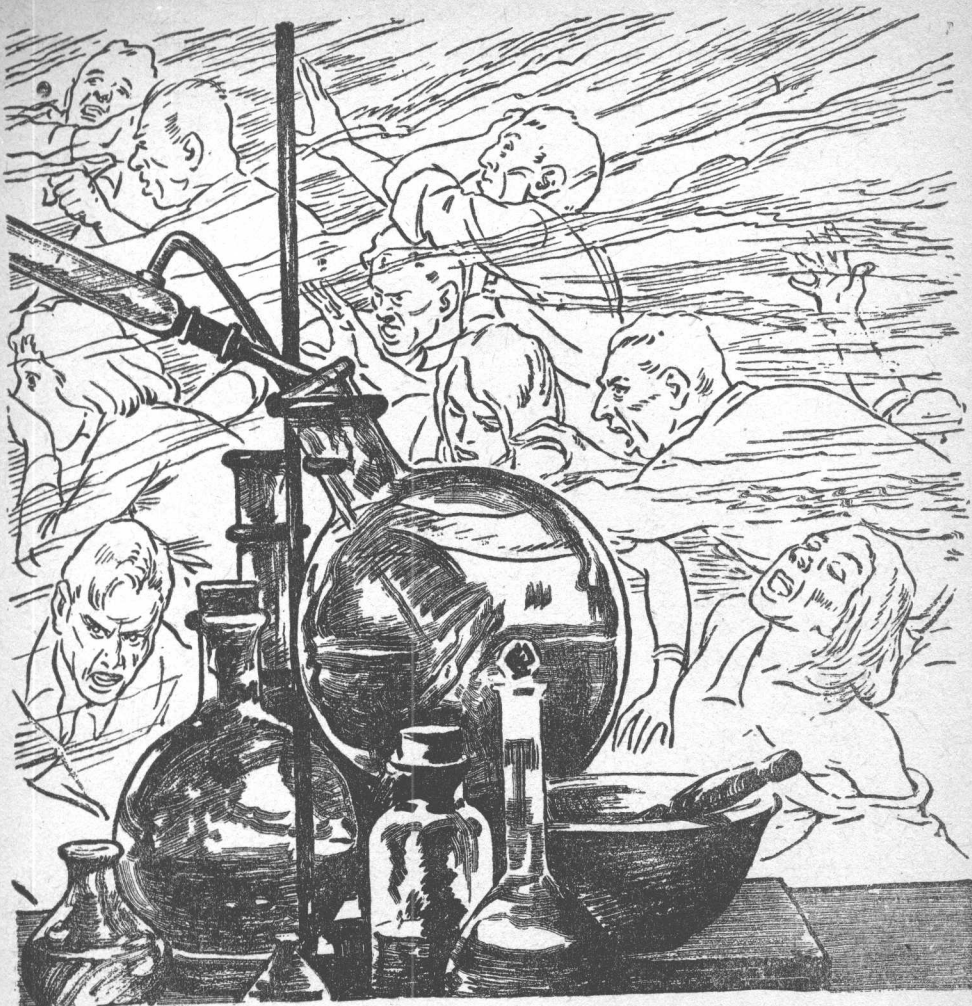
Paul McFarley, tall, lean and grey-haired, climbed into his big car and sat there a moment or two, looking at the results of his months of work. Old DeWest, the night watchman, sauntered over and nodded happily.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but it's a great building. A great factory. Sinclair couldn't have done as good a job as you did, sir."

"Thanks." McFarley smiled. "Now keep your eyes open. We don't want this place to burn like the first one."

GHOSTS

A Complete
Baffling Mystery Novel



*The Vengeful Voices of the Dead Scream in Anguish as a Sinister,
Barbarous Killer Stalks His Prey!*

DeWest gave a convulsive shudder. "If I was two years old and expected to live beyond a hundred, I'd never forget that afternoon, sir. With them girls and the men all trying to get through that one exit—all the others being blocked by the flames. Forty of 'em didn't. Worst fire we ever did have in the state."

McFarley drew on gloves.

"Yes—by far the worst. And Sinclair's fault too, in not heeding warnings from the fire department and insurance companies. Just gross care-

lessness or penny pinching prevented him from creating other exits besides those blocked by fire and the one which passed through the concrete, private laboratory. It won't happen again, but you'll have to do your part, DeWest. Remember, some of the chemicals we prepare are from secret formulas. There's a chance certain people would like to get at them, believing those formulas are hidden in the factory. They are not. One copy is on file in Washington and there is no other. Several men, including my-

self, have memorized the formula. Well, good night and good luck on your first tour of duty at the new plant."

DeWest walked into the now silent factory. He made his rounds, admiring the new machinery, the huge cork lined vats in which powders were blended, the bottling, and pill stamping rooms. This place certainly had everything.

At ten o'clock he made his third round, starting at the fourth floor and working down. He reached the steel door of a small room that always was kept locked now. That room was the only thing which the devastating fire had left. Through it, a hundred and fifty people had tried to pass, each one intent on saving his own life. DeWest still remembered with startling clarity, the howling, pushing mob with tongues of flame urging them forward, into a room meant for no more than half a dozen people. DeWest shivered and suddenly it seemed to him as though every lurking shadow in the ray of his watchman's torch, hid several of those victims.

Then DeWest stopped short and cocked his head. There was the sound of footsteps on the first floor. DeWest drew a nickle-plated revolver and raced down the steps.

Then he sighed in audible relief when he saw Anderson, the Chief Chemist.

"Hello," Anderson greeted him. "How do you like the new place?"

"Good, sir. Very fine. Are you going into the lab?"

Anderson took a bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one and nodded.

"Yes—so busy today I didn't find time to mix up a special formula. Sorry I can't keep you company—or even allow you to enter the lab, but rules are rules.

He inserted the key in a complicated lock on the steel door, opened it and stepped inside. When that door closed, entrance could only be effected by the use of another key. McFarley, the new president of the plant had one. Jerome, secretary of the business, also had blanket privileges to enter when he liked and the shop super, Lockhart, possessed one of the keys.

"If you don't mind my saying so," DeWest grunted, "I wouldn't go into that room for a hundred dollars a night. That's where those girls and the fellows died in the crush. If Sinclair had built another exit as he was ordered to do—they'd be alive today. Sometimes I wonder if they wouldn't haunt Sinclair and the factory too."

ANDERSON laughed. "You're a foolishly superstitious man, DeWest. There is no such thing as a ghost—or didn't you know that?"

DeWest looked down at the floor.

"Sure, I know it, all right. There ain't no such thing as a ghost, but just the same—I'm scared of 'em. Well, I'll be going to the west wing now. Call if you want anything."

"All right, but don't worry about me. You see, nobody can enter the lab without a key and I can always come out in a hurry, if necessary. See you later."

The steel door clanged shut. DeWest shook his head from side to side and walked to the location of his next ring. Half an hour passed before he reached the vicinity of the lab again.

Unaccountably he became frightened. His eyes told him nothing was wrong, his better judgment hammered home the idea that dead people were dead and that's all there was to it. But the whisper of impending trouble became insistent.

At precisely eleven o'clock there was a sudden rushing sound like a great wind storm sweeping through the factory, yet every window and door was closed. DeWest heard it and stood still. The next sound was the sinister crackle of flames. DeWest pivoted. There couldn't be a fire. The building was fireproof. Then came the low hum of voices that grew and grew until they were clear and blood curdling. Above the clamor arose screams and definite words like:

"Stop pushing! For God's sake, let me out! The fire . . . it's closer!"

DeWest had heard that sound the afternoon when all the doomed employees had tried to squeeze into the tiny lab. Then, when they jammed

the doorway with their own struggling bodies, they'd died there. Some from suffocation, some from the flames and others were trampled and crushed to death.

It was the same sound—even to voices which had been familiar to DeWest. Then, above them, came Anderson's voice, screaming in terror. His words were indistinguishable, but there was no questioning the fear in them.

noise and screaming. DeWest could almost smell the acrid smoke and the overpowering fumes from chemicals which had been turned into gas by the heat. It was exactly as it had been the day of the big fire.

Then, as suddenly as it had commenced, the confusion died away. DeWest was breathing hard from his exertions. He called out, in a cracked voice, for Anderson. There was no answer. He banged on the door again



DeWest cast off the temptation to flee. All those sounds and confusion came from inside the lab. If only Anderson could reach the door. All he had to do was flip a latch and the door would open. DeWest beat frantic hands on the steel door.

Outside, DeWest was incapable of helping. He thought of trying to shoot the lock away with his revolver, but knew that would be ineffective. He kept banging on the door, hardly hearing the sound of his blows above that

as his terror mounted. DeWest whirled and fled like a scared rabbit toward the main offices.

He grabbed a telephone, glanced at a list of names and numbers headed by Paul McFarley's and called him first.

"You'd better come down and get the police too," DeWest yelled. "Something's happened. Anderson—in the lab—ghosts—forty of 'em. Hurry, boss. I'm scared."

McFarley didn't reply, but abruptly

broke the connection. DeWest hung up the receiver and backed into a blind corner, tightly gripping his gun. There was nothing he could do for Anderson. He was dead. DeWest was positive of that. Dead—murdered by a band of ghosts. Everyone else laughed, but DeWest knew they wouldn't laugh again. If only the police would come. Or McFarley. Anybody! The sight of another man's face; and the sound of his voice would quell the trembling in DeWest's soul. He'd never been so frightened in his life.

LIEUTENANT Ted Morgan used a siren as he raced toward the outlying factory. McFarley's call for help had been garbled, but Morgan recognized its import and he was in a hurry.

He saw a car ahead of him, traveling fast, but Morgan swept past it with a blast of his siren. He had a glance at the white face of Paul McFarley behind the wheel. Morgan didn't wait for him.

When he pulled up at the office entrance DeWest came out to greet him. He was tottering on legs weakened from terror. Morgan drew his service pistol, raced through the factory and up to the steel door. He used the butt of his gun on it.

There was no answer.

Then McFarley and DeWest joined him. McFarley took a bunch of keys from his pocket and tried to select the right one with hands that were shaking.

"DeWest insists he heard the sound of those poor devils who tried to get out of the fire last year," he said. "He swears it came from inside this lab and that Anderson was yelling for help too."

"Get the door open," Morgan said. "Your watchman has been brooding about that fire too much. Personally, I don't believe in ghosts. Anderson had an accident, that's all."

McFarley managed to insert the key, turned it and then he stepped away. Morgan gave the steel door a kick. What he saw caused him to retreat a few steps and utter a cry of horror.

Anderson was on the floor. His clothing was all but torn from his body. His face and limbs were a mass of bruises and welts. Eyes were wide open and staring in terror that was now emblazoned there by death.

DeWest gave a screech.

"He looks just like them—them others, after they got 'em out. The ghosts killed him. The ghosts of those forty people. I heard 'em. He was begging for mercy, but they wouldn't pay no attention. They killed him!"

"Quiet!" Morgan growled. "Mr. McFarley, go to the office and call headquarters. Have them send the medical examiner and everyone else who works on a Homicide."

"Homicide?" McFarley gasped. "You think he was—murdered?"

"He didn't bat himself around like that," Morgan grunted. "I don't know how anybody got into this room, but somebody did. Now summon help, will you?"

CHAPTER II

Ambush

MORGAN and the Medical Examiner conferred in McFarley's private office.

"I can't understand it," the medico said. "The man died of multiple contusions, a skull that was fractured in more than a dozen places. His right arm was broken twice. Both legs and the right hip shattered."

"Just as if he was caught in a rush like the poor devils in the old factory," Morgan said thoughtfully. "Doc—do you believe in ghosts?"

"As a man of science—no. As just a—well, a man—I'm not so sure. Not after seeing what happened to Anderson. I tell you he was crushed to death, just as though he'd been trampled by a crazy mob. It's—it's impossible! There's no other way to describe it."

Morgan lit a cigarette.

"Yeah—yeah, I know. Anderson was in that small room. Nobody could get in, but he could have come out. Why didn't he, then? If somebody

or something trapped him there, he could have reached the door and got it open. Unless . . ."

"Unless there were so many it was impossible to get by them," the Medical Examiner grunted. "Well—thank heavens, I'm just an M.D. Morgan, you'll have your headaches from this one. If I can help, let me know."

"Thanks," Morgan said. "Send in Blane, the fingerprint man, on your way, will you?"

Blane made a terse report.

"Nothing, Lieutenant. I dusted that whole lab. Plenty of prints, sure, but none all around as there would have been if a mob was in there. No footprints, of course, on the cement floor. I also looked for scrapings, like those made by the feet of a struggling man. There weren't any. I'd say Anderson was all alone in there when he was killed."

"You and DeWest," Morgan derided. "Okay, Blane—and thanks."

McFarley came in then at Morgan's request. He sat down behind his own desk and bit off the tip of a cigar.

"I'm stuck," Morgan said. To all appearances Anderson was killed by being trampled by a mob of ghosts. Tell me—who else has a key to enter that lab? DeWest wasn't near it all the time. Somebody could have gone in, killed Anderson and hid someplace until DeWest ran to telephone."

McFarley looked up. "I have a key. Our factory superintendent, and Jerry Jerome, the secretary of the firm, each have one. That's all, Lieutenant. Without a key, entrance to that lab is practically impossible. The door is built like a safe, the room itself is constructed of concrete. During the fire which leveled the whole building, that room remained. The new factory was built around it."

"Yeah, I know. Keep on talking."

"We manufacture drugs. Many of them are blended or produced by secret methods. Anderson was in charge of that. Those others I've named also know the secrets involved in the mixing procedure and no one else does except—"

"Yes? Except who?" Morgan insisted.

"Don Sinclair. He was president of

the plant before the fire. His negligence was responsible for the deaths of the workers. Sinclair went to prison for a year and a day. Got out less than a week ago. He knows the various formulae, too, but Sinclair has nothing more to do with this firm. He sold out to me while he was in prison."

MORGAN'S eyes lighted up. "Ah—now we're getting someplace. Sinclair might know something. He's the most logical suspect. Does he have a key to the steel doors?"

"Yes. We didn't have to change the doors and those particular locks are expensive. Sinclair must still have a key, but what good would it do him to murder Anderson?"

"The answer to that might solve our case." Morgan walked toward the door. "Luckily there are plenty of motivations we can leave out. Sabotage? No, because you're not engaged in defense work. Labor troubles? You boss the happiest crew of employees in town. Robbery? Nothing was missing and you don't carry valuable drugs. There are only two motivations left—greed or revenge. The latter hooks up with Sinclair, and I'm going to see him after I take another look around the factory."

Morgan went to the fourth floor, using DeWest as a guide, much against the watchman's will. He stayed so close to the detective that their bodies tangled several times.

"Let's ride down to the next floor," Morgan suggested. "That's an elevator, isn't it?"

"Y—yes a freight lift. It goes from the fourth to the second floor. No heavy stuff is sent to the ground floor so the shaft doesn't go all the way down. There's another one at the west wing used for weighty material. I—I'll walk if you don't mind. I—I'm scared of getting into a small place like an elevator. Those—ghosts—might come back and try to get in with us. I tell you, I heard 'em. Just like the day of the fire. Even the voices and the cries for help. You don't think I've gone crazy, do you?"

"If you keep talking and thinking like that, you will be," Morgan grunted. "Come on—we'll walk."

An hour's inspection of the place showed nothing was amiss. Morgan left, after getting Sinclair's address from McFarley's files. It turned out to be a modest place and—although it was after two in the morning—there were lights in every window.

Morgan scouted around first, peeking in windows and trying to get a preview of the man's actions before he actually announced himself.

Sinclair, whom he recognized from McFarley's description, was in the living-room. He was short, stooped and white-haired. He sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair and kept dry-washing his hands. There was a harrowed expression on his face.

Morgan rang the bell. Sinclair let him in, shuddered at the sight of the detective's badge, and led the way to the living-room.

"Yes, I heard about it," Sinclair said. "The news came over the radio—a late flash. The announcer quoted DeWest—what he said about hearing the ghosts, I mean. And then the announcer laughed—the fool!"

Morgan felt a chill creep up his spine.

"Then you believe ghosts killed Anderson, too?"

"They should have torn that laboratory down with the rest of the place. Forty people died in or around that little room. I used to see their faces when I was locked up in my cell nights. I killed them—do you hear? My carelessness is responsible for their deaths. They've come back—to haunt the factory. I knew they would. I always knew it."

He covered his eyes and shuddered visibly. Morgan edged his chair closer.

"Mr. Sinclair—just where have you been these last three or four hours? I'm asking only to keep the records clear."

SINCLAIR looked up with a flash of fear in his eyes. Then he calmed himself with an obvious effort.

"I—was right here at home—by myself. I haven't an alibi, if that's what you're after. Also I'm an ex-convict. I suppose I should naturally be the

first suspect. But I didn't do it. Anderson was my friend. He came to the prison to see me."

"What about Jerome and Lockhart, the superintendent?" Morgan queried.

"No, no," Sinclair groaned. "Anderson was their friend, too."

"Then McFarley—or even DeWest?"

"DeWest is a faithful old man, incapable of harming anyone," Sinclair snapped. "McFarley owns the factory. I knew if I took charge again, nobody would work for me. So I gave it up. What would McFarley gain by killing Anderson? The secrets of those mixtures and drugs? McFarley knows every one of them. I tell you nothing human killed him. It was done by—ghosts!"

"All right," Morgan sighed. "We'll concede that for the present. McFarley's a rich man, I suppose? How did he pay for your factory?"

"In cash—it broke him, but he's smart enough to know a bargain when he finds one. I've got the papers in my safe—if you want to see them."

Sinclair went over to what seemed to be an ordinary table covered to the floor with a velvet cloth. He pulled this away and revealed a safe. He opened it as Morgan watched narrowly. The first thing he saw when that door swung open was a pearl handled automatic. Sinclair brushed it aside and took out a steel strong box. He opened this and displayed papers. Morgan digested the information they contained. McFarley had purchased the presidency of the firm by buying a controlling interest for a quarter of a million dollars.

There was another paper on the bottom of the strong box. Morgan looked at Sinclair curiously. The man hastily pulled the box away.

"That happens to be my will. It's none of your business. In fact, even these papers aren't, but I wanted you to get things straight. You know, Lieutenant, I haven't a great deal of respect for policemen. They treated me pretty shabbily a year ago when I was arrested. I'm only cooperating because I don't want to get mixed up in this and—let me warn you—investigate until doomsday and you'll never

find out what killed Anderson. Why? Because no living thing did. It was the ghosts of those people."

He ran a hand across his forehead, stowed the box away and locked the safe.

Morgan let it go at that. Sinclair wouldn't try to run away; or if he did, finding him wouldn't be hard. A man with a prison record can't disappear as easily as an ordinary citizen.

Morgan drove back to headquarters and filed the oddest report he'd ever written. He decided to return to the factory then, even though it was within an hour or two of dawn. He drove the detective cruiser at a snail's pace through the silent streets, trying to think out some method by which this mad case could be solved.

Sinclair was the logical suspect; and Morgan was reasonably sure that the single document in the bottom of his strong box was not a will. He'd seen that the thing was handwritten and brief. Furthermore, the writing wasn't the crabbed hand of Sinclair which had been amply exhibited on the papers pertaining to the sale of the factory. Sinclair was holding out and for the moment, Morgan didn't care. He had to get the goods on the killer before he acted and the solving of this case would take place at the factory and nowhere else.

He turned into the lonely, dark road leading to the factory, made a sharp corner and jammed on his brakes. A sedan was parked directly across the road, blocking his way.

Morgan grunted, got out of his car and approached the sedan angrily.

Something plucked at his neck and simultaneously the roar of a gun sent him diving for cover.

CHAPTER III

The Second Murder

HE snaked out his own service pistol, but couldn't find a target. He raised his head and a slug smashed into the side of the sedan, half an inch from where his skull had been. Morgan fired twice at the spot where the gun flash originated. Something moved rapidly in the bushes. Morgan threw caution to the winds and advanced boldly, sure that the gunman was wounded or frightened into retreat.

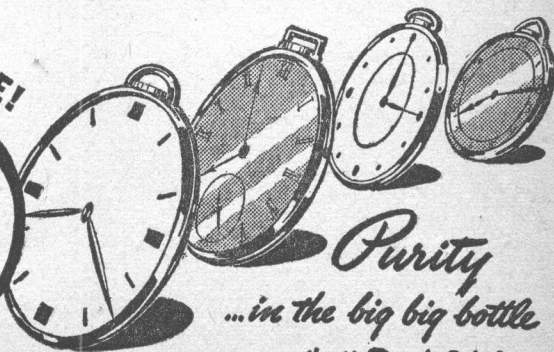
Dense shrubbery lined the road. Morgan drew a flashlight and swept its ray in all directions. He saw a spot where the assassin had flattened the grass and shrubs. His flash picked out a shining gun. He was starting for it when a branch snapped behind him.

He started to turn around, but his assailant was too fast. A fist smashed him on the cheek, another blow sent him reeling back to fall on one knee. His flash dropped to the ground and went out.

The dark figure of the killer came at him with a madman's fury. Morgan was thrown prone by the force of attack.

Both his legs came up and wound around the body of the man. Morgan

[Turn page]



squeezed and heard the man grunt in pain. Then, with a mighty effort, he heaved up and his assailant went catapulting away.

Morgan got to his feet and rushed forward. Two feet shot out like pistons and Morgan toppled backwards. Before he could arise, the man shrieked and dived into the brush.

Morgan recovered his gun and flash before making a twenty minute search for the killer. Then he thought of the gun he'd seen on the ground and returned to that spot. The gun was still there. He picked it up and his eyes narrowed. The replica of the gun—if this wasn't the original—had been in Sinclair's safe a couple of hours ago.

He stuffed the gun into his pocket, returned to the road and examined the car which still blocked his way to the factory. The owner's certificate was hooked to the dash. Morgan had never heard of the man. Undoubtedly the sedan was stolen.

He moved it off the road, took the ignition key and climbed out of the sedan. Using his flashlight, he sprayed the floor and the pedals. Red clay clung to the brake. He dislodged a piece and found it wet, indicating that the mysterious driver had stepped from a muddy, clay covered spot directly into the car.

Morgan's mind worked smoothly. He recalled a lane about half a mile up the road. It had been literally carved out of a forest and the narrow road was lined with big trees that excluded sunlight and kept the lane damp and wet for days after a storm.

Morgan got into his own car, drove to the lane and turned into it. About two hundred yards beyond the main highway he saw a small farmhouse, apparently deserted and almost hidden by woody growths.

Gun in hand, he cautiously approached the house, used his flash sparingly and saw fresh tire tracks—several sets of them all made by the same car. He rapped on the front door, received no answer and found it unlocked. He pushed it open, stepped into an empty room with enough dust around to indicate it had been unoccupied for weeks.

He searched carefully, upstairs and down. He found nothing and was ready to leave when he noticed a peculiar thing. A telephone box was hooked to the baseboard of the living room and its wires disappeared beneath a closet door. He opened this and on the closet floor he found a telephone.

Morgan grunted in surprise and then shrugged. The telephone company hadn't bothered to come after the instrument, leaving it in the house just in case another tenant moved in and wanted a phone. They did that often enough.

On his way back to where he'd left his car, Morgan mused on why the attempt had been made on his life? He knew nothing at all. Why had the would-be killer driven to this old abandoned house? Then a wave of apprehension engulfed him. Had that actually been an attempt on his life or a method to delay him? He stepped hard on the gas pedal.

Before he reached the area near the factory, the first floor suddenly was flooded with light. A door opened. DeWest, screaming, catapulted out.

MORGAN grabbed the man, pushed him against the wall and slapped him smartly across the face. That blow sobered the watchman and he managed to babble a few words.

"Jerome—in lab—ghosts again—killing him—murdering!"

Morgan thrust DeWest aside, raced through the offices and came out into the first floor of the factory proper. The first thing he was aware of was a slight trembling of the floor, as though a hundred people were marching across it. Yet the floor was made of concrete. Then he heard the sinister babble of voices.

They came from the closed and locked doors of the small lab. Like DeWest, he heard the desperate screams for help, the sinister sound of advancing flames. Then a man's voice screeched for help. Morgan raced up and tried to open the lab door. That was impossible. He banged on the door with the butt of his gun. Instantly the sounds inside were cut

off as cleanly as if done with a knife.

In the intense hush that followed, Morgan realized that DeWest was on the verge of a mental breakdown. The voices did sound like people rioting in terror to get clear of a fire. The lone voice, rising above the others, was even more horrible for it was that of a man who knew he was already dead.

"DeWest!" Morgan shouted at the top of his lungs. "DeWest! Come in here. They've gone. It's safe!"

A little ruefully the full import of his words struck him. He was believing in those forty ghosts now. DeWest came, cautiously, and on legs that threatened to buckle.

"Go to the phone. Call McFarley—or wait—you stay here and I'll call him. Watch the lab door and if it opens, yell your head off."

"I—won't be able to yell. I won't—I swear it," DeWest moaned, but he stayed there.

MORGAN found the list of phone numbers, dialed McFarley's and the president of the plant answered sleepily. All the sleep left his voice when Morgan asked him to hurry down. He promised to come immediately. Morgan then looked for Sinclair's number in the phone book. If Sinclair wasn't home, he'd have some explaining to do. But Sinclair answered at the first ring.

"What were you doing near the factory a short time ago?" Morgan demanded. "You were seen."

"Me? You saw me near the factory? Lieutenant—I'm afraid that was a mirage. I haven't left my home. In fact, after you departed, I felt so badly that I called in my doctor. He's been here for the past half hour. He's here right now. Wait, I'll put him on."

The doctor gave his name and address, reiterated Sinclair's statements and Morgan cut the connection. He called headquarters and somewhat despairingly asked for help.

McFarley arrived first, clad in pajamas and a bathrobe. He had his keys and opened the door instantly. Morgan knew what he'd find inside.

Jerome, a meek looking little guy,

lay as Anderson had fallen. His clothes were ripped, his face puffed from a series of terrific blows. Bruises were growing black for blood had ceased to flow. Morgan ordered everyone else out, turned his back toward the door and surreptitiously searched the dead man's clothing until he found a ring of keys. He transferred these to his pocket.

After aid from Headquarters arrived and the same routine was gone through, DeWest explained Jerome's presence.

"He came down about an hour after the police cleared out. Believe me, I was glad to see him. This place gives me the creeps. Well, he'd heard the news and felt bad, but he said the mixtures must be made ready or the mixing rooms would have to close down tomorrow. I told him not to lock himself in that room, but he insisted. Then, about half an hour later, I heard the voices. Horrible voices of the dead. They were back again—after Jerome—and they got him. I knew they'd do it. He didn't have a chance."

"I don't know what to think," McFarley said. "I knew, of course, that Jerome was coming down because he called me first. Like a fool I gave my permission—thinking more of our employees than of Jerome's safety, I guess. Which reminds me—the stuff still isn't mixed. It's got to be done so," he gave a sigh, "I might as well do it."

"Not alone," Morgan said. "I'm going in that room with you. Don't object. I know nothing about chemistry or mixtures. You could mix a dozen things right in front of my nose and I wouldn't know what it was all about. I'll even turn my back while you work, but—if I don't go in—neither do you."

"All right," McFarley said, "but it's on your own head."

They entered the lab, with DeWest and two husky patrolmen guarding each entrance. McFarley fussed with a score of bottles, carefully weighing out powders and measuring liquids. He dumped everything into one huge beaker and was finished. Nothing had happened—no sound reached them.

The room was practically sound proofed except when those voices screamed or a dying man yelled for help.

MCFARLEY washed and dried his hands outside the lab. He turned to Morgan.

"Honestly now—what do you think of this?"

"I know DeWest wasn't lying because I heard those voices, too—even the crackling of flames. But I still don't believe in ghosts. How about you?"

"I don't know. It seems incredible, but what else can we think? Two men, locked in that lab, were killed by a method indicating they'd been trampled to death. By whom? Who else could get in that lab? And how?"

"I looked, if that's what you mean," Morgan said slowly. "I can't understand it. There's a solution somewhere—got to be. I saw Sinclair tonight."

"Oh—him," McFarley snorted. "He hasn't the nerve of a crawfish."

"Maybe not, but he certainly did not confide in me the way you'd expect a man to do when under suspicion. He did explain how you gained control of this factory. All perfectly legal, of course. Say . . . I just happened to think. Where's this factory superintendent of yours—Lockhart, wasn't it? Why hasn't he showed up?"

McFarley threw the towel into a waste basket and chewed on his lower lip a moment.

"You know, the same thought occurred to me not long ago. I tried to contact the man, but he doesn't answer his phone. He's a bachelor, lives alone and he's a heavy sleeper, but I rang for fully five minutes. That was—let's see—about two hours ago."

"Thanks, I'll look him up. If you don't mind though, I'll stick around a little longer, just in case the ghosts return. And I'm still betting they're only on the threshold of being ghosts. When I get them—ah—then they'll be even closer to the spirit world because the electric chair can switch them out of this one pretty fast."

McFarley grinned, all teeth and without humor, as though the idea was repulsive to him. He said good-night and left. Only DeWest remained and he refused, pointblank, to do any more than run like a sheep between his call boxes so the records would be clear.

Morgan hiked to the second floor, using his flashlight. He did take the precaution of changing his gun from holster to side coat pocket and he kept his hand on it.

Morgan inspected the third floor and then the fourth. He was examining the mottled interior of a large mixing machine when he heard the faint footsteps on the stairs. Dousing his light, he crouched behind the machine and waited.

Someone, who knew every inch of the place, walked directly over to a timekeeper's office, glanced inside and then turned on the lights. Morgan raised his head and saw a huge man with shaggy eyebrows and the shoulders of a football player.

He edged toward the office while the stranger was busily engaged in looking over various sheets of paper. Morgan stepped through the door.

"Don't move," he snapped.

The big man eyed Morgan belligerently and Morgan began to wonder if a tin slug of steel-jacketed lead would stop such a man.

"Who the devil are you?" the man spoke in a booming voice.

"Lieutenant Morgan—Police. Now suppose I ask the same question."

The big man started to laugh.

"Whew—you gave me a scare for a moment. DeWest sort of played on my nerves downstairs. The man is scared stiff. Me? I'm Robert Lockhart, superintendent of this factory. I just heard the news and came down. Say—DeWest wasn't giving me the run-around about this, was he?"

"If he told you two men had been murdered here tonight—no. As for his theory that ghosts did it—use your own judgment. So you're Lockhart. I wanted to meet you. Where did you spend the evening?"

"Home," Lockhart said promptly. "Been there since I got in from dinner."

"Hmm," Morgan mused, "funny you didn't answer the phone. McFarley said he called you."

Lockhart looked startled.

"Sure he did—just a little while ago. Hey, wait, he also told me he'd tried to phone before, but got no answer. I was there though—I swear it."

CHAPTER IV

Dangerous Sleep

UNDER Lockhart's guidance, Morgan made an inspection of the premises and the machinery. They turned on all lights. DeWest crept up the stairs, and seemed relieved when he saw Lockhart.

"I didn't see you come upstairs, sir," he said. "You're not—going to work in the lab?"

"Hardly," Lockhart grinned. "I don't like that place any more than you do. Anyway McFarley made up a batch of the mixtures. Keep your wits about you, DeWest. We don't want to find you trampled to death in the lab some morning."

DeWest shivered and turned away. Later, Lockhart and the detective reached the platform just outside the office doors.

They shook hands and Morgan watched the factory superintendent drive away.

He got into his own car, frowning slightly at this new mystery of Lockhart who said he was at home, but didn't hear McFarley's call. Who slipped into the factory without announcing his presence to DeWest. That, in itself, was dangerous because DeWest's nerves were such that he might be expected to start shooting at shadows—and Lockhart must have known that.

Morgan turned the ignition key, started the motor and backed around. He headed toward the city, finally left the old road which led to the factory and stepped on it along the paved highway. He kept trying to figure out a solution to this puzzle. Ghosts! He wrinkled his nose. Leave



He lay on the muddy bank, completely exhausted

such things to men like DeWest to believe. But—what had trampled two men to death? Certainly no one person—provided he could secure entrance to the locked laboratory—could have so thoroughly crushed his victim.

Morgan had seen the results of riots and knew that both Anderson and Jerome bore the marks of hundreds of blows and kicks.

Sinclair was the prize suspect. The man might have a rankling hatred in his soul for those who had taken over his factory and, possibly, for all society due to his prison term. However Sinclair would gain nothing by murdering his former employees, unless. . . .

Sinclair could dispose of those secret mixture formulae to another firm for a good price provided that everyone who knew the secrets was dead. That might be motive enough.

MORGAN yawned and his eyelids slowly closed. He felt the car wobble, opened his eyes again and narrowly missed sideswiping a state highway fence. He whistled in relief, got a firmer grip on the wheel and tried to keep awake. Two or three more miles went by. He yawned again and his eyes closed. This time he had to brake rapidly to avoid running off the road. He began to wonder what was wrong. True, he hadn't gotten much sleep, but he'd never experienced such complete exhaustion before.

Something snapped under the hood when he jammed on the brakes, but Morgan was too sleepy to pay much attention. He made the corner all right, straightened out and decided he'd better hurry home and get some rest.

He was doing about fifty along the deserted highway when one hand slipped off the wheel and landed limply on his lap. He tried to raise it, but this required every effort he could summon. There was something wrong. He pushed down on the brake pedal. There was no response. The pedal went clear to the floor without resistance and the car kept hurtling on into the night.

Morgan gasped. That snapping sound had been the end of his braking system. The emergency brake also was ineffective. He reached for the emergency switch. His whole body felt as heavy as a chunk of lead. His eyelids kept drooping and he knew that one of those times, they wouldn't open again.

Turning the ignition key failed to halt the motor. The car's speed was undiminished. Even with his foot removed from the gas pedal, the car actually seemed to be picking up speed.

Sleepily he realized that the highway sloped downward, not a steep descent but a long, gradual decline. The speedometer showed fifty-six. Dangerous driving at night for a man in full possession of his faculties and now Morgan found that he couldn't think with his usual skill.

By the time he reached the bottom of that decline he'd be doing seventy. That much filtered through his brain. He had to do something. The idea seemed to roll around, as if in a dream. White fences whipped past him, with a margin of no more than a foot or two. Then he saw the turn ahead, one that actually curved and sloped downward. He lifted his right hand to the wheel and tried to grasp it hard for the turn. His fingers curled loosely and there was no strength at all in them.

He was certain he was going to crash. And although he knew this danger, Morgan simply yawned once more and felt like going to sleep.

The right front fender struck the first of a series of fence posts. Rasping, buckling metal roused him from his stupor. He managed to pull feebly at the wheel. Using all his waning strength, he forced himself to realize the danger. He noticed that the highway fence wasn't strong along this straight of way, but at the curve, which loomed up fast, it was thick, capable of smashing the car to bits.

Morgan gave the wheel a turn. The car edged in toward the fence, knocked down one section in a head-on collision and bumped down a slight embankment. It kept on going al-

though there was no guiding hand at the wheel. Morgan simply couldn't get his arms up that far. He was slumped forward, heedless of what happened. Nothing could be as bad as his utter lack of sleep.

The front wheels gave a dive. The rear end of the car rose up and then banged back on the ground once more. The motor coughed a couple of times and stalled. Morgan didn't know it, but both front wheels had dropped into a two-foot-wide stream. That alone had probably saved his life.

Someone was shaking him. Slaps resounded across the face. He managed to get his eyes open and stare into the face of a uniformed motor patrolman.

"Gosh, Lieutenant," the cop said, "I thought you were dead. There was a pulse, but I couldn't wake you up until just now. Never saw a man sleep so hard in my life. How come you drove through the fence and tried to give your buddy a bath in this brook?"

"Brook? Fence?" Morgan sat up, closed his eyes tightly and tried to think. It came back to him slowly and now, with a clear brain, he recognized the fact that this had been a crafty diabolical attempt on his life. He got to his feet, brushed off his clothes and got back into the car.

"You were curled up over the wheel when I found you," the cop said. "I dragged you out on the grass."

"Thanks," Morgan said. "Somebody tried to finish me off last night—just how I don't know yet, but—we'll see."

HE pulled the ignition key out of the switch. It had been cut off so that part of it still fitted into the key slot, but never turned off the ignition. The brakes too, indicated they'd been weakened so that hard action would destroy them completely. Most startling to Morgan, however, was a small tin box, fastened to the motor with tape. It was arranged so that the contents—a white powder—turned into a gas on contact against the hot motor surface.

"See?" Morgan pointed out. "That powder created a narcotic gas of some kind which I couldn't smell. I

couldn't turn off the ignition and the throttle wire is notched so it wouldn't go back when I took my foot off the gas. No wonder it was impossible to stop the car.

"Say—roll your bus down here, will you? I believe that I can make repairs, with your help. You can haul me out. It will be quicker than going into town for another car and, brother, I'm in a hurry."

Half an hour later, after some frantic work, the car was hauled back to the highway. It was morning, well after usual working hours began, when he drove to the factory and barged into the main office.

McFarley disregarded Morgan's disheveled appearance and indicated by a nod of his head that Morgan was to sit down until he finished dictating. Then McFarley had his secretary close the office door before he started to talk.

"What progress have you made, Lieutenant? I know it's a difficult case and I can't expect too much, but certainly—"

"I'm as much in the dark now as I was last night. Is DeWest around?"

"No—you forget—he's night watchman and is probably at home sleeping."

"Is Lockhart here? And tell me—which of those two men knows anything about cars?"

"Lockhart is here—and he's a whiz at mechanical things. One of the best men I know at such a line of work. Why?"

Morgan didn't answer. He walked into the factory, passed through a long, narrow room equipped with steel lockers and summoned the man in charge. A master key opened Lockhart's locker. Morgan carefully examined the clothes. The suit coat was greasy with black heavy oil from a car motor. Morgan thought he knew now why Lockhart hadn't made his presence immediately known at the factory the night before.

He pledged the man in charge of the locker rooms to secrecy and spent half an hour prowling around the factory. Lockhart was busily engaged at his various tasks and he only nodded when Morgan called to him.

Neither McFarley nor Lockhart indicated surprise at seeing him, alive and unharmed.

What about DeWest then? He had had sufficient time to tamper with the car.

Morgan slowly walked out of the factory. At least he didn't feel tired. The drug induced sleep had rested him completely. He got behind the wheel, tested the brakes a couple of times and then drove away. Why had an attempt been made on his life? Even a double murderer wouldn't try to kill the investigating officer unless there was a definite reason for it.

Stopping the car briefly, Morgan searched his pockets. Everything was intact, including the key ring which he'd taken from Jerome's body. It contained four keys on a ring chain and a fingernail clipper and file.

Morgan shrugged and drove to headquarters where he filed another report, as barren of progress as the one he'd written hours before. Newspapers were devoting much space to the case. Morgan realized he would have to get some action before long.

CHAPTER V

Into Thin Air

MORGAN spent the rest of the day running down faint clues concerned with finances, business dealings and a general investigation of each man involved. Lockhart, he learned, had a favorable bank balance. DeWest had saved for years and could have retired any time he chose. In fact, he almost seemed to be a miser.

Records at City Hall proved beyond doubt that the sale of the plant by Sinclair to McFarley was perfectly above-board.

A banker listened to Morgan's story and questions, then sent for certain records and consulted them before he spoke.

"We handled the transaction of sale between Sinclair and McFarley. Sinclair was a very wealthy man but he drew out most of his cash just before he was sent to prison. I suppose it

cost him a small fortune defending himself and settling his affairs."

"What about McFarley?" Morgan asked. "Was he well-heeled too?"

"I'm not sure. You see, McFarley isn't a local man though he came here several years ago. He kept no bank accounts in this city and was, so far as we knew, not a wealthy man. When the time came to buy the factory, however, he produced the cash promptly. So it's obvious that he did have money somewhere. Our dealings with him have been excellent. We regard him as an honest man and a good citizen."

"Thanks," Morgan smiled. "I hope I don't go and spoil that reputation. I doubt it though. McFarley stands to lose more than anyone else if the factory goes to pot."

Late in the afternoon Morgan drove out to the plant and waited until the employees were going home. Some lived close by and walked to and from work. Morgan stopped one of these men.

He produced his badge. "I'm not trying to go over anyone's head," he explained, producing his badge, "and whatever you tell me will be kept strictly confidential. I want an employee's unbiased viewpoint of McFarley and Sinclair. How about it?"

The employee shrugged.

"You're a cop and entitled to any help a citizen can give you. Sure I'll talk. Sinclair was a heel. McFarley is okay."

"How about more definite details?"

"Well, Sinclair was a driver for one thing and none too good about giving a man a raise when he deserved it. He was, shall we say, careful about money. It showed up in the plant lots of times. Machines were too old and repairs cheaply made. The fire inspector ordered him to install an emergency exit in case of fire, but Sinclair stalled until the fire happened. Two exits, incapable of handling everybody in that big room, were made impassable by the flames and the only way out was through that narrow laboratory and its small doors. Nobody would have been killed if the emergency exit had been installed."

"Now about McFarley?" Morgan persisted.

"He's okay. Nice guy—listens to our squawks sympathetically. He ordered a general increase in wages. He built the factory again and did a swell job of it. Everything is the latest development in the business."

"What do you think of Lockhart?"

"We'll—he's on the level all right, but he certainly knows how to push a man around. Tamed down since McFarley took charge. Guess he must have told Lockhart off. Still, we all like the guy."

"Hop in," Morgan offered, "and I'll take you home. I'm greatly obliged for this information. Knowing how people regard suspects in a case always gives us a clearer insight—a chance to know what we may expect of those involved in the case."

At eight o'clock that night Morgan stopped half a block from Sinclair's house and approached it on foot. He approached quietly and looked into one of the living-room windows. Sinclair was there, a pile of newspapers at his feet. He'd been reading about the case and now the man seemed to be staring in space as though he saw a solution to the whole affair developing out of thin air.

MORGAN rang the bell without moving too far from the window. Sinclair jumped up and turned deathly pale. He hesitated a moment and then finally walked toward the door.

"Oh," he said with a gasp of relief, "it's you, eh? What do you want now?"

"Just a little chat." Morgan walked in and sat down. "I'm sorry about last night, calling you that way."

"I'm not," Sinclair snapped, "because I was able to prove an instant alibi. Lieutenant, you haven't found out very much so far, have you?"

"Very much?" Morgan grimaced. "Nothing, describes it better. That's why I'm here. I need your help. Somewhere, deep in the background of this mess, is a motive for those killings. You know as much about that factory as anyone. Haven't you any ideas?"

Sinclair leaned forward.

"Yes—the same idea I've had all

along. There are such things as ghosts and they killed Anderson and Jerome. They'll keep on killing, too, until they get the one man they want. That's . . . me! Me—do you hear? I was responsible for their deaths. I used to see them, milling about, trampling one another in that awful fire, in my cell nights. They've haunted me ever since it happened."

"Oh, listen now," Morgan began.

"Don't interrupt," Sinclair said curtly. "I know what I'm doing. Until I surrender myself to those dead men and women, innocent people will die. I've been thinking about it for hours. There's no other way out."

He bowed his head into his hands and groaned. Morgan arose slowly.

"You're mad if you try any such stunt," he warned. "Ghosts won't kill you, but some human being may. Perhaps you're in the way of his plans, too. Don't be a fool, Sinclair."

"Fool?" Sinclair looked up. "Would I be a fool to sacrifice my life so that no one else would die? What have I got to live for? I'm practically ruined in the business world, an ex-convict, the blood of forty persons on my soul, just because I neglected to have another exit prepared. No, Lieutenant, I'm not a fool, but right is right. I'm going to give myself up to those—ghosts."

Morgan was puzzled. Either Sinclair was a little mad or completely sincere in his belief in ghosts and the fact that they were after him. Morgan left the house and drove to the factory. It was dark and sinister, sprawled out there in the gloom, but when Morgan turned into the yard toward the offices, he saw lights.

He banged on the door for admittance and DeWest let him in.

"Mr. McFarley and Lockhart are in the office," DeWest said. "I just resigned. I'm darned if I'll stay here another night."

"Just a minute." Morgan grabbed DeWest by one arm and piloted him to a corner. "Last night somebody tampered with my car. You were on the first floor most of the time. Didn't you see anything?"

"Why yes I did. Never thought much about it because I figured it

must be McFarley. Now that I think back I realize the man I saw was shorter. Just about the size of Mr. Sinclair . . ."

"Sinclair?" Morgan gasped. "Are you sure?"

"No—I ain't. Couldn't see his face and all he seemed to be doing was just passing by your car when I laid eyes on him. It was very dark."

"All right. Keep that information under your hat. Now let's see McFarley and Lockhart."

THEY went into the office and talked about the case for a few moments. Then McFarley turned to DeWest.

"Look here, you can't quit now. We haven't anyone to put in your place and the factory must be guarded. I'll pay you double to stay until we get another man."

"Well . . ." The money sounded good to DeWest; but he also had sharp recollections of ghostly voices and screams, the crackle of flames and the battered bodies of Jerome and Anderson.

"Let him go," Lockhart grumbled. "I'll stay myself."

"No you must be capable of managing the plant tomorrow and we're very busy. How about it, DeWest?"

"All right—," the old man sighed, "but it's just for tonight. But I ain't ringing the station near that laboratory. I'm keeping away from that spot—money—or no money."

McFarley seemed to be relieved at the old man's consent. He put on his topcoat, drew on gloves and nodded briskly to Morgan. They heard his car pull away moments later. Lockhart appeared with his grease stained coat.

"Been fooling around greasy machines?" Morgan asked blandly.

"It's as bad as that, huh?" Lockhart frowned. "You know, I don't remember how I got that stuff on me. I take my coat off and put it in the locker room as I enter the plant. Maybe I brushed against a mechanic. Well good luck, DeWest. You remaining here Lieutenant?"

"I don't know," Morgan answered. "By the way—nobody is going to use

the lab to work in tonight?"

"Nope—McFarley mixed up a batch of stuff. Finished just before you arrived. Well, good night, and watch out for the forty ghosts."

Lockhart laughed harshly. DeWest turned pale and said nothing. Morgan walked out to the platform with the superintendent and watched him drive away. DeWest had disappeared when Morgan returned to the plant, apparently making his rounds already. Morgan put out the lights in the office and sat down near a window overlooking the approach to the factory. He remained there for more than two hours, smoking cigarettes which were cupped in his hand so the glow couldn't be seen.

Then he pinched out a cigarette and arose. Someone was coming. Twice Morgan caught a glimpse of a dark form slithering through the gloom.

The man started running as he reached the cleared space where cars usually were parked. Morgan left the offices, ran lightly in the direction of the lab and hid behind several oil drums piled near the wall. He heard a key grate in the main door. The intruder quickly closed the door. He stood there, invisible in the darkness, for a couple of minutes and then slowly advanced toward the lab.

Morgan drew his gun and waited. He hoped DeWest wouldn't blunder downstairs at this crucial moment and spoil the whole thing. The man reached into his pocket, brought out a key and unlocked the lab door. He flung it wide, but didn't enter at once. Finally he snapped on the lights and just before the door closed behind him, Morgan had a glimpse of his face. It was Sinclair! The ex-head of this factory was keeping his word to surrender to the murdering ghosts.

A test of whether or not ghosts were responsible for the murders seemed imminent. If nothing happened to Sinclair, the theory of ghosts would be blasted wide open. Not that Morgan believed in it but lots of other people did. It was a courageous act on Sinclair's part, too, and in Morgan's estimation more or less absolved the man of blame in these

murders. And—he had a key. There were supposed to be only four, yet Sinclair had entered.

Morgan patted his pants pocket, felt the outlines of Jerome's bunch of keys and extracted them slowly. He risked a quick snap of his flash to select the right key and gradually approached the lab door. Still nothing happened. DeWest was nowhere in sight or within range of hearing.

Then Morgan's skin prickled. The floor began to rumble slightly, as if from a distant earthquake. He'd felt that odd sensation a moment prior to the outbreak of those horrible voices when Jerome died. Morgan started running toward the lab door. Before he reached it, the voices began again, starting from a low, indistinct sound to a rushing crescendo of horror.

As he fumbled for the keyhole, with hands that shook, the voices inside the lab began screaming for help. The crackle of the fire also was evident and the utter confusion of trampling feet and bodies thudding to the floor.

Morgan put out his flash, turned the key gently, and steeled himself not to be affected by the screams and voices of forty dead people. He grasped the door knob, twisted it firmly and then got set. The element of surprise would be on his side when he barged through the door and it had to be done fast. Gun ready, trigger cocked, he pushed the door open a fraction of an inch. The lights which Sinclair had turned on now were extinguished. He gave the door a hard kick, sent it banging wide and with a grunt hurled himself straight into the pitch darkness.

Morgan's feet kicked thin air. He fell into what seemed to be a Stygian pit. The whole laboratory apparently had disappeared. The voices stopped instantly. Morgan's hands were making desperate grabs, trying to find something to grip and check his fall.

He kept falling. The drop must have been plenty high. All kinds of weird thoughts raced through his brain. Then they were cut off suddenly as Morgan hit bottom with a crash that left him a limp, unconscious form sprawled out and completely at the mercy of the killer,

whether he was a living, breathing person or—forty fighting, screaming ghosts.

CHAPTER VI

Quarry Kill

WHEN Morgan's wits returned, it seemed that a million ghostly fingers were prodding his body. There was a sense of being moved around, too, but even with his eyes wide open, he couldn't see a thing. There was also an appreciable lack of air and he felt as if he'd been put through a wringer.

Summoning all his efforts, he tried to clear his befogged brain. Then he realized he was in some kind of a sack and being roughly dragged across uneven ground. He tried to move his hands, but they were tied.

An excruciating bolt of pain shot through one ankle as something heavy banged against the shin bone. Morgan attempted to raise his legs. He got them up about an inch or two and then a great weight kept him from moving them farther. A metallic clank, as he was dragged over rock, told him the story. The whole lower end of that sack, into which he'd been tied or sewed, was filled with heavy pieces of scrap iron.

Morgan's entire body was coated with sweat. Being enveloped in a sack, with scrap iron, meant but one thing. He was going to be thrown into water and drowned. Like a flash he recalled that about a mile behind the factory was a high cliff, once used by a slate rock company. At the bottom was a deep and wide pond. That was to be his destination—and grave!

He couldn't do much as he was being dragged across the ground. He could double up his legs though and he prayed the killer wouldn't notice that. For all Morgan knew, it could be broad daylight. Hours could have passed since he gave that wild leap into what he thought was the laboratory and proved to be nothing but blank space and thin air.

He possessed no idea as to how

much more time was left before he'd be hurled off that cliff. And what could he do to save himself anyway? Writhing and twisting only served to prove the ropes around his wrists were unbreakable, the knots excellently applied.

Morgan recalled that just before he dived into the lab he'd placed Jerome's key ring to which a nail file was attached in his breast pocket.

The forward motion stopped abruptly, as though the killer was resting from his labors. Morgan lay inert. So long as the killer believed he was still unconscious, he'd be less apt to insure the death of the detective by a bullet or a knife. Morgan hardly dared to breathe. He'd managed to wriggle around into a peculiar humped up position so that by raising himself a little, the bunch of keys might spill out of the pocket.

Then the killer grabbed one end of the sack and began moving again. Just as he started, Morgan gave a violent contortion of his body, praying the killer wouldn't notice. The keys fell out, but were lost somewhere in the folds of the sack.

Morgan began rolling around until his fingers encountered the gold chain. He secured a firm grasp on it and gradually drew it up until he seized the nail file. It was easy to open and sharp.

HE sawed the file between the ropes.

The dragging stopped again. Morgan knew that he was resting on smooth, hard rock. Probably the edge of the cliff. Then the ropes around his wrists gave way.

Just at that moment he was roughly rolled over and over. He felt the edge of the cliff cut into his body and then he dropped again through unresisting air. He hit the water with great force.

He managed to create a fair sized gap in the burlap as the water closed around him. Using both hands and a strength born of desperation, he ripped the burlap apart.

He was at the bottom of the pond, standing on his feet because the heavy iron weights held the end of the sack to the pond floor. Morgan gave a

springing jump. His lungs ached from lack of oxygen. Another minute or two and unconsciousness would creep over him.

He was climbing though, battling a way through the water. His head cut the surface and he sucked in air. It gave him renewed strength, but not quite enough. Turning, he let himself float for a minute or two.

When strength returned, Morgan swam gradually to shore, a distance of no more than thirty feet. He hauled himself up on the muddy bank and lay there, completely exhausted.

Dripping wet, unsure of his bearings, he staggered toward the sheer cliff rising high above him. He kept to the edge of the pond and made his way to the other side where no cliff hemmed him in. Twenty minutes later he started to climb up a steep road which would eventually lead him to the factory.

Meanwhile he wondered what had happened to Sinclair in the lab. Whatever happened in there smacked of the supernatural and Morgan found himself half believing that DeWest and Sinclair were right and that ghosts had returned to trap the man responsible for their deaths.

Sinclair was Morgan's biggest problem. The man must be in the factory, perhaps mangled and trampled as the others had been.

The possibility also existed that Sinclair might have set up the whole affair as a trap for him. Why? Morgan wondered if his noticing the document in the bottom of Sinclair's strong box was the reason. Perhaps that paper contained vital information which would give away the murderer's identity the very moment it would be read?

There certainly must have been some reason why three distinct attempts had been made on his life.

Morgan reached the top of the hill and saw the factory far below. He hiked toward it, keeping off the road and pausing every few moments to listen. It was chilly and his wet clothing clung to his body.

Nearing the factory, he took refuge in a clump of bushes and studied the place intently. He noticed that he

must have been dragged across this dirt road because the marks showed up plainly under the light of a moon that had just come out.

Morgan grimaced. It wasn't pleasant to think back on that close shave with death. One thing he did know—a ghost hadn't dragged him.

Perhaps ten or fifteen feet from the marked part of the road, Morgan stopped. There was a similar mark, indicating that he'd either been dragged by the murderer as he doubled back to make two marks or someone else had met the fate intended for him. DeWest? The watchman certainly hadn't put in an appearance.

Morgan went up to the factory door, found it ajar and entered. Nothing stirred. At least now he could solve the mystery of the laboratory and how it could be there one moment and gone the next, with only a gaping chasm in its place.

He walked directly up to the closed lab door, thrust the key into the lock and kicked the door open. He reached through the door, fumbled along the wall and turned the light switch. He gasped.

The lab was intact. Nothing was changed, nothing moved. Morgan put one foot on the lab floor. It was as firm as any other flooring. He stepped inside, prepared for almost anything to happen. Nothing did. He sat down on a stool, propped elbows against the lab table and cupped his chin in his hands. For ten minutes he tried to reason the thing out, but there seemed to be no answer.

Wary steps announced the presence of DeWest, attracted by the light streaming out of the lab. Morgan called reassuringly to the nervous old man, not wishing to be any target for his lead. He arrived at the lab door, but nothing on earth could have made him set foot inside.

"Sure, I'm soaking wet," Morgan said. "One of your ghosts threw me in the quarry pond. Where's Sinclair?"

"Sinclair?" DeWest gaped. "I ain't seen him. Is he supposed to be here?"

"He came into this lab. He must be somewhere in the factory. We'd bet-

ter search. And, by the way, are there any clothes I can borrow before I get pneumonia?"

DeWest found some and Morgan quickly changed. He was minus his gun, badge and everything else he carried in his pockets. Only the carelessness of the killer had spared the keys.

Together both men searched the factory from top to bottom without locating Sinclair.

DeWest said he had heard the cries of the ghosts and rushed downstairs, but the voices died out quickly and so he believed they'd existed only in his imagination.

"Is there a cellar to this place?" Morgan asked.

"Sure. It's used as a strong room. Want to go down?"

MORGAN did, and DeWest led the way. Morgan guessed at the location of the lab, went directly beneath it and knelt on the dirt floor. Someone had recently raked the dirt smooth directly beneath the lab itself.

In a further corner Morgan discovered a pile of burlap similar to that in which he'd been rolled. He went upstairs again, walked into the private office of the president and sat down behind his desk. On inspiration he phoned Sinclair's home and received no answer. Then he called Lockhart's and the superintendent was on the phone in less than half a minute.

"Is anything wrong?" he inquired anxiously. "There are no more of those—?"

"Bodies? Not yet, although I still can't be sure," Morgan said. "What's McFarley's number?"

"Worthington 38—something or other. You can find it on that phone listing in his office," Lockhart said.

Morgan grunted. He'd forgotten that listing. McFarley's number wasn't anything like that which Lockhart had started to relate. However, the president of the firm answered promptly.

"Sinclair missing?" he gasped when Morgan told him what had happened. "You say he walked into the lab and vanished?"

"Not only that," Morgan went on,

"but the lab vanished too. At least the floor of it did. No, there's no use in your coming down here. I'm leaving myself. Done everything possible with no results. So long as no one else is slated to enter the lab tonight, I'll go home and get some sleep. I checked on Lockhart, by the way, and he's at home."

Morgan hung up. He had no intentions of going home, but the less people who knew that, the better. The killer was striking fast tonight. Perhaps he'd try again. Morgan picked up a hefty paper weight. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it might serve. Then he shut off all lights, told DeWest to make his rounds, and sat back.

Things were going to happen, he felt sure. The murderer, whatever his reason for killing, would try to clean up the case tonight. If it went on much longer, Morgan or someone else was bound to stumble on a piece of evidence which would queer the whole ghostly set-up.

CHAPTER VII

Secret of the Vanishing Room

IT was almost two o'clock when Morgan eased himself out of the chair, opened the office door a crack and listened. Someone was turning the lock of the main door. It opened and a bulky form came inside, closed the door again, and walked softly across the floor in the direction of the lab.

Morgan stalked him, moving on tiptoe through the darkness. The man fumbled in his pocket, drew out keys and then the detective acted.

"Don't move," he called out softly. "Stand just as you are or I'll shoot."

Morgan had no gun, but in the darkness, this intruder couldn't know that. The man turned quickly, as if in sudden terror. He spoke in a voice that shook slightly.

"L-lieutenant Morgan—it's you?"

"Lockhart," Morgan moved forward. "Why were you going into the lab?"

"Just to satisfy myself that this is

all the bunk," Lockhart shrugged. "And, incidentally, to prepare a mixture which McFarley forgot about today. It has to stand for a few hours before being thrown into the mixing tubs to be blended with the neutral powders. I'm going in. You can come along if you like."

Morgan moved close to Lockhart and doubled up his right fist. This was no time to be formal. He'd either save Lockhart's life or make a terrific fool of himself. That fist traveled upward in a short, vicious arc, collided with Lockhart's chin and the big man swayed drunkenly. Morgan hit him again, grabbed the man as he plunged for the floor and eased him down.

Then he found rope and a gag, quickly bound Lockhart and thrust the gag between his lips. He dragged him to the main offices, laid him in a corner and returned to the vicinity of the lab. Lockhart had been carrying his topcoat and his hat lay on the floor beside it. Morgan put these on, working very fast. DeWest must have been busy somewhere else in the factory for he certainly had not been attracted by the brief rumpus.

With the lab door key available, Morgan walked briskly across the floor, and entered the lab. His borrowed hat was pulled well down and while the topcoat was a couple of sizes too big, he kept it wrapped around him to hide this fact.

He closed the door again and looked around, wondering just what would happen.

Two minutes went by slowly. He decided to carry out every step which Lockhart would have taken. Moving to the lab bench, he clanked bottles, pushed apparatus around and, in general, made noises like a man familiar with the routine of mixing the secret formulae.

Suddenly he felt the floor quiver a bit. Not like the rumbling which took place just before the ghostly voices began their clamor, but more as if the floor itself had unexplainably become loose.

Morgan couldn't watch all four walls at once, but he could keep three under close observation and

he took care of the area directly behind him by propping up a piece of chrome steel, which he hastily polished to mirror-like brightness. The sensation of a loose floor had disappeared almost as soon as it began and now everything seemed to be under control. Every nerve in Morgan's body was tense and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. Three men had entered this lab. Two had been found here—dead. The third had vanished. Morgan couldn't help theorizing what would be his fate.

There was a faint, jarring noise, or perhaps more of a sensation in the soles of his feet. Morgan watched the chrome mirror intently. There was a heavy bottle in one hand, ready to be thrown at a second's notice. Then the lights went out.

The chromium plated piece of steel glowed with a weird bluish light. It might have come from the moonlight shining through a door directly opposite the mirror. Morgan's brain flashed this warning and he whirled like a top, hurling the bottle of chemical at the same instant.

It smashed—not inside the lab—but somewhere far outside. He heard a grunt of surprise and then a fury that was certainly not composed of ectoplasm, struck him. Morgan went down under the unexpected attack. Two hands fastened around his throat in a familiar grasp. This was the mysterious assailant who'd attacked him after he left Sinclair's house the first time.

Morgan's arms were free and he used them with good effect. One fist landed against his attacker's midriff and drew a sharp cry of pain. The left fist cracked against a jaw. The grip around Morgan's throat loosened just a trifle and he surged his body upward. The attacker was thrown off balance. Morgan jumped to his feet and crouched, ready to spring.

"If you try it, I'll shoot," a low, nasty voice warned. "I'm holding a gun."

Morgan tried to place that voice, but couldn't. The speaker disguised it too well. There were qualities he could attribute to McFarley or Lockhart, Sinclair or DeWest. Yet Mor-

gan sensed that the man spoke the truth and did have a gun. He raised both arms slightly.

"Turn around," the voice hissed, "and walk over to the mixing tubs. There's more light there and I can see you."

That suited Morgan. He too could identify this killer. He walked slowly in the direction of the big, squat tubs and noticed that the door of one tub was wide open. Inside, Morgan knew, were half a dozen arms that ground the powder into a fine talc. They looked something like an inverted milkmaid's stool now and those arms could lengthen gradually and force their way through the powder that was placed inside while the whole tub turned rapidly.

Morgan exhaled sharply. Here was the secret of how Anderson and Jerome had been battered to death in a manner much like those people who had died in the fire. Those arms would stab and strike until the breath was beaten out of his body. Stains, caused by the chemicals, colored the interior so that the victim's blood remained invisible.

Suddenly, without warning, the assailant surged forward, grabbed Morgan by both legs and dumped him head first into the tub. But Morgan had recognized his danger and was prepared. True, he was practically turned upside down, but he yanked his feet free of the mystery man's grasp, shot them out and heard the man fall heavily to the floor. Before he could arise, Morgan was on his feet once more.

A gun cracked and the bullet ricocheted off the tub. Another chopped a hunk out of the cement floor at Morgan's feet. Then the murderer, firing wildly, started a sprint toward the steps. Morgan went slowly after him, cautious of the lethal gun.

When Morgan reached the stairway, the man had vanished. He raced downstairs, yelled for DeWest, and got no answer. In the main offices and where Lockhart had been lying were just a few neatly sliced ropes and the gag.

Morgan ran out of the building, slamming the door behind him. His car was where he'd left it, but he took no chances. Better to make sure he'd reach his destination than take any risks. The car didn't seem to have been sabotaged. Perhaps the killer hadn't found time to do this.

The motor responded swiftly and Morgan whipped the light sedan down the driveway, and turned into the dirt road. He reached the highway and his speed increased on the smooth pavement. He headed straight for Sinclair's home.

There were no cars parked near it and Morgan left his around the corner. He crossed through a neighboring yard, vaulted a hedge and took the porch steps in one leap. The house was darkened, the front door locked. Morgan tried using his shoulder on it, but the door was substantially built. In the rear of the house he found an open pantry window. It was narrow, but he wormed his way through it, dropped lightly on the floor and moved the safe in Sinclair's living room.

Nothing seemed to be disturbed. If his hunch were correct, he'd beaten the killer to this house because he'd taken a fast, direct route while the murderer may have circled just in case he was being trailed. Morgan pulled a heavy, overstuffed chair well out of a corner and faded into the darkness behind it.

He had nerve wracking minutes to wait and his mind went over the case. Sinclair had vanished. Morgan knew how that had been accomplished, but if Sinclair also knew the secret of that small lab, he could have used it to make his getaway. DeWest was missing from the factory. Lockhart, whom he'd tied up so securely, had been cut free and he, too, was gone.

Morgan began to wonder if his hunch was wrong—if his theory as to why the murderer had attempted to get him was in error. He figured that the document in Sinclair's strong box held the secret to the whole case and the killer would come after it. Perhaps he'd been here already, during the interim which Morgan had used to get out of the pond and re-

turn to the factory once more.

Then metal scraped against metal and Morgan tensed. Someone crossed the living-room floor, an obscure figure well muffled in a turned up coat collar and hat brim pulled low. The man knelt beside the safe, ripped away the velvet drape hiding it and instantly turned the tumbler. He knew the combination.

THE door swung open and out came the strong box. The killer had a key to this, raised the lid and hastily dumped the contents onto the floor. He picked up the document which Sinclair had been so unwilling to show, gave a grunt of satisfaction and quickly replaced everything in the safe, closed the door and spun the combination. Then he straightened up, reached into his pocket and extracted a pack of matches. He lit one, touched it to a corner of the document and then a gust of wind blew the match out. At the same time the killer's shoulder was seized and he was spun around. One hand streaked toward a holstered gun, but never got it out.

Morgan yanked the document free, wadded it into a ball and hurled it toward one corner. Then he went forward in a low, flying dive. His arms wrapped around the killer's thighs and sent him crashing to the floor. A kick made his head throb. Heavy blows beat a tattoo on his face.

But all the while he methodically inflicted one punishing blow after another until he had the man groggy.

Forcing him back against the wall, Morgan's fists made the man's head bob. He suffered two blows, one in the face and the other at the back of his head. Knees buckled and he slowly sat down, cross-legged. Then he pitched forward on his face.

Morgan turned on the lights, found the document and spread it on a table. He digested the contents and nodded in satisfaction. It was precisely what he'd hoped for and had expected to find. He walked over to where the killer lay huddled, lifted the man's hat and tipped his head back.

Paul McFarley, president of the

factory, stared unseeingly into space. Morgan grinned, for this was just another confirmation of his theories. He bent down, hoisted the man to his shoulder and walked out.

When he pulled up to the factory, two figures detached themselves from the darkness and strode forward, each holding a gun. They were DeWest and Lockhart. McFarley was an unconscious heap on the tonneau floor of Morgan's car.

"How does your jaw feel, Lockhart?" Morgan said. "I'm sorry I had to slug you."

Lockhart didn't look exactly pleasant.

"What was the idea? And why did you tie me up like that?"

"To save your life. Who told you to return here and mix those chemicals tonight?" Morgan asked.

"You remember that only five people knew the secret mixtures," Morgan said. "McFarley had to eliminate those people and be the only living person who could operate this plant. The formula is on file in Washington, naturally, but it would become McFarley's property then. Presumably he purchased this factory, lock, stock and barrel, from Sinclair. There were bills of sale, checks and everything else to make it legal—but Sinclair still owned the factory.

"I found out that Sinclair had a lot of money and suddenly drew it all out, leaving the impression that he needed it for his legal defense. Shortly after, McFarley, who had no bank account, suddenly managed to lay his hands on a sum of money almost equalling that which Sinclair had withdrawn. That money was

Colonel Crum Investigates a Smuggling Ring—and Finds a Nazi Spy Hideout

IN

THE SCARLET JESTER A Complete Mystery Novelet

By **JOHN H. KNOX**
COMING NEXT ISSUE



"McFarley. He said he'd forgotten one important batch. DeWest found me in the office and cut me loose. Just then we heard the ghosts acting up and we beat it. Don't laugh. I know I'm a healthy, strapping guy, but ghosts are—ghosts."

Morgan opened the back door of his car. "Take a look inside and see your ghost. This one has warm blood flowing through his veins, a black heart and a brain warped with crookedness. Sure—it's McFarley. He fooled all of us."

MCFARLEY, well tied, was seated on the floor and propped against one wall of his own office. Morgan, DeWest and Lockhart occupied chairs and smoked McFarley's expensive cigars.

Sinclair's. He loaned it to McFarley so he could buy him out because Sinclair knew after what had happened, he'd never be able to operate the factory again. His employees disliked him before the fire—hated him afterwards. Sinclair was a penny pincher and wouldn't have sold the business for any figure like that which passed to him from McFarley.

"The business was on the upgrade, so Sinclair got McFarley to stooge for him. Sinclair made McFarley sign papers proving this and Sinclair insisted on keeping the documents in his safe. He showed me some of the papers proving the sale. In fact he was almost too eager to show them to me. These concerned only the actual, recorded sale of the factory. McFarley must have been around the house

and saw Sinclair do this. He apparently thought Sinclair was spilling the whole plot. Later Sinclair removed the documents temporarily and McFarley slipped in, knew the combination to the safe and opened it. He found the papers gone and was positive I had them. He stole Sinclair's gun, waited for me and did his best to kill me. He tried again a couple of times, too. If he'd succeeded, the blame would have been placed on Sinclair because McFarley intended for him to vanish and take the rap for the whole business."

"You learned all that from what was written on the piece of paper?" Lockhart asked.

"Yes. Now, if that paper was destroyed, and Sinclair dead, who'd there be to say that McFarley really hadn't bought him out and did own the factory? Then if Anderson, Jerome and you, Lockhart, were dead, the secret mixtures used in the highly successful preparations made here, would be McFarley's alone. He could, perhaps sell out to a larger firm at a good profit or go to town building up this plant. Everyone who knew the secret mixtures certainly had a cut in the profits coming, didn't they?"

"Yes—we all developed those mixtures," Lockhart explained. "We all had a share in the profits. But what happened in that lab? How could McFarley kill those men and then reach his home so fast and alibi himself? He lives ten miles from this plant."

"It puzzled me, too. Remember how McFarley always kept a list of phone numbers right here at his desk? Well—his number topped the list. It was typed on a narrow piece of paper and inserted in a celluloid slot to be kept visible and clean at the same time, just like the other listings. McFarley kept his real phone number in the slot except when he wanted to establish an alibi. Then he switched the slips and left another, giving a different phone number which is connected with an abandoned house just up the road.

"People who would phone on business, would never see the phony number and those who might call after

hours wouldn't know the difference.

"DeWest, you remain here and watch McFarley. Lockhart, you come with me.

LOCKHART followed Morgan in to the factory, where all lights had been turned on. They went to the second floor and Morgan pointed out the freight elevator.

"That lift doesn't go down beyond the second floor," he explained. "McFarley rebuilt this plant. He had some fancy work done, perhaps even did it himself. The lab is nothing but a small room inside another. It can be raised right out of its moorings and lifted to the second or third floor by the elevator. There's a powerful hook which can be dropped into position for catching the lab.

"It's cleverly arranged, no gaps between the two walls—nothing. McFarley simply knew when one of his victims was slated to enter the lab. He slipped into the factory, brought the elevator down and hooked it to the lab. He raised the lab so slowly and carefully that whoever was inside never even felt the sensation of rising. I know because I was in there when he tried that stunt."

"Well I'll be darned," Lockhart rubbed his chin. "McFarley was a clever duck with all kinds of gadgets, but this. . . ."

"He is clever," Morgan admitted. "Once the lab was lifted up the elevator shaft, McFarley could open one section of the lab wall and get at the man inside. He knocked him out, thrust him into one of those mixing tubs and sent the lab back into its position on the first floor."

"But the voices of the ghosts we've been hearing?"

"A recording," Morgan said briefly, "which simulated the riot when the fire broke out and those people were killed. He also piped down the voice of his victim, yelling for mercy while the tub started rolling. The confusion of sounds hid the noise of the rolling tub. Then McFarley just hauled out his dead victim, raised the lab and threw him on the floor. He sent the lab back, unhooked it from the elevator and fled to that secret

hideout so that when anybody called him, he'd answer just as if he was at home. It was a risky business, but he was playing for heavy stakes."

"What about Sinclair?" Lockhart asked.

"Tomorrow we'll drag the quarry pond. I expect Sinclair is on the bottom. McFarley lured him here, probably telling him there actually were ghosts and they wouldn't stop killing people until they had a crack at him. Sinclair was a susceptible person anyway.

"McFarley wanted Sinclair to vanish because things were getting a bit hot and police attention was bound to be riveted on a suspect who van-

ished. He did his best to throw suspicion on others, like sabotaging my car and smearing your clothes with grease. DeWest told me he thought he saw Sinclair at the car, but it had to be McFarley. DeWest, nervous as he was, just made a natural mistake. Let's go downstairs. I've got to haul McFarley to headquarters."

DeWest, gun in hand, watched the president of the plant narrowly. Morgan seized McFarley's arm and hoisted him to his feet.

"Come on, ghost," he said, "all forty of you. This is the first leg of a journey that will convert you into a real spectre—if there are any such animals."

Detective Dagby Sloan Gets His Fill of Rough-and-Ready Action When He Guards a Millionaire in the Desert

IN

DEATH HAS A VOICE

A Smashing Crime Novelet by J. LANE LINKLATER

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

•

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THE MAN WITH



Henry Bosart's head was missing

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "They Must Never Know," "The Terrible People," etc.

CHAPTER I

Night Owls—With Guns

AMONG all the clients represented in the files of the Abbott Detective Agency there were a good many who were insufficiently supplied with brains. But only one bore the doubtful distinction of having two heads—Mr. Henry W. Bosart of the Florida Penninsular Oil Company.

The hairless head Henry Bosart carried around on his stooped shoulders was modeled from the pattern of an egg. He had the arched eyebrows of Cupid, and shrewd blue eyes that twinkled. His smile reminded Peter Abbott, the Agency Chief, of a porcelain display.

Henry Bosart carried his second head in his pocket. Or sometimes Peter Abbott found it grimacing down at him from some cranny of Bosart's crazy old house. It was a mummified

TWO HEADS

A Mystery
Novelet



*The Florida Everglades, Oil and a Shrunken Jivaro Head Combine
to Form the Background for Murder!*

human head, reduced to the size of a Florida orange by a process which had perished with the so-called civilization of the Jivaros.

It was like the head of a doll, the features perfectly formed, the eyes sleeping, the brown cheeks covered with peachlike down. Since the shrinking process had not affected the hair, two disproportionate long black braids dangled from the crown. Peter Abbott once had seen these braids hanging out of the coat pocket of Mr. Bosart, creating the impression that Bosart had just come from scalp-

ing a couple of pigtailed Chinese.

The head wasn't repulsive in itself. It was only when he remembered that this same head had once piloted the sinewy body of a South American Indian that a chill would wander up Peter Abbott's spine. After all, Mr. Bosart's second head must once have belonged to a head-hunter who had been out-hunted.

Actually, the Jivaro head was a sort of talisman to Henry Bosart. He could count his years of successful business operations from the day he had received the head from an ex-

plorer friend. It was a sort of a gruesome luck-piece. His superstition about the head was so well known that a couple of New York crooks once had tried to finance a Florida vacation by stealing the thing and holding it for ransom. Peter Abbott had received a nice fee from Bosart for recovering the head.

Bosart even paid a monthly retainer to the Abbott Agency for guarding the ghastly curio. All this struck Peter Abbott as being on the silly side, but it was a soft way to promote an honest dollar, wasn't it?

Or was Henry Bosart afraid of something else besides the loss of his number two head—something he did not care to divulge to the detective? Peter Abbott often wondered.

At thirty-two minutes past midnight, just as Peter Abbott was about to count his last sheep, the telephone on his nightstand brought him fully awake. The voice of Herbie Brink, an Abbott Agency operative, came out of the receiver. Brink was the man assigned to the task of guarding Mr. Bosart's Jivaro head. Any word from him would be bad news.

"Boss," Herbie said, "that darned pickled head the old gent is so fond of. It's disappeared again. You'd better toddle out here and hold Bosart's hand. He's fit for a straight-jacket."

PETER ABBOTT reminded Brink that you didn't exactly 'toddle' out to Coral Cove from anywhere. It was eight hours across the everglades with a Seminole guide, and even then you needed a marsh buggy.

"How do you think I got out here?" Herbie asked. "You think I was born here or somethin'? In your boat you can make it in two hours by sea."

Peter groaned. He sat up and shoved his long legs over the edge of the bed. There was a note of genuine anxiety in the husky voice of the operative.

"Boss," Herbie pleaded, "a few more hours in this nut house and I am taking my chances with the sharks. The place has got me bats. Find the head, huh? Find it, heck! You can get lost in this darned house."

Peter Abbott knew just what Herbie

Brink was up against. The house at Coral Cove had been built by a peculiar man, to say the least. It was perched on a solid piece of land with the everglades behind it and the sea in front. It was made of poured concrete, the life work of the original owner. It was a sort of engineering impossibility like Pisa's famous leaning tower. It reflected the various moods of the mad genius who had built it; part of it was gay with colored tiles, and there were other rooms as sombre as the catacombs. It was a palace and a castle and a prison and a crypt. It had all these things plus an undefinable fear that seemed actually an ingredient of the mixture that was molded into the walls and columns.

"All right, Herbie," Peter Abbott sighed. "If you can hold on to your sanity for two or three hours, I'll join you. Maybe we'll both take a swim with the sharks." He hung up.

Abbott dressed, strapped his gun harness in place, and left his apartment. He got his car from the garage and drove to Seaside where he kept his launch.

Cold light from a full moon brought into sharp relief Abbott's private pier and boat-house. He left his car, closed its doors quietly so as not to disturb the hush of the tropic night. His cushioned shoes made scarcely any sound as he walked out along the pier.

Thirty feet from the end of the boathouse, he stopped. A harsh metal-to-metal sound came sharply from the deep shadow on the pier. And then there was quiet, disturbed only by the somnolent sound of little waves lapping against the piles. Peter put his right hand to the butt of his automatic, kept it there as he took a cautious step forward. He narrowed his eyelids as though to sharpen the focus of his eyes on the blot of shadow that clung close to the door of the boathouse.

Footsteps. Something in the shadows moved. Peter Abbott stepped to a thick pile that stuck up through the pier flooring.

"Looking for something?" He directed his question toward the shadows that lay in front of the boathouse door.

The answer came—the sharp crack of a revolver punctuated by a flare of gun flame that showed him the crouching figure of a man. Peter dropped to his knees behind the pile. The prowler showed himself in the moonlight and ran away from the boathouse, up the pier and toward Peter. He fired again, chipping pine from the pile.

Peter placed his first shot low, trying to catch the man's running legs. The prowler swerved across the pier and dived into the water. Peter stood up, waiting for the man's head to break water. He watched the moon-silvered ripples for a moment, saw bubbles break on the surface. And then the water was still. The prowler had got away, evidently by swimming under one of the neighboring piers. Peter shrugged. It was probably a common boat thief surprised in his crime.

ABBOTT holstered his gun and went to the door of the boathouse. The man had succeeded in breaking the padlock, but when the detective opened the door he saw the sleek brown hull of his motor cruiser riding safely in the slip. He stepped aboard and hastily checked the gasoline supply. The gauge indicated the tank was full. Evidently he had interrupted the prowler just as the latter had succeeded in forcing the door.

Abbott raised the overhead doors on their guides, opening the seaward end of the boathouse. He was about to cast off the last of his moorings, when car lights from the shore fell squarely across the wide open door through which the detective had entered. The lights, instead of passing across the panel as the car moved, were switched out. Possibly someone who preferred fishing to sleeping had come down to take one of the boats from a neighboring pier.

Peter Abbott stepped into his boat. He stooped to pick up the line that ran through a pulley mounted on a crane arm that extended out from the front of the boathouse. As he straightened, a shadow fell across the smoothly arched bow-deck. He looked to the left.

A girl was standing just inside and

to the left of the door. The light bulb socketed in the wall was directly behind her so that it was impossible for him to clearly see her face. But her slender, perfectly proportioned figure was clearly silhouetted.

"I want to hire this boat," she said.

Her voice, while a little unsteady, was low-pitched—the sort of voice Peter Abbott would have liked to listen to more often. She was wearing a cool, tailored suit of white linen, the jacket fronted with a deep blue ascot. She wore no hat. Her hair was dark brown, Butcher-boy bobbed, and nearly straight. She carried a large hand bag—one of those wildly colored print things that women use to carry everything from knitting to a complete change of clothes.

"I'll pay you two hundred dollars," she said.

The toe of her low-heeled shoe tapped impatiently on the board floor.

"Must be rather a large party," Peter said.

"I'm alone," she said.

"Sorry, but the boat is not for hire. And my ideas are pretty generally kind of small. You wouldn't be, by any chance, remotely connected with a man who tried to borrow my boat a minute or so ago, would you?"

"I said I was alone. And I've got to have a boat. Here—"

She opened her brightly colored bag, reached into it. She pulled out a small, plated revolver that nevertheless loomed large in her small, white-knuckled fist. She stepped onto the bow-deck, the rubber soles of her shoes clinging to the rounded surface. She covered Peter Abbott with the pop-gun. He could see now the decisive cut of her chin, the determination in her large blue eyes. Head on one side, she regarded him gravely for a moment.

"I'm a spoiled brat," she said, "used to getting what I want. Right now, I want this boat. And I want you along with it."

Peter Abbott shrugged. He took hold of the tow rope in both hands, heaved on it. The boat moved slowly out of the slip, thumping softly against the rubber-covered bump-boards. When it was clear of the

shelter, he leaned out across the rear deck and unhooked the tow rope, letting it run up to the crane arm above his head. He stood up, turned the brass wheel to the left of the tiny cabin, touched the engine starter button.

"You'd better come down here with me," he said to the girl. "That deck will get slippery with spray and your rubber shoes won't do you much good."

The girl sat down, thrust her silk stockings legs over the edge of the cabin roof, and dropped beside him. He had to put an arm around her waist to keep her from falling. He could have taken her gun away from her then if he had wanted to.

"Where do we go?" he asked.

"You know a place called Coral Cove?" she asked.

CHAPTER II

The Whisper House

A GAINST the sea and an infinity of moonlit sky, the shore was like something a child might have cut from black paper. Peter Abbott stood motionless at the wheel of the cruiser. The girl with the gun was beside him.

"We've got an hour and a quarter to go," he said to her above the rhythmic plop-plop of the under-water exhaust. "Why don't you take a load off your beautiful pins?"

"Pretty soon I'll just drop from starvation," she told him. "But not until I get to Coral Cove. Keep on your course, skipper."

"It isn't exactly a kitchenette, but there's a miniature cookstove and refrigerator in the cabin. Why don't you go stir up a cake or something?"

She poked him in the side with her revolver.

"Turn around."

He turned, frowned down at her.

"Sister, what's the idea?"

She patted his pockets with her left hand, finally located his gun in his shoulder holster. She pulled it out, tried sticking it into the pocket of her

jacket. The automatic was too big, too heavy.

"Hey!"

Abbott made a grab for her left hand, missed as she flung his gun out over the water. He followed it with his eyes, heard the splash, watched the ripples so quickly blotted out by a wave.

"I've got a hunch," he said, "you'll live to regret that move, sweetheart."

She laughed at him and ducked into the tiny cabin.

"Coffee, Skipper?" she called out to him.

"There's a can on the shelf above the stove," he told her. "I like mine French, cooked with milk and sugar."

"And I like mine black," she retorted.

He chuckled within himself. This girl, whoever she was, had a mind of her own. And nerve. He'd have to watch himself. Moonlight on the water, an uneasy feeling that adventure lay ahead, and a girl. All the makings of a first-class romance.

The girl came out of the cabin, a red-painted canister in her hand.

"Say, what kind of coffee is it that says 'tick-tick-tick' all the time? And besides I can't get the lid off."

"Huh?"

He let the wheel run, took the coffee can from her hands. It was heavier than it would have been if it had contained only coffee. He brought the can to his ear, heard distinctly the muffled tick of a clock. He gave the girl a glance. Her lips were parted, her eyes round. And then he hauled back his right arm and flung the coffee can as far as he could.

Sky and water suddenly were joined by a pillar of lavender flame. The roar of the explosion was brain splitting. The mahogany hull of the cruiser heaved to the crest of a wave and slipped sideways down into the trough. Abbott and the girl with the gun were hurled to the limber boards, tossed together like dice in a cup. And then when the night was silent again except for a ringing in his ears, Peter Abbott hooked a hand onto the rail and stood up. The girl's hand came up to him, fumbling. He caught it and pulled her up beside him.

She had lost her gun. He spotted it just under the edge of one of the leather seat cushions. He stooped, picked it up, handed it to her.

"I'm sorry about the coffee," he said.

"It must have been tea. T. N. T."

"N-no," she stammered. "It—it's my fault. I shouldn't have imposed myself upon you like this."

"A lovely lady like yourself," he said, "never comes under the classification of an imposition."

"But the bomb—don't you see—it was intended for me. He means to kill me, to kill all—"

She bit her lip.

"Yes?"

"I can't tell you," she snapped.

He shrugged.

"It's nothing to argue about anyway. I'm not egotistical enough to insist that that lovely present in the coffee can was intended for me. But how the devil did he know you were going to travel on my boat?"

"Who?"

"The prowler I caught monkeying around my boat-house just before you put in your appearance. Did you tell anybody you were taking my boat to Coral Cove?"

"I never, never heard of you and your silly boat in my life!" she said angrily. "I simply drove out to the piers to get a boat, and I wouldn't have cared if it was your boat or a garbage scow."

"Then, you see, the bomb was intended for me," he insisted.

"I'm Lois Albright," she told him. "My father was one of the partners in Florida Pennisular Oil," she said.

"My name is Peter Abbott. And you were right the first time. You're a spoiled brat."

She stamped ahead into the cabin, while Abbott fixed his eyes on the shoreline by which he was steering. He had been slightly more shaken by the bomb than his perfect poise indicated. People just didn't plant bombs around you because they didn't like the color of your eyes. Somebody had been trying to prevent him from reaching Coral Cove.

How had the bomb-planter known he was going to Coral Cove that night? It would be difficult to tap

the telephone wire leading from Peter's apartment without attracting attention. That meant that somebody had listened to Herbie Brink.

In the cabin, he could hear Lois Albright laughing. It didn't sound like hysteria. He hoped it wasn't. She came through the door a moment later, still laughing. He asked her what was wrong.

"Your name. You say it fast and it's funny. Sounds like Peter Rabitt."

"That must have been the way my father figured it," he said dryly. "And have you noticed, I have big ears."

He kept his eyes on sea and shore, watching for the two lean fingers of land, the two sentinel palms that marked Coral Cove. Lois Albright sat down on the leather seat cushions.

"We'll be there in another ten minutes," he said, more to himself than to her. After all, there had been two attempts that night to prevent him from reaching the cove—a gun shot and a bomb.

"Peter—"

"What?"

"Are you sore?"

"Only where the limber boards struck me when the bomb went off," he said.

SHE clasped her hands over her knees and rocked back on the cushions.

"Good," she said. "Because I kind of like you, Peter."

He saw at last the south reef thrusting out from the shore, and the lone palm nodding gravely to him in the moonlight. He headed the cruiser out to sea so as to clear the treacherous rocks that waited beneath the water. He cleared a red-eyed buoy, brought the bow of the boat around, headed into the cove.

Ahead lay quiet water, deep and dark, an inlet that narrowed from a natural harbor to a mere thread of water back somewhere in the marshland. Bosart's white yacht was tied up at the pier and there were a couple of smaller craft in the shallow water nearer the mainland. Abbott put his cruiser to berth alongside a speedy looking runabout, cast a rope to the pier, and made it fast.

Lois Albright climbed the four brass steps to the cabin roof and Peter joined her there in a moment. She was groping in her handbag.

"I'll pay you, Peter," she said, "and then you can get back to your fishing or whatever you planned to do when I so rudely interrupted."

"You don't owe me anything," he said.

"Two hundred dollars. You'll have to take it."

"That's what you think. You see, I could have taken that gun away from you a couple of times. It just happens I was coming out here anyway to see Bosart."

Lois Albright closed her handbag with a snap. She sprang lightly to the pier. She stood there for a moment, right hand flung up to her mouth, eyes staring widely at him. Except for the gentle billowing of her white skirt in the warm breeze, she was motionless as a statue. And then she spoke in a frightened whisper.

"I came out here with! I never guessed. Tall and thin. But I thought you'd be older."

She took three steps backward, pointed an accusing finger at him.

"You—you murderer!"

She turned and fled up the pier toward the shallow concrete steps that led to the Bosart house.

Peter Abbott watched her until she was only a ghostly shape fluttering away into the darkness. Then he calmly slapped a mosquito that had settled on the back of his neck, stepped to the pier, and made certain of his moorings. He straightened, walked up the pier in the direction the girl had taken.

"Lady," he said into the darkness, "you came to the right place, all right. A nut house is the place for you."

Vegetation grew rank above the gentle slope of wide steps leading to the door. The lush green canopy closed overhead, shutting out the moon and the very air it seemed. The trill and rasp of insects, the croak of frogs in the marsh behind the house, drowned out the whisper of Peter Abbott's cushioned shoes.

Before the door of the house, the foliage had been ruthlessly hacked

away to form a clearing. Moonlight spilled brilliant silver across the flat face of the concrete house and the twelve foot bronze studded door that formed the main entrance. The door stood slightly ajar. Abbott thrust out both arms against the portal and it swung wide. Moonlight fell across the threshold, and there was Peter Abbott's grotesquely thin shadow sprawled across the floor. Beyond the oblong of moonlight was only an immensity of blackness.

"We've got you covered, Roger Mascoomb," a tremulous voice whispered out of the dark.

"...you covered, Roger Mascoomb."

".....vered, Roger Mascoomb."

".....ger Mascoomb."

The tremulous voice echoed and echoed from wall to wall. Peter Abbott put his empty hands above his head and stepped resolutely forward.

"You there, Herbie Brink?" he called. "What the devil is this, anyway?"

His voice echoed, and then Herbie's echoed, too.

"Well I'll be darned, if it ain't the boss! Switch on the lights, Mr. Farrington. This ain't your Roger Mascoomb. It's only Mr. Abbott."

CHAPTER III

The Clock Chimes Death

PETER ABBOTT lowered his hands, looked around the vast room now illuminated by an electrolier which hung in the center of the domed ceiling. The dome was poured concrete, supported by crude concrete pillars placed at irregular intervals about the room. The floor was concrete, studded with colored tiles. Abbott had been in the Bosart house just twice before. If he lived to see it a hundred times he knew that he would never get accustomed to the place and its whispering walls.

The man Herbie Brink had called Mr. Farrington stood near the light switch. He was about fifty, tall, broad-shouldered, with grayish-blond hair curling back from a receding forehead. His was the tremulous voice

which had warned Abbott when he had entered the doorway. Farrington's only weapon was a brass-handled poker.

On the other side of the door stood a man of medium height and ample belly. His porcine face was framed in gray chop whiskers. He had one thick arm about the slender waist of Lois Albright, while his right hand was clamped on the handle of fire tongs that matched Farrington's poker.

Herbie Brink, the Abbott Agency op, was absurdly armed with a broom. Peter eyed him coolly.

"Who do you think you are, the Old Dutch Girl about to make everything spic and span?"

Herbie's cherubic cheeks flushed.

"Somebody swiped my rod. A heck of a note, but there ain't a gun in the house."

Peter looked over at Lois Albright.

"That makes it nice," he said. "Miss Albright has a gun, though. Who's this Roger Mascoomb you people seem to dislike so much?"

Somewhere in the house there was a hollow thumping sound that came three times like the knock of a ghost. Because of the whispering echoes, it was virtually impossible to detect the direction from whence it came.

Peter looked quizzically from Farrington to the fat man.

"Mice?" he suggested dryly.

"They're looking for Bosart," Farrington said.

"Bosart?" Peter scowled. "Don't tell me he's gone along with the Jivaro head and Herbie's rod? And will somebody please enlighten me as to this Roger Mascoomb?"

From somewhere in the vast reaches out the house came a scream. A man's voice, and yet it screamed. The echoes took up the unearthly sound and played tricks with it; echoes shouted it up from the floors and down from the ceilings; echoes bounced it from pillar to post, and left Peter Abbott completely bewildered as to where it had originally come from.

Farrington, his face the same ashey color as his hair, pointed a lean finger upwards.

"Upstairs," he whispered.

"Come on, Herbie!"

Abbott seized his operative's arm, spun the little man around, and dashed toward a concrete stairway that looked as though it was glued on the wall of the room. Herbie caught up with his chief, grasped Abbott's hand.

"No," the little op gasped. "Not that stairway. It don't go anywhere. The batty concrete sculptor who made this dump only half finished those steps when he died, or sumpin. This way."

Herbie led off across the room, through a door, and into a hall. A second stairway squeezed in between ponderous walls of yellow cement was visible ahead of them.

"Get used to stairways that don't go nowhere," Herbie panted as he tried to keep pace with his chief. "Get used to them after a while. Whole place is nuts. I guess there's rooms here even old Bosart don't know about."

THE top of the steps narrowed into a hall that wasn't wide enough for two men abreast. The scream sounded again, and a man who was evidently a servant, judging from his black frock coat, came running toward them. He stopped, and pointed back over his shoulder.

"I've found Mr. Bosart!" he shouted. He would have run past them if Herbie Brink hadn't caught him by the coat tails and hauled him back.

"Where is he?" Abbott demanded.

"The li—library!" the servant stammered.

Herbie gave the man a shove in the direction whence he had come.

"Lead on, Wellington," he ordered.

The servant protestingly led the way. The corridor branched, twisted, turned. Since the whole house followed the natural foundation of the reef—the only ground firm enough to support the heavy structure — there was scarcely a right angle in the whole floor plan.

The servant came to a stop, pointed to a door at the end of the passage. The panel had been hacked open by repeated blows of a fire ax that stood along side of it.

"The—the door was locked," Wellington stammered. "I could see Mr. Bosart's legs through the keyhole. He didn't answer, so I used that ax I brought from the yacht to break in—"

Abbott squeezed by the servant and pushed open what remained of the door. The narrow hall blossomed into a huge room built along the geometric lines of a trapezoid. There were no windows—only walls of bookshelves stretching up fifteen feet from the floor. Three leather lounge chairs were dwarfed by the proportions of the room. Against one wall stood the largest, most sombre looking grandfather clock Peter Abbott had ever seen. And in one of the chairs sat Henry Bosart.

Henry Bosart was a man who once had had two heads. Now there was only one, and it perched on a bookshelf above the chair in which Henry Bosart sat. The head on the shelf was that shriveled, doll-like thing, mummified by the Jivaros. There was no head on Henry Bosart's shoulders—only the horrible stump of a neck, dark with dried blood.

In the hall along which Peter Abbott and Herbie Brink had come, anxious voices clamored. Abbott, nerves taut, snapped at Herbie to keep the others outside. Herbie, glad enough to turn his back to the corpse, obeyed. He walked all the way around the chair, expecting to find the missing head. But there was no head. He brought himself to touch the hand of the corpse. He tried flexing the dead man's arm. Rigor already had advanced. He turned away and faced the grandfather clock for no reason at all save that it took his eyes off the corpse.

"What time did Bosart disappear, Herbie?"

"Right after I called you, maybe ten, fifteen minutes after. He got a telephone call and then hiked out of the room. He called me a sap or sump-in' like that."

Abbott looked at the face of the clock. The hands were hovering around three. He figured Bosart had died nearer to the hour of one than two. Abbott looked the clock up and down. He had never seen an ebony

casket, but that was what the time-piece reminded him of. Gilt letters around the face offered the cheerless maxim:

"IT IS LATER THAN
YOU THINK"

AND that didn't refer to daylight savings time, either!

Peter shuddered.

"When did Bosart first miss the head?" he asked.

"You mean *his* head or the pickled one?"

"The Jivaro head, of course," Peter said patiently.

"I guess it was right after noon," Herbie said. "Mr. Farrington and Mr. Edwards—Edwards is the one with the whiskers—came in just before lunch. A little after we were through eating, Mr. Bosart came into the living room to say the Jivaro head was gone. We hunted for it a long time before I finally called you tonight. That is, Bosart, Wellington, and Captain Kursh of the yacht hunted. Farrington and Edwards went off fishing. They didn't come back until about an hour before you arrived."

"Where's Mr. Bosart's nephew?"

"He's here in the house somewhere, looking for his uncle, I guess. Darn it, Chief, you can't keep track of anybody in a house like this. It's driving me bats, I—"

The clock struck three. It did more than that. It chimed with at least half the volume of Big Ben and the tune it played consisted of the first two bars of Chopin's Funeral March. When the last hollow reverberations had died, Herbie took up where he left off.

"That's one of the things that's driving me bats, Chief. You hear that damned clock go off every hour. That tune keeps running through my head. Ain't it a theme song for some radio band?"

"Yes," Abbott said dryly. "Theme song for the National Association of Undertakers and Grave Diggers."

"Heck, they got a union now, too?"

"Herbie, let's get out of here. I want to call the Deputy Sheriff's office at Seaside. I don't care how soon all the cops in Florida move in here. It

would liven things up considerably."

They went out into the hall. Wellington, the servant, together with Farrington, and the Whiskered Mr. Edwards were lined up single file in the corridor. Farther down the passage were Lois Albright, a man in a white uniform whom Abbott took to be Captain Kursh of Bosart's yacht, and Gilbert Varrick who was Henry Bosart's nephew.

Gilbert Varrick, a sallow-complexioned man of about thirty-five, spectacled and intelligent looking, came sideways down the passage toward Abbott.

"Is my uncle in there, Abbott?" he demanded. "If he is, I've got a right to see him—or rather his body. He's been murdered, hasn't he?"

"Go in for a moment if you want," Abbott said. "Don't touch anything."

Varrick pushed open the broken door, uttered a horrified gasp. He came out again quickly, his face a sickly greenish hue.

Abbott said to Wellington, the servant:

"How come nobody thought to look in the library before this?"

"I—I don't know, sir," Wellington said. "Ex—except the place is quite remote from the other parts of the house."

"And you looked through the keyhole and saw Mr. Bosart's legs."

"Y—yes. The door was locked, but there was no key in the lock. Ob—obviously locked from the outside. I sh—should say."

"Captain Kursh—"

"Yessir," the man in white responded.

"Any guns or weapons of any kind on the yacht?"

"None, sir. It's a queer thing, but all the guns disappeared."

ABBOTT jerked his head toward the other end of the corridor.

"Let's go. I'm getting claustrophobia standing here."

They trooped silently back along the passage. Lois Albright lagged behind until Peter had caught up with her, and the two of them brought up the rear.

"What was the idea of calling me a

murderer out there on the pier?" he asked the girl.

"I don't know exactly," she said. "Except that your saying you intended coming here, and then you are tall and thin. That's the only description we have of Roger Mascomb. So I ran into the house and told Arnold Edwards and Vincent Farrington that Roger Mascomb was coming up the pier. I'm rattle-brained as well as spoiled, you see."

"Suppose you pass over that little gun of yours to me," he suggested. "I don't suppose you've lost it?"

She gave him a startled glance with her big blue eyes.

"Why, it's no good! It's just a scare gun. Shoots blank cartridges. I'm afraid of real revolvers and that sort of thing. I'm an awful coward, too."

"As well as a spoiled brat and a rattle brain," he concluded. "Now, once more, who's this Roger Mascomb?"

"Why," she said, "don't you know? He's the man Henry Bosart was paying you to watch out for, isn't he?"

"I never heard of him in my life," he said. "But believe me, lady, I'm going to hear all you know about him, and quick."

They went down the stairway and turned once more into that high domed reception hall. Abbott asked Herbie to show him to the phone, and the operative lead him to the living room which opened on the south side of the huge hall. Abbott sat down at the phone desk. The Bosart house was connected by direct wire across the marsh to Seaside. Abbott put in a call for the sheriff's deputy stationed there. Finally, a sleepy voice answered. Abbott identified himself.

"There's been a killing out at the Bosart place on Coral Cove," he said. "You'd better—"

There was a crash in the receiver and the line went dead.

"What's the matter?" Herbie asked.

Abbott wiggled the receiver hook. He shot a glance at his operative.

"I don't like the way things keep closing in on us, Herbie. Somebody tries to bomb me out of the water. A good-looking gal plucks my rod. And now the phone goes dead. Let's go out and count noses. Maybe some-

body with a nice, sharp Boy Scout knife wandered out and cut the line to Seaside."

CHAPTER IV

The Unknown

HE COUNTED noses. Captain Kursh, Lois Albright, Arnold Edwards, Vincent Farrington, Gilbert Varrick, and Wellington—all present and accounted for. Peter asked them to be seated. Herbie took up a watchful station near the door, while Peter himself hung over the back of Lois' chair.

"Now, who's this Roger Mascoomb you're afraid of?"

Farrington looked at Edwards who looked at Lois. Lois rolled her large blue eyes.

"I seem to be the goat. Years ago, before his death my father left me a large interest in the Florida Peninsular Oil Company. My father, Arnold Edwards and Henry Bosart owned the entire company. That was before Vincent Farrington purchased his big slice of stock."

Farrington smiled at the girl.

"Go on, Lois," he said. "Might as well tell the whole thing."

"At that time," Lois continued, "the company purchased a large tract of marsh land from a man named Roger Mascoomb who lived in New England. Mascoomb was just one of the victims of the Florida real estate boom who bought land he never bothered to look at. Naturally, Mascoomb was willing to get rid of the land at any price. Henry Bosart closed the deal with Mascoomb some place in Vermont, so you see Henry Bosart is, or rather was, the only member of the firm who ever saw Mascoomb face to face."

"I'm way ahead of you," Peter said. "The Mascoomb land fairly oozed oil."

"The luckiest strike we ever made," Arnold Edwards said. Recalling the profit that had been realized brought a grin to Edwards' whiskered face. He looked a little like a cat who has feasted on cream.

"Roger Mascoomb," Lois con-

tinued, "swore he would some day ruin Peninsular Oil. Then, for quite a while, nothing more was heard of him. Vincent Farrington had joined the firm, and new blood brought new prosperity, and everything was rosy.

"Shortly after my father's death, we began to get threat letters from Roger Mascoomb — all of us, whether we had actually taken part in the land deal or not. The last came from Seaside and threatened us with death."

"So," Farrington said, "as long as we were doomed, we thought we'd meet here and hang together—rather than hang separately, as the saying goes."

Arnold Edwards said:

"And you wanted to do some fishing and take a few movie shots, Vincent, m'boy."

"But if Roger Mascoomb killed Henry Bosart," Lois asked, "why kill him that horrible way?"

"Might be a couple of reasons," Farrington contributed. "Isn't it right, Mr. Abbott, that it is legally impossible to establish *corpus delicti* in a murder case if the body can't be definitely identified? And none of us can positively identify the corpse in the library unless we see the head."

"Nonsense!" Varrick said. "Who else could it be if not my uncle?"

Farrington shrugged.

"Might be Roger Mascoomb. Henry might have beat Mascoomb to the draw."

Abbott straightened away from Lois Albright's chair.

"By the way, is everyone in Coral Cove at this time right here in this room?"

"Except for the yacht crew taking a holiday in Seaside," Captain Kursh offered.

"All right," Abbott said. "The sheriff's deputy ought to be here in a couple of hours. Wellington, I'll speak with you alone in the living room, please."

Abbott could only hope the deputy sheriff would arrive. He couldn't be certain that his call had got through before the wires had been cut. Who had cut them? Roger Mascoomb?

In the library, he told the servant

to sit down and then closed the door.

"Anything in the house that would account for the murder method used? No collection of headsmen's axes or anything like that, Wellington?"

"N—no, sir. The c—crime seems im—possible, sir."

"Where'd Bosart get that clock that chimes the funeral music?"

"It was in the house when he bought it," Wellington said.

"Is this Gilbert Varrick Mr. Bosart's only relative?"

"I see what you mean, sir. Yes. And they got along well, sir."

The servant cleared his throat.

"Could the Jivaro head have killed Mr. Bosart in some way? I suppose that's a foolish question, but that little head Mr. Bosart always put such stock in, gave me the creeps."

"Surely nothing supernatural about it," Peter said. "Unless you've got something you want to tell me, I think that's all."

"I think not, sir."

Abbott left the room. In the hall outside, Farrington was seated with his movie camera on his knee, changing the film. The others had left the room.

Peter Abbott pushed open the front door and walked out just as the grandfather clock in the library chimed its dirge. It was four o'clock in the morning. Peter would have given much to have seen the sheriff's deputy approaching. But as he came to the land end of the pier, he saw something that was quite as welcome, though for a slightly different and vaguely disturbing reason. Lois Albright was walking swiftly up the pier toward him.

"Out to hear dawn break?" he called to her.

Lois looked up, startled. She stopped, beckoned to him.

"Peter," she said as he came up, "all the small boats are gone. Nothing here but the yacht, and I just saw a man aboard her."

Peter brushed past her and ran along the edge of the pier. His own cruiser and the other small craft were gone.

"Closing in," he muttered. "Something always closing in on us. Tele-

phone out of order. And now the boats gone."

He glanced from the shark-infested water to the all but impenetrable everglades behind the house.

Lois caught up with him.

"A man went through the hatch into the hold of the yacht," she whispered.

Peter crossed to the gangplank of the yacht and stepped aboard. He located the hatch amidships, ran down the ladder to the engine room. He moved quietly along the steel catwalk that extended along the side of the big diesel oil burning engines that powered the yacht, stopping every now and then to listen. Metal was tapping against metal somewhere in the hold of the yacht.

He kept on along the steel runway, came to an open hatch. He looked down. Crouching on the limber boards that stretched across the ribs of the vessel was a man. In the beam of a flashlight that lay beside the crouching man, Abbott could see the man's hands busy with a wrench attached to the brass sea-cock. Somebody was trying to scuttle the yacht.

Peter Abbott dropped through the hatch.

THE man at the sea-cock turned around on the balls of his feet without straightening, threw the wrench with deadly accuracy. Peter Abbott ducked, but not quite soon enough. The wrench missed his head, struck his shoulder, took him off balance. He fell, striking his head against something solid and cold. The man raced along the limber boards, and before Peter could get to his feet he saw the man climb through the hatch.

The earth spinning on a pivot beneath his feet, Peter got up. He gripped the ladder, drove legs with rubbery knees to climb round after round. He gained the engine room, staggered up the steps to the deck, and ran squarely into Lois Albright.

Somewhere close at hand a fusillade riddled the silence of the new morning. Lois Albright, half supporting Peter, screamed, pointed aft. Peter saw the man who had thrown the

wrench turn half around and fall to the deck.

CHAPTER V

Heads You Lose

L EAD slugs splattered against the cabin wall, too close to do Peter and the girl any good. Peter unceremoniously tripped Lois and allowed his weight to drag her to the deck. The rim surrounding the engine-room hatch was a low shield against the marksman concealed on shore.

Peter looked at the girl. Her mouth was tightly set. There was fear in her eyes—honest fear such as Peter felt—but no sign of panic. He winked at her.

"Somebody don't like us!"

Her lips smiled briefly.

"So long as we like each other, who cares?"

A bullet struck the hatch rim directly above Peter's head, was deflected, buzzed off like some deadly insect. He threw an arm protectingly across Lois' back, and thought selfishly that was where he wanted his arm to be in case the next shot from the shore drilled the top of his head. But there were no more shots. Peter wondered if the marksman was waiting for them to make a move.

"I'm going to snake out a ways, just to see how the weather is," he said.

He wriggled on his belly out from behind the protecting rim of the hatch. Nothing happened. He stood up, flattened himself against the cabin. There was enough light now so that he was a perfect target. No bullet came to meet him. He looked down the length of the pier, saw the stubby figure of Herbie Brink running toward the yacht. He hailed the operative just as Lois Albright came to join him.

Herbie Brink came bounding up the gangplank, his eyes bulging.

"If there ain't any gun around here, somebody sure pops his chewing gum loud."

And then Herbie saw the man

"Whozat? Gilbert Varrick?"

It was Varrick—Gilbert Varrick whom Peter had caught trying to open the sea-cock of the yacht. Peter, Herbie, and Lois came up to Bosart's wounded nephew and the two men knelt beside him. Peter lifted him a little, turned him over, held him in his arms. Varrick was wounded in the chest. There were tell-tale flecks of blood on his lips. But as his spectacled eyes stared up at Peter they recognized the detective.

"Sorry, Abbott," he said in scarcely more than a whisper. "Didn't know you, down there in the hold. Should've explained. Trying to sink the yacht in the inlet. Block them out."

"Who?" Peter asked. "I don't get it. Did you cut the small boats adrift?"

"No. They did that. They got you, Abbott. You're cut off. Try to kill you. Dangerous game—"

VARRICK'S eyelids closed. Peter gripped the man's shoulders.

"What's a dangerous game? Tell us, Varrick."

"Got to play it smart, Abbott. Pretend you don't know. Stall for time. Help coming—they get my message. Sent out a pigeon. Knew the wires were tapped."

"Varrick!" Peter shouted into the dying man's ears. "Hang on a bit. Who do we watch out for? Who killed your uncle?"

"You—still there, Abbott? Can't hear you. They're going to get more oil. You think the yacht comes here to refuel? Funny, but it comes here to discharge fuel. Twice a week the yacht comes here and empties its tanks into the tanks under the pier. Thousands of gallons."

"Who killed your uncle?" Peter shouted.

"Uncle?" Varrick murmured. "Uncle was afraid of the deal. He was killed. Play it safe, Abbott. Don't lose your head."

Gilbert Varrick died, a faint smile on blood-flecked lips. Abbott let the body gently on the deck. He looked up at Lois Albright. The girl's lips were trembling, her face was pale.

"What do you know about this, Lois?" Peter asked. "Some sort of oil deal the Peninsular Oil Company is mixed up in. Bosart's yacht was used to deliver oil here to Coral Cove, according to Varrick. That yacht has a two thousand mile cruising radius. The tanks could deliver a lot of oil from Seaside to Coral Cove."

"I—I don't know anything," Lois insisted. "I—I want to get out of here."

"Heck," Herbie said, "this is one time you don't get what you want. If you think I like it here, you're crazy. We might as well be on a desert island."

Peter stood up. He squinted his eyes, looked out toward sea. Help was coming, Varrick had said. Varrick evidently had been playing spy in his uncle's own house. Telephone cut off or tapped, he had sent out a carrier pigeon. But to whom?

He took Lois by the arm, urged her toward the gangplank.

"And you don't know why they've been storing up oil in the tanks under the pier?" Peter asked the girl.

"Believe me, Peter, I don't. I've never bothered my head about business affairs. Bosart, Farrington, and Edwards have run the company to suit themselves. So long as my income was steady and plentiful, I never had any reason to ask questions. If this Roger Mascoomb included me in his vengeance plot, it was only because of my father."

"Roger Mascoomb," Peter mused, as they walked up the pier with Herbie Brink tagging along behind. "I wonder if there is such a person, or whether he's a red herring deliberately drawn across the trail."

When they reached the house, they found Captain Kursh, Arnold Edwards, and Vincent Farrington seated at the table in the dining room. Wellington had served them toast and coffee. Abbott strode into the room.

"I'll have to ask you all to stand and be searched for weapons," he said coolly. "Gilbert Varrick was shot and killed by someone concealed in the jungle along shore."

"Varrick?" Vincent Farrington gasped. "How terrible!"

He stood up, advanced toward Peter.

"Of course I'll cooperate with you. You see, I *know* I'm not carrying a gun—"

"Yes, and I don't," Peter said dryly.

BUT Farrington wasn't carrying a gun, and neither were Captain Kursh nor the fat Mr. Edwards. Just as Herbie and Abbott were concluding their search, a bell tinkled somewhere in the house. Impossible as it seemed, it sounded like a telephone bell.

"I thought you said the phone had been cut off, boss?" Herbie said.

Wellington entered the dining room. His eyes calmly met those of Peter Abbott.

"Telephone for you, sir."

Abbott followed the servant into the living room, picked up the waiting phone.

"Mr. Abbott?"

The voice was masculine.

"Mr. Abbott," the voice continued, "if you are looking for the missing head of Mr. Bosart, try looking in the case of the clock in the library—"

The connection was broken immediately.

Peter slammed up the receiver and turned to the servant.

"Get Herbie Brink in here in a hurry."

Herbie stuck his cherubic face around the edge of the door.

"Right here eavesdropping, chief."

"Come here, Herbie."

Herbie bounced across the room. Abbott stooped over the little operative, whispered in his ear:

"Follow the telephone line from this house. Find out where it's tapped. That call didn't come in from the Seaside exchange. Somebody just cut in with a private transmitter, probably pretty close at hand. Could be hidden a million and one places back there in the marsh."

"What was the call, chief?" Herbie questioned.

"A trap. The same trap that got Bosart, if I'm not much mistaken. Didn't you say he got a phone call just before he disappeared?"

Herbie nodded.

"You watch your step."

"Watch your own."

As soon as Herbie had left, Abbott told Wellington he wanted to go to the bedrooms and search the baggage of the guests for guns.

"Baggage, sir?" Wellington left his mouth open. "Why it just occurred to me, Mr. Abbott, that I have not yet assigned the gentlemen to their respective rooms. They arrived about lunch time, and I simply dumped the bags in the hall upstairs and hurried away to serve lunch. We're short a cook, sir, and I've had to see to everything—"

"Okay, let's see the bags in the hall or otherwise."

A moment later as he looked down at the heap of luggage in the hall, Abbott reflected that at least one of the suitcases was large enough to pack a rifle. He asked the servant to identify the bags.

"Sorry, sir, but I'd have to ask the owners. I was in such a hurry. That big suitcase was so heavy I had to make an extra trip for it."

Abbott pulled out the large suitcase from the heap. He looked at Wellington.

"It's not at all heavy now," he said.

He stooped over the suitcase. It was locked, but he had no trouble finding a key that would fit it on a ring he carried; suitcase locks were all more or less alike. The case, he discovered, was less than half full of shirts, ties, and socks. There was also a little black circular box about the size of a cannister which might contain a portable typewriter ribbon. The little box was empty. He looked at the laundry marks on the shirts, failed to decipher them.

PAWING through the clothing, he noticed that the lining of the case was badly scuffed in spots, as though something heavy and sharp-edged had been carried in the case. He was about to close the lid when he discovered a worn plush watch box. Inside was an old fashioned ornately engraved gold watch. He turned the watch over, looked at the back. The monogram in the center had been worn all but smooth.

"That monogram," he said in a low voice. "It looks like 'R. M.' Wellington, whose suitcase is this?"

"I—I swear I don't know, sir. In my hurry—"

"Never mind your hurry," Abbott snapped. "I think I know. This suitcase belongs to Roger Mascoomb!"

"You—you mean Roger Mascoomb is in this house."

"I think so. Let's go to the library, Wellington."

Abbott ran out into the tortuous hall and hurried to the splintered door of the library. Wellington was crowding him closely from behind. As they entered the room, the sombre grandfather clock knelled the first bars of the death march, announcing five o'clock.

Peter Abbott looked above the headless corpse that sat in the chair to the bookshelves above and the withered, mummified Jivaro head that rested there, its tiny eyelids placidly closed. And this was the thing that Henry Bosart had considered a good-luck talisman!

Peter approached the clock. There was a long, narrow door above the base and below the face of the clock for easy access to the pendulum and chime rods. Peter opened the door and quickly stepped back.

Nothing happened. Peter stared at the swinging pendulum back inside the deep case, stared at the chime rods beyond. The brass metal was spattered with blood stains. Peter dropped to his knees in front of the case. There was only one place inside the clock where anything of any size could have been concealed, and that was in the hollow base accessible through this door. To see down into this base, you had to put your head inside the case.

Peter put out his hands to rest them on the sill of the clock case door and thus lean cautiously forward. But he never quite reached that sill with his fingers. Something in his brain telegraphed:

That is what the killer wants you to do.

Peter jerked his fingers back. He looked around, pointed to a magazine on one of the book shelves, told

Wellington to hand it to him. Then he took the rolled-up magazine, thrust it into the clock case and brought it down onto the door sill. There was a small strip of wood projecting above the sill and on the inner side of the cabinet. No sooner had the magazine pressed against this strip than there was a faint click.

Swift as the speed of a camera shutter, a weighted steel blade as wide as the opening itself and keen-edged as a razor, dropped from up inside the clock cabinet. It traveled straight and true, sheared the end of the magazine roll like a piece of cheese, and *thucked* into some sort of guard in the hollow base of the clock case.

"Good lord!" Wellington gasped. "A regular guillotine!"

That was about what it amounted to. The mechanism was a wood frame made to fit just inside the clock case. The knife ran freely up and down the frame in grooves. When it was pushed up as far as it would go, the knife was out of sight behind the wood facing below the clock dial. A simple notched trigger, also attached to the frame, kept it there. The trigger was connected to the loose wood strip at the door sill by means of piano wire.

THE man who was Roger Mascoomb evidently had constructed the whole deadly device to fit the inside of the clock case. He had brought the thing with him in his suitcase, installed it in the clock. The bait for the trap had been the Jivaro head which Henry Bosart was so fond of. It had been dropped into the base of the clock case, where Bosart would have to put his head into the trap to recover it.

The trap ready, the killer had left the house, and some time later had called Bosart and suggested that he look in the grandfather clock for the head. That was the phone call Herbie had mentioned as coming in shortly after Herbie had called Peter.

Later, the killer had returned to the house, gone to the library, taken Bosart's headless corpse away from the clock and posed it in the chair. Then he had locked the library door,

and perhaps joined the others in the search.

Now that the guillotine knife had fallen, Peter looked into the clock case, turned his flashlight down into the hollow base. The base was floored and had effectively caught the blood—and the head—of Henry Bosart. Peter shuddered, withdrew from the clock.

"Get your coat off, Wellington," he whispered as he crossed the room, turned on a small reading lamp that stood beside one of the lounge chairs. From the lamp, he went to the door and switched off the central lighting fixture. Light from the reading lamp scarcely reached the grandfather clock across the great room.

Peter stripped off his own light weight business suit coat and tossed it to Wellington.

"You're going to masquerade as a dead man, Wellington," he explained. "The killer must have heard the sound of his trap springing, and he'll be up here in a bit to see what he caught. In my coat and this uncertain light, I think you'll serve the purpose."

Wellington wasn't quite so sure he wanted to play dead man, but Peter shoved him toward the clock, made the old man get down on his knees and thrust his head into the opening.

"Don't move, Wellington," Peter whispered. "I think I hear footsteps. Yes, I think we're about to meet Roger Mascoomb."

"My lord, sir!" Wellington whispered, and froze in his uncomfortable position like a frightened rabbit.

Peter tiptoed to the shattered door, stepped to one side of it. The sound of footsteps along the concrete corridor was plainly evident now. Peter held his breath. He was certain that Mascoomb would be armed. It would have been easy for him to hide a weapon or two about the house where he could reach it easily if needed.

The footsteps stopped. The long shadow of a man fell across the floor just inside the door. A chuckle, low-pitched and unpleasant came from the man's lips.

"Pretty smart, weren't you, Mr. Abbott," Roger Mascoomb chuckled.

"Even knowing there was a trap somewhere, still you fell for the trick nicely, didn't you?"

The man stepped into the room. Because of the shadows, Peter could not see his face, yet he knew who Mascoomb was. That suitcase and its contents had given the secret away; for in the same suitcase which had brought the guillotine frame had been a little round black tin box—a movie film container. And Abbott remembered who it was he had seen loading a movie camera with the film that had come from that box.

ABBOTT sprang on the man from behind. His left arm hooked around a long neck, became a pincer that closed inexorably on the man's throat. The man tried to pull a gun from his right coat pocket, but Abbott was ready for that move.

Abbott's long fingers stabbed into the pocket ahead of his antagonist's. He got a grip on a gun, tore the patch of the pocket half off getting it loose. He released his grip on his captive's neck, and as the man broke away, Abbott stuck out his foot and tripped him. Covering the man with the gun, he backed to the door, turned on the central light.

Vincent Farrington sat there on the floor, his face the color of his ash blond hair. But his lips curled defiantly.

"What do you think you're going to do, Abbott?"

"I got just two alternatives. Turn you over to the police or shoot you." Abbott glanced at Wellington who had got up from in front of the clock.

"Nice bit of play acting, Wellington. You ought to have an Oscar."

"Thank you, sir, but begging your pardon, sir, I think I am about to be sick."

"I can hardly stand the smell of things around here myself since Farrington entered," Abbott said. "Say, which do you prefer to be called, Farrington or Mascoomb?"

"So you know I'm Mascoomb, do you?"

"Sure. And Henry Bosart didn't know that the man who had vowed to

square things with him and other stockholders of the oil company was actually a member of that company?"

"Of course Henry Bosart knew," Farrington sneered. "He was the only one who did. He was the man who swindled me out of my land. He was always a swindler. He'd be in the penitentiary right now for his crooked dealings in a New York bucket shop swindle, save that I chose to keep quiet about it."

"Oh," Peter raised his eyebrows. "Then you dug up old evidence against Bosart and blackmailed him into giving you a piece of Peninsular Oil. And I suppose you forced him into this bootleg oil deal going on here in Coral Cove?"

"Forced him! Why he jumped at the chance to pick up the easy money. It was only when that damned spying nephew of his accused him that he got scared. He was going to turn in evidence against us."

"Us? You mean Captain Kursh, Arnold Edwards and yourself. What's this Captain Kursh, a Nazi agent or just a crook?"

"Oh, you've figured that out, have you?"

"No. Gilbert Varrick told me most of it. You were storing oil at Coral Cove in tanks under the pier—lots of oil. The inlet here would make a perfect submarine base. I figured that from the fact that Varrick tried to scuttle the yacht in the harbor. That would have prevented a submarine from holing up here."

"A lot of good all this is going to do you, Abbott," Farrington said. "You think the yacht crew is at Sea-side. All of Captain Kursh's men are right here in Coral Cove."

Peter nodded.

"Hiding in the everglades back of the house. One of them dropped Gilbert Varrick on the deck of the yacht at dawn this morning. They are responsible for the cutting of the telephone line. Back there in the marsh they've a means of tapping in on this telephone line, so that they heard Herbie's call to me at twelve-thirty midnight. Probably they've got a radio set back there, too, and used it to communicate with Nazi agents in Sea-

side. One of those agents tried to keep me from coming here by putting a bomb on my boat. And after I got here, they cut the boats loose so I'd have to stay.

"Another thing, Farrington. You were the man who sent those threat letters signed 'Roger Mascoomb' to the members of the firm. You knew you were going to have to get rid of Bosart and if you could lay the blame on Roger Mascoomb you felt the very fact that you were a member of the firm that had gyped Mascoomb would keep you clear of suspicion—"

PPETER stopped. Somewhere outside the house sounded the crackle of gun fire. Herbie Brink

the reef. If Abbott cares anything about the life of this girl he'll help us reach it."

"Why run?" Farrington asked, getting to his feet. "That shooting's just a little gun play. Herbie Brink probably has located that radio shack in the marsh where your crew is hanging out."

"That isn't Herbie Brink," Kursh said. "There are armed men. State troopers, probably, cooperating with Feds."

It was then that Peter recalled Gilbert Varrick saying that he had sent out a message by carrier pigeon.

"Fight back!" Farrington cried. "Good god, we can't lose now. Where are your Nazi friends from the submarine?"

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must have turned up a hornet nest in the everglades. He looked at Farrington. A slow smile spread across the man's face.

"I think you're checkmated, Abbott!"

Peter turned toward the door. Captain Kursh stood there. He had a heavy automatic in his fist. The muzzle of that gun was pressing into the side of Lois Albright. There was no smile on the captain's face. Rather, there was a worried gleam in the man's blue eyes.

"We'll have to run for it, Farrington," he said. "We can reach that launch I've got on the other side of

"The sub won't be in here until nightfall," Kursh said. "We've got to run."

Lois looked at Peter.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Peter. Don't cooperate with the dirty crooks. And don't worry about me."

"Put down your gun, Abbott," Kursh demanded.

"Don't, Peter!" Lois said. "Strike a bargain, Farrington's life against mine."

Peter Abbott knew well enough that there wasn't any bargain there. Kursh didn't give a hoot whether Farrington lived or not, now that Farrington's hours of usefulness

were numbered. He tossed his gun onto the floor.

"No go, honey," he said sadly. "Got a soft spot for you."

"All right," Kursh said grimly. "Let's go. Pick up that gun, Farrington."

Farrington started for Abbott's gun. Kursh turned to lead the way out the door. He took just one step, and then a gun blasted out in the corridor, and Kursh hit the floor long before the echoes of the shot died. Farrington made a dive for the gun that Abbott had dropped, but Peter was there inches ahead of him.

For a moment, Farrington stood there, looking dazedly around a room that had no outlet save the door. Then he squared his shoulders and started for the door.

"Stop!" Abbott warned. "I'd hate to shoot you in the back."

Farrington kept walking.

The second shot from the corridor

roared. Farrington's legs seemed to break under him. Herbie Brink came through the door, a smoking rifle in his hands. He was grinning widely.

"Carried out your instructions, boss. Old Poppa Edwards tried to stop me, but socked him in the whiskers. And boy, oh boy! State troopers, sheriffs, G-Men—must be a score of them. And crooks—the whole yacht crew was in that shack back there in the marsh. All rounded up now. I got there just about the time the marines landed, grabbed a gun from the first crook I saw, and beat it back here. There's a radio in that shack back there, boss. They been selling oil to a Nazi sub, believe that or not! Ain't you glad I'm here, boss?"

Peter Abbott was looking into the deep blue eyes of Lois Albright. He had to admit that he was glad to be here—glad to be anywhere with a girl like this.

A Mad Sculptor Creates Manikins of Satan that Do His Sinister Bidding

IN

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DISTURB THE DEAD

By

SAM MERWIN, JR.

Author of "Talent for Trouble,"
"Three Left Hands," etc.

*A Murder and a Jewel Theft Take
Bill Post on a Strange
Graveyard Trail*

WHEN Bill Post finally caught up with Pete Mydans, the dapper thief grinned at him amiably from behind bars. Bill, usually a pretty hard-shelled citizen, felt like swearing violently or bursting into tears. But, being a pretty mature young man, he did neither. Instead, he managed a grin. "Planning to stay awhile?" he asked.

Mydans shrugged. He was a hawk-faced, man whose dapper exterior covered a long experience with prison and violence. He had not yet exchanged his two-hundred-dollar suit for prison shoddy. A white carnation, tipped with cerise, adorned his buttonhole.

"A couple of years, I guess," he replied. "Depends on how I behave."

"Where'd you put the Mallory jewels, Mydans?" Bill inquired.

"And what would I be doing with the Mallory jewels?" said Mydans. "I'm a pretty ordinary sort of fellow. Why an insurance dick like you would think I have them beats me. You must have run up a sweet swindle sheet chasing me around, Post."

"I know you took 'em," said Bill, his smile fading. "No one else leaves pink and white carnations lying around a rifled safe."



A terrific haymaker sent the detective crashing into the furniture

"But I was miles away," said Mydans with a look of bland innocence. "My friends told you all about it in court."

"I know that fake alibi of yours stood up," said Bill. He turned away in disgust. By giving himself up on this old charge in Central City, Mydans had effectually spoiled Bill's pitch. It meant the jewels—a six-figure collection of them—had been safely hidden.

"You might do me a favor," said the crook insolently. "They don't give us carnations around here. I'd appreciate if you'd send me one every day. I'd do the same for you."

"Except that you're not free, and I'm not in jail, and I don't like carnations," growled Bill.

Mydans' insolence had gotten under his skin. Knowing that further talk was useless, he left the prison abruptly.

He'd only missed by a few hours, after a two-week chase. Mydans had gotten away with the loot, and the Twin-American Insurance Company was taking the rap for two hundred G's. It was Bill's job, as an investigator on the Twin-A payroll, to get at least some of it back.

So far, his efforts had amounted to absolutely zero. Mydans had been as elusive as a greased pig. He'd ducked to Canton, Ohio, then to Memphis, getting clear each time just before Bill caught up with him. The detective was quite certain that Mydans had not yet fenced his loot. If it had gone on the underworld market, there'd have been indications the Twin-A couldn't have missed.

All he'd done was make it so hot for the crook that the latter had gone to earth in Central City, where a jail sentence was waiting for him from a previous encounter with the men in blue. Evidently Mydans had decided jail was the safest place for him until the heat on the Mallory job died down. Which meant that he'd safely hidden the swag.

BILL was in a nasty temper when he strolled back to his hotel. Newsboys did their best to make buildings topple with their shrill

yells. Finally the shouts of one of them broke through the detective's angry mood. Unable to learn what the shouts were about, he grudgingly bought a paper.

With a grunt he read the bold headline on the front page and the story below it.

MURDERER STILL AT LARGE! SLAYER OF UNDERTAKER ELUDES POLICE DRAGNET

While Central City police search feverishly for clues, the killer of undertaker Harlan Brown is still a large X today. Brown, who was slain last night in his office, was listed high in Central City professional and political circles. As police reconstruct the crime, he was at his desk, going over the accounts of the company which bears his name when some person or persons walked in and put a thirty-eight calibre bullet between his eyes.

Patrick Regan, a gravedigger, the only other person near the establishment, heard the shot, but was unable to reach his late employer in time to stop or identify the murderer. Regan had been in charge of the burial of Miss Mary Smith, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Belvedere Smith of this city, which took place two hours earlier. He had returned to the office to report to his employer, and had stopped in the wash room to clean himself up.

Bill read the story without much interest. His mind was on the telegram he was going to have to send the Twin-A folk. In view of the dead end to which his investigation had come, it wasn't a pleasant prospect. His boss would be sore and rightly so. Bill had done his best, but he wasn't paid for that. He was paid for bringing in the bacon, in this case the Mallory jewels.

That blasted Mydans! Every time he closed his eyes, Bill could see that blandly insulting hawk face. He could still hear the thief ask for more carnations. The detective reached his hotel, moved toward the elevators, then detoured to the bar café. A drink might help him think up something to say to the old man.

It didn't, of course. Nor did the second, nor the third. By the time he raised the fourth Rye and soda to his lips, he had mentally consigned Mydans and his employer to a very warm place. His boss stayed put there, frying nicely, thank you, but Mydans kept popping back into Bill's maudlin

thoughts—Mydans and those pink and white carnations.

With the fifth drink, Bill decided those carnations were becoming a fixation. Grimly, he decided to do something about it. With the precision of a brain slightly muddled by alcohol, it seemed to him that the only logical way to rid himself of this fixation was to buy up all the cerise and white carnations in Central City and send them to the thief. This done, he could forget about the whole business for a night at least.

The first florist he called on, shook his head.

"I got white carnations, pink carnations, red carnations, but no pink and white. There's no demand for them here."

"Thanks just the same," said Bill.

The same thing happened at three other flower shops.

"For Pete's sake!" said the detective to the proprietor of the fourth shop when the answer was again no. "A friend of mine likes them. He was wearing a fresh one this morning. Where'd he get it?"

"I don't know," said the florist dolefully. "I'd sure like to fill your order, but I don't know where. Wait! There's a man who raises carnations over across the river. He sells directly to some of the hotels and funeral parlors."

"What's his name?" Bill asked.

SOMETHING in this jarred him, brought him out of his drink-induced fog. He wrote down the florist's name, went to a drug store and called the man up. It was late, but he got his man at home.

"Yes," said the flower dealer, "I do raise them. There isn't much demand for them in Central City, but I like to have them on hand to play safe. Unfortunately, I sold all I had on hand yesterday."

"Who'd you sell them to?" asked Bill. He felt a hot hunch burning inside him, just below his diaphragm.

"I sent them over to a funeral—to that chap Harlan Brown who was shot last night. It was Dr. Smith who ordered them."

Bill hung up cold sober. If the

Brown funeral parlor were the only place that had pink and white carnations, then Mydans had been there. And police were still looking for the undertaker's killer. Riding to the establishment on the rim of town, Bill thought it over.

It had seemed logical enough that the thief would be willing to serve a short jail sentence with such valuable loot awaiting him on his release. If Mydans had a murder rap hanging over him as well, it seemed many times more logical.

And why would Mydans murder the undertaker? Since he was no fool, there had to be a good solid reason. Well, two hundred Gs in pearls, diamonds, rubies and the like were plenty solid. If the undertaker had hidden the stones, Mydans might have decided to rub him out. In Mydans' mind, no friend is true against the temptation of such a haul.

At first, Bill thought the place was deserted. It was a rambling one-story structure on the very rim of town. Behind it, over rolling hills, were dotted the seemingly endless monuments of Central City's leading graveyard. A big blue roadster was parked in front of it.

Finally the door was opened. A hulking hairless Hibernian whose rough hands and weather-beaten face gave the lie to his neatly-pressed dark suit answered it. This, Bill hazarded, was Patrick Regan.

"I'm from Twin-American," Bill said smoothly. He could be smooth when the occasion demanded it. "Mr. Brown had a small policy with us. It is to be paid over to whomever carries on with the business. Can you tell me a little about how things are fixed?"

"Sorry, bub," said the Hibernian. "I only work here. I wouldn't know who gets the business."

He stayed in the door, blocking most of Bill's view of the interior. The detective got an impression of hulking strength and—vague fear.

"Who is it?" asked another voice. Bill tried to get to look at its owner without success.

"Just an insurance guy," said the hairless man. "I don't know from nothing."

"Well, snap it up, Pat," he said.

Bill smiled, turned to go, managed to stumble against the door. Through it, he was able to take a quick mental photograph of a hulking, long-jawed man with a red face, loud clothes and a glittering diamond horseshoe tie pin. He apologized, went back to his cab.

"Drive around a bit," he said. "I want to think."

A dollar and twenty cents later by the meter, he rapped on the window that partitioned the vehicle.

"Hey, cabby," he said. "Do you know a big guy who wears high-powered clothes and sports a diamond horseshoe in his tie?"

"Who don't?" said the driver. "I've been payin' him most of my dough since I was fourteen. Central City ain't big enough to have two of him."

"Okay," said Bill as patiently as he could. "But who is he?"

"That's Sean Logan, unless he's got a carbon copy. He runs the biggest book on the races in town."

BILL did some more figuring while the meter mounted. What would a big-time bookie like Logan be doing with such a son of poverty as Pat Regan? It didn't make sense, unless—

Harlan Brown had been killed after the Smith funeral. The only pink and white carnations in Central City had adorned that funeral. Mydans had been sporting an unwilted pink and white carnation that afternoon. And now Regan, a gravedigger, was in consultation with a big-time bookie.

Bill had the cabbie take him to within a quarter of a mile of the mortician's establishment. It was getting dark now, and he kept in the deepest shadows as he moved carefully toward the one-story structure. Yes, the office lights were still on. Resisting the impulse to light a cigarette, Bill Post sat down at the base of a hedge and prepared to wait it out. The big blue roadster was still out in front.

His wait was not a long one. As soon as night had fully fallen, the light in the office went out. Regan, attired in coarse grey working clothes came out carrying a pick and spade over his shoulder. With him was

Logan, a lantern in his hand, his coat collar turned up against the chill night air.

Bill felt excitement rise within him. He knew he was onto something when he followed them, working silently from monument to monument, to keep out of sight. They covered some three hundred yards before they went down into a little ravine. There they stopped by a fresh grave, and Logan lit the lantern.

Steadily the shovel gouged into the freshly turned earth. Keeping well out of the range of the lantern's rays, Bill worked closer. His hand slipped under his topcoat, emerged with a very businesslike automatic. Then, he squatted behind a headstone and waited.

"You're sure you saw them, Pat," said Logan.

"It weren't no dream," said the Irishman, digging stolidly. "I wasn't supposed to be in the office at all. But my spade broke and I had to go back for another. I saw this friend of the boss' showing them to the boss."

"A nice friend," said Logan thoughtfully. "I knew Harlan Brown had his fingers in a lot of pies, but I never figured he'd go for hot stones."

"You haven't got a load of these yet," said Regan.

His shovel scraped metal a moment later. Peering cautiously around the monument, Bill saw that the grave was open. The hairless Hibernian was busily putting the rollers in place to bring the coffin up.

He moved with the precision of an experienced veteran. The casket came up evenly, and only a few moments were required to open it. It was lined with white satin. Inside lay a young girl, also in white, still lovely in death.

Disregarding her as if she were the body of a mangy dog, Regan plunged both hands into the foot of the coffin. Despite the cold, his bald dome shone with sweat. He came up with a small casket, ripped at its cover feverishly. A moment later he dangled a loop of pearls in front of Logan, whose eyes narrowed at sight of them.

"Holy suffering cow!" said the bookie softly. "You were right, Pat."

"I told you so," said the Irishman

aggrievedly. "This ought to even up for what I've been owing you and leave a bit over besides."

"It does, Pat. It does," said Logan.

"All right," said Bill, covering them with his pistol. "Let's be getting this stuff back where it belongs."

LOGAN and Regan froze. Bill stuffed the stones into his overcoat pocket, kept them at bay with his gun while Regan recovered the casket. Then, leaving it lying atop the re-opened grave, he marched them back to the office.

And there his two prisoners made a break. Both jumped him at once. The gravedigger literally ripped the coat from his back and fled for the door. Bill put a bullet through his leg and put him out of action. But Logan wasn't wasting the seconds. He hailed heavy punches off the side of Bill's head, knocked him reeling to the wall, his senses fading.

A terrific haymaker sent the detective crashing into the office furniture.

For a moment, he wondered if he were going to lose the game now when he'd come so close to winning. But the very power of the blow gave him his chance.

It knocked him clear of his opponent, enabled him to recover sufficiently to get his gun down and shatter the man's kneecap.

Feeling groggily triumphant, he picked up the telephone and called the Central City Police.

"By the way," he concluded, "you'll be interested to know that Brown's murderer has been caught."

"Where the blankety blank so and so is he?" bellowed an excited police lieutenant.

"In jail," said Bill hanging up. He'd let them stew for a bit. Then he picked up the phone once more and got the florist across the river.

"Get a bale of those pink and white carnations tomorrow," he said. "Yes. and send them to Carl Mydans in the city jail. Just say it's a favor to a friend."

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THE BURNING CORPSE

By HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Men Die Alone," "A Skull Has No Ears," etc.

Red Murder Lust Runs Riot When Simon Gaunt—Long Dead—Writes the Name of His Murderer in Flames

CHAPTER I

"Flame Is Life"

SIMON GAUNT worshipped fire. His mania was purely pagan; had he lived in ancient Britain, he might have been a Druid, tending the sacred altar flame. He loved fire as he would have loved a woman, and, I thought sometimes, it was the only thing that kept him alive.

Despite this, there was no warmth in the man. His eyes were chill flakes of blue ice, and his hands were wasted and transparent. He was always cold, except when he crouched by his hearth, watching oak-logs crackle and burn down to glowing coals of pulsing red.

The obsession of fire grew stronger as Gaunt aged.

He owned an advertising agency, but neglected it more and more. The burden of responsibility fell heavier on my shoulders, for I was the manager of the business. It would not have mattered if the firm had failed, for Gaunt was wealthy. Yet people

spoke of him now as eccentric, and Diana and I talked together about it—but we could reach no real conclusion.

Diana was Gaunt's daughter, and my fiancée, a slim, blond girl whose blue eyes were all warmth and sparkle. We had been engaged for a year. Gaunt neither approved nor disapproved; he simply ignored us. His emotions always were kept under lock and key, though I knew he had a very real affection for Diana.

Superficially there was nothing wrong. Despite Simon Gaunt's skeletal appearance, he was in perfect health. Nor was his mind affected. The only thing was—he was abnormally and morbidly preoccupied with the cult of fire-worship.

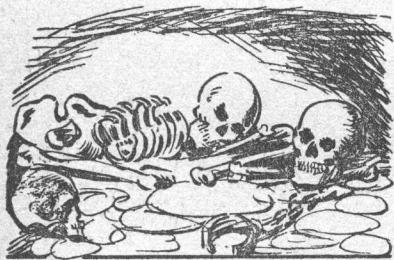
His library was full of books on the subject. Sometimes he would talk to us about his theories—and they were wild enough.

"Flame is life," he said once, his skull-like face reddened by the glow from the hearth. "The old religions were wiser than we. The ancient Persians knew the truth."

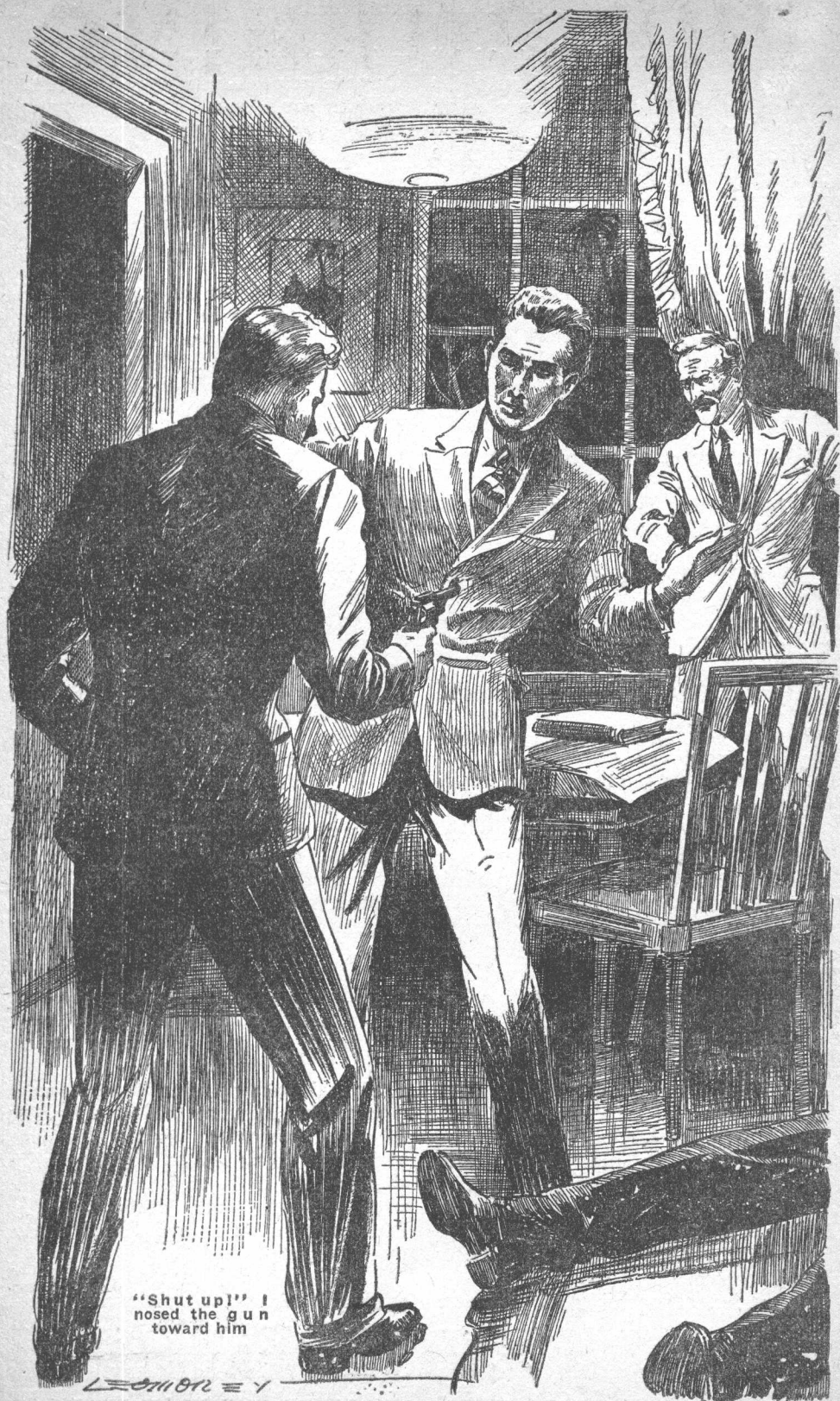
Diana and I exchanged glances.

"Fire was man's first step toward civilization," I said. "Certainly it—"

Gaunt made an impatient gesture. "I am not speaking figuratively. *Fire is life*. The seeds of life came from the sun, and later from a molten earth. Fire is the crucible. Folk-lore hints at that, with its talk of fire elementals and salamanders—beings that can live



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"Shut up!" I
nosed the gun
toward him

in flame, are even part of it. I think," he said somberly, "that I should die very quickly if I could not replenish my energy with fire."

"You're good for twenty years more at least," I said, grinning. "Even on an iceberg."

"Did you bring those new advertising accounts?" Gaunt said, abruptly changing the subject. "I should like to go over them with you."

"They're right here." I took the papers from my briefcase. It was like old Simon to show these sudden flashes of interest in the business, which he usually ignored.

DIANA rose, went to Gaunt, and kissed the top of his head.

"I hate being bored," she smiled. "Duke was going to take me to a dance tonight."

"All right. I can go over these contracts alone."

"You're tired," I said. "I'll stay and help you. The dance can wait an hour or so."

Diana wrinkled her nose at me and went to the door.

"I should ask Steve to take me," she said. "But I'll wait."

"Okay," I said helplessly. I didn't like Steve Mallory. A young attorney, he and Diana had once been engaged, and I knew he still phoned her too often for my peace of mind, though I tried to be fair about it. Mallory was a bachelor, probably lonely—a good fellow, to give the devil his due. The fact that Diana wore my ring on her hand didn't make me her boss.

Gaunt suddenly pushed back the papers and blinked at me.

"It's Diana's birthday next Sunday," he said.

"I know. I'm buying her a—"

He fumbled in his pocket, and brought out his battered old pipe.

"I sent to New York for her present. Having it delivered at the shop, so she won't see the package. Let me know when it comes."

He puffed reflectively at aromatic tobacco.

"I'm going up to the lodge for a few days. Want to be alone." There was the flash of a smile. "You'd be sur-

prised at what I'm doing up there. Certain experiments—" He sobered. "Well, you'll see. I'm trying something the ancient pyromancers used to do — materialize a fire-elemental. Sounds silly, doesn't it? I'd have said the same myself a few years ago. But lately I think I've stumbled on something—"

"Yes?"

Gaunt looked at me keenly.

"Don't try to be polite. You don't believe in magic. Well—" He chuckled hoarsely. "We won't talk about it. But don't be surprised if I live to be a hundred—or more. Fire is imperishable. There's such a thing as possession—you've heard of men possessed by demons. There's also possession that isn't diabolic—an elemental spirit dwelling in a human body, and endowing it with strength and energy. A fire-elemental—"

But he would say no more, and we fell to work on the contracts. Later, I repeated Gaunt's words to Diana, and she shook her head worriedly.

"People are beginning to talk about Dad. He's made no secret of his theories. And—well, such a hobby can't be healthy."

IT wasn't. A few days later, Gaunt went up to his private lodge in the mountains, alone, as usual. That was on a Friday—the 13th—bringing unexpected bad luck to me.

Gaunt went to the mountains—and I went to the hospital!

I was on my way to see him and driving too fast—an unfortunate habit of mine. The first thing I knew, a car swung out of a side street into my path. There was a crash.

Then I woke up in an atmosphere of ether, with a nurse taking my pulse. It wasn't anything serious, but cuts and a broken rib or two kept me tied to the hospital bed—so I wasn't present when Diana, with Steve Mallory, drove to the lodge and found Simon Gaunt's body.

Botulism was the answer—food poisoning. There was an open tin of meat paste in the kitchen, and analysis proved that it carried the fatal toxins of decay. The brand was a new one, just recently put on the market, and

Gaunt was addicted to meat paste sandwiches. His last one had been fatal.

Mallory told me about it, mentioning that the lodge had some unusual equipment, gadgets that would have looked in place in the den of some medieval alchemist. There were carefully-labeled bottles of herbs, powders, oily-looking liquids; devices that were a designer's nightmare; curious out-of-print books on fire-magic.

Eccentricity — nothing more. I thought that, then.

I was in the hospital for a month. During that month, Steve Mallory saw Diana almost every day—and at last Diana gave me back my ring.

"I'm sorry, Duke," she said. "We decided long ago that we should be honest with each other, if—"

"It's Mallory, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes. He's been so—so kind, so good. . . . You see, Duke, this is the first real trouble I've ever had. And I find myself turning to Steve. Just as I used to, before we—"

So that was that. There was no use trying to argue, of course. I lay back on my pillows and wondered when they'd let me out of the hospital.

Then Don Albertson came into the picture. He was Diana's cousin, but, years ago, he and Simon Gaunt had quarreled bitterly over some trivial matter. Now, however, he spent most of his time with Diana.

He was a short, round-faced fellow with an unruly thatch of red hair and a loose grin. I thought him stupid and as talkative as a magpie when he visited me at the hospital.

"So you'll be out of here tomorrow," he said. "That'll be swell. Just in time for the big party at the lodge."

I stared at him.

"Party? What—"

He grinned, rather nervously.

"Didn't you know? There was one clause in old Gaunt's will that was pretty screwy. Once a year Diana's got to go to the lodge and perform a sacrifice to Ahriman."

"Sacrifice!"

"Not what you're thinking of. I saw the directions—a lot of screwy ritual stuff about burning magic powders on an altar and chanting incanta-

tions to elementals. Diana's got to do it on Walpurgis Night—which is two days off."

"Good Lord!" I said. "Her father died less than a month ago, and—well, it sounds pretty morbid to me. Can't you stop her? A thing like that doesn't mean anything."

ALBERTSON lit a cigarette.

"It did to the old man—and Diana realizes that. I told her it was foolish, but she insists it's the least she can do for her father, now that he's dead. However, I see what you mean. It'd be plenty depressing, so I had Diana let me handle it. I invited a lot of people, and we're going to throw a real party. Drinks and music and dancing—"

I stared at him, utterly astounded. The man's lack of good taste was appalling.

"Does Diana know what you're doing?"

"She left it in my hands," he said blandly. "I can really manage a party. Got it all fixed up. The big stunt's going to be a treasure hunt—clues and everything."

"You can't dance on Gaunt's grave that way," I said. "Nobody would come."

"I invited *my* friends," he said—and then I noticed, as he leaned closer, that there was a strong odor of liquor on his breath. Later I was to learn that drunkenness was Albertson's continual state. No sober man would have planned such a thing.

I picked up the phone. Albertson lifted his eyebrows.

"Diana's out of town. Won't be back till just before the party. She went to Chicago with Mallory and his father on some legal business. I don't even know where they're staying."

"Take my advice and call it off," I urged. Albertson only winked at me and went out. I lay back, feeling vaguely nauseated. If I could get in touch with Diana, I knew she'd call off this gruesome party—but there was no way for me to reach her, though I put in a long distance call to Chicago.

The next day I was released from the hospital, cured, and tried out my

car, which had been repaired. It seemed in good condition. But I didn't sleep well that night.

The next evening I drove to the lodge.

Early as I was, I wasn't early enough. Don Albertson and his gang—a dozen of them, men and women—had taken possession. They were engaged in getting intoxicated, and greeted me with whoops of joy.

"Sit down and listen," Albertson urged. "Have a drink. I'm just reading Simon's instructions."

"Where's Diana?" I asked.

"Not here yet . . . Listen." He struck a pose. "Here's what the old boy wrote. . . . 'It is my belief that after my death, I shall live again through the power of fire—'"

It was the same argument I had heard so often from Simon Gaunt himself. Albertson droned on:

"Here's the interesting part. 'On each Walpurgis Night, I wish my daughter, Diana, to perform the ancient ceremony of Ahriman on the altar I have erected at my mountain lodge. First burn the following herbs . . . and so on . . . reading the ritual to be found hereunder . . . Place the body of a black cock on the coals of the altar, and throw upon it these sacred powders. . . .'"

I looked around the lodge's big room. The wall-paper was curious, carrying a design of magical symbols—pentagrams, zodiacal markings, and the like. From overhead, spiders dangled from oak beams. They had spun fast. A small crucible stood in one corner, and there were racks upon racks of extraordinary instruments, and shelves of books. Against the wall stood a block of an altar, made of dull metal, with a bowl scooped out of the top. I walked over to examine it. Tracks on the floor showed where it had been moved. It was light enough, being hollow, to shift easily.

In the room was a chemical odor, mixed with a faint incense, aromatic and vaguely stifling. I heard Albertson say:

"I've got the herbs and stuff all ready—even brought along a black cock. But we can't make magic yet. 'Tisn't time."

CHAPTER II

The Dead Return

I HEARD a car draw up in front. Diana came in, followed by Steve Mallory, a big, bronzed man, with level blue eyes and a tight smile. Behind him was his father, a dry, withered husk of a man, with all the moisture burned out of him by age—a bald, sardonic giant. But now there was little of his bigness left save the skeleton, on which shrunken skin hung in folds.

I saw the surprised disapproval on their faces. Even Albertson noticed it. He went hurriedly to Diana and drew her aside. They talked for a time—and at last I saw the girl nod, though she frowned. I caught a few words.

" . . . Can't let me down now, Diana . . . my friends . . . Thought it'd cheer you up. . . ."

I was talking to Steve Mallory.

"I tried to stop this. Tried to get in touch with you. I wish Diana'd order this gang of drunks to leave!"

Mallory scowled. "Yeah—"

His father broke in, his voice sardonic:

"She won't. She's too soft. Doesn't want to hurt anybody's feelings."

I caught Diana's eye as she headed for the back door, and followed. The Mallorys were at my heels. We stepped out through the porch, and the door slammed shut, muffling the tinny music of the radio. The sun was going down behind the mountains; at our feet a long slope reached toward the lake. Trees cast long shadows around us.

"Listen, Diana," I said. "Give me the word and I'll throw those tramps out."

"Thanks, Duke," she smiled, rather wanly. "But it really doesn't matter. Dad can't be hurt by anything now. Let them stay. They're all broke, Don says, and—well, let them have their fun."

"Let's get off where we can't hear that radio," Steve Mallory said harshly. He took Diana's arm and led her off into the twilight.

I lit a cigarette. Abruptly it was night. The sun was gone, and darkness came on with a rush. Curiously, it was not at all cold—almost oppressively hot.

Presently I walked down toward the pier that stretched out into the lake. I heard footsteps, and Albertson came up behind me.

"Duke," he said nervously, "was Diana mad?"

"No." My voice was annoyed.

"Where is she?"

"Out on the pier," I said, pointing.

"With Steve. Leave them alone."

"Sure," Albertson said hesitantly.

"Sure. . . ."

I started back toward the house, stumbling over the pump that stood beside the path. I fell on hands and knees, cursing under my breath, and simultaneously I heard Diana's soft, choked cry.

I sprang up, searching for her in the dimness. But it wasn't Diana I saw. Not twenty feet away—

Simon Gaunt stood watching us.

It was no illusion. It was Simon Gaunt, dressed in his burial clothes, with a dead, passionless face that held no emotion whatsoever. He stood there in the dark, and looked at us.

HOW could we see him—in the dark?

His body was like a lamp. A lamp in which hell-flamed burned!

A core of fire seemed to shimmer within him. He loomed against the dark like a—a shining shadow of light. Despite myself, I could not repress the crawling thing that rippled down my spine.

I heard Albertson's shrill cry, heard footsteps pounding. Instantly I was racing at his heels. The shining thing had not moved. Its eyes, I saw, were luminous. Around the black pupils they glowed like white, intensely hot flame.

Albertson's silhouette momentarily blotted out part of the figure. Something, red and withering, gushed out like the very heart of fire. Albertson cried out, flung up an arm to protect his face. And then the—the thing was gone.

A flashlight's beam rayed out from

behind me, playing over the gnarled boles of oaks that stood here and there on the lawn. Albertson was crouching down, scrubbing at his face, making a hoarse, inarticulate sound deep in his throat. Beyond him, I could see nothing—only shadows, and the white cone of light, as it played like a revealing pencil here and there.

There was no place where the creature could have hidden. The trees were far apart, and there was no shelter close enough for it to have reached. It might have climbed—

No. The flashlight danced over oaklimbs as its holder walked cautiously forward.

"Is it up there?" Steve said.

I tilted back my head, staring.

"No. I don't see anything."

The white ray flickered about. Quite obviously, there was nothing in the trees.

Then the others were with us, Steve Mallory, holding the light, scowling in angry bewilderment; his father, Aaron Mallory, helping Diana, with a lean arm about her waist. She was whispering:

"It was Dad. I saw him—"

My face felt curiously hot, as though flame had breathed upon it. "Let's get in the house," I said abruptly. "There's nothing out here." I moved aside a little, but Diana already had seen what I was trying to hide. The flashlight dwelt on scorched footprints that were burnt into the tall grass.

Mallory sucked in his breath and knelt down. His probing forefinger touched the withered outline, and grass crumbled, brittle as glass, under his hand. I said irritably:

"Stop playing detective and get Diana in the house! She's not made of iron!"

"I'm going to look around here a bit," Mallory said. His father didn't speak, but he didn't follow us in, either. When we opened the porch door, music struck us in the face, and the laughter of half-drunk couples. Diana headed for a bedroom.

I switched on the porch light. Albertson, his round face strained, bent to examine his hands under the glow.

"Burned," he said. "See?"

THE finger-tips were red and inflamed.

"What was it?" I asked in an undertone.

"I don't know. I touched that thing, and it—burned like fire."

"I saw a flame—"

"Well, there was that, too. I haven't seen old Simon for years. Was that—like him?" Shock had sobered Albertson.

"Exactly like him," I said shortly, and pushed past him into the big room, through dancing couples. None of that gang, of course, knew what had happened outside. I went into Gaunt's bedroom, lined as it was with books. Albertson followed me.

There was something oppressive about this little room. A dead, stifling, hot silence that filled it unpleasantly. Albertson was examining the books.

"This is—very curious," he said, in his shrill voice. "I've done some research in magic, and Simon has a lot of unusual stuff here." He found a vellum-bound book, flipped it open, and found a place. "Listen to this: 'The salamander is a symbol by which we know them. In the fires of creation they dwell; their blood is as flame, and they move invisibly like burning shadows. Yet they may be commanded to dwell within the body of a man, and their life is endless. Though the flesh shall die, the fire-elemental lives on, giving to that flesh a fiery rebirth—' That's the angle, eh? Gaunt was on the track of eternal life, the old chimera."

I stared at him.

"He hinted as much to me."

Albertson shook his head.

"The whole thing's impossible, of course."

"That Gaunt might have called up a fire-elemental, and that it might have reanimated his corpse?" My voice wasn't quite as steady as I had expected.

Diana was suddenly standing on the threshold. Her face, I noticed, was white.

"That was Dad, you know. It wasn't a trick."

"Diana," I said, "do you think it's safe for you to stay here? I'd feel better if you were back in the city."

Her lips tightened. "I'm going to stay."

"Suppose I stay here," I suggested. "I have my gun. And I can—take care of any emergency that might come up. I don't pretend to know what's happening here, but I do know it isn't kindergarten stuff. I wish you'd go back."

Her eyes dwelt on me.

"You saw—him—at close quarters, didn't you, Duke? It was Dad—"

"Listen," I said, and took her firmly by the shoulders. "Don't get any screwy ideas. I saw something—okay. I don't know what it was. But I intend to find out. Meanwhile, I'd feel safer if I knew you were out of danger."

"Danger. You feel that? But Dad wouldn't hurt me—"

Involuntarily I glanced at the book which Albertson had left open on a table. Diana bent to scan it, and turned a shocked white face to me.

"You're hinting something, Duke. That Dad isn't—"

"I'm not hinting anything," I said half angrily. "I'm simply implying that maybe it wasn't your father we just saw."

"I've never believed in ghosts—or anything going on after death," she whispered. "But we don't know, do we?"

"Ghosts," I said, "are one thing. A hunk of ectoplasm—maybe. But a fire-elemental is another." I thumbed through the book Albertson had found. "Listen to this rot: 'All things sprang from the Mystic Four: earth, air, fire, and water. And these four combine in mankind, who partakes of the attributes of each. He is clay; he is water; breath is his life; fire the center of his being. But these great forces have their own children. Of the sea are undines; sprites dwell in the air about us, and there are dwellers in earth. Greatest of all are the spirits of fire. Man was shaped from the Mystic Four, and the life-force of them. That power, that life-force, brought forth from its womb beings without souls, eternal beings, the elementals. In Egypt they have known them. They were known in Stonehenge. The Druid fires masked a

mighty secret. They are'—" I broke off, grinning wryly.

"It isn't even fake spiritualism."

"It may be something worse," Diana said slowly.

CHAPTER III

Incredible Fire

I felt a gust of anger. "Magic!" I growled. Simultaneously I heard Albertson's gasp.

I followed the direction of his gaze. There was something at the window. Only a glimpse I had, of a flaming shapeless thing, and then Albertson brushed me aside and headed for the door.

Still the—the thing hovered outside the window as though it watched us—malignantly!

Then I was racing after Albertson. Diana, I realized was at my heels. I said:

"Go back!" but she only shook her head mutely. There was no time for more.

We were outside the house, in darkness. Pale yellow shafts slanted out through the windows. Of the Mallorys, father and son, there was no trace. Albertson's figure loomed up in the dark; I caromed into him, and heard something thud and roll away on the grass.

"My flashlight!" he said—

"I've got something better," I snapped, and felt the coolness of my automatic against my palm. Briefly I stood motionless, orienting myself to the darkness.

Diana pressed close to me.

"Do you smell that, Duke? Something burning—"

Yes—I smelled it. Simultaneously I saw a little flare of flame spring into view in the distance. A tiny grass-fire which elongated and ran along like a serpent through the gloom. I found myself thinking: *green-grass doesn't burn.*

Then I saw the—the thing. It was fire. It was a core of pure white flame, twisting in midair, unsupported. It seemed to float away from us, dancing

as though in mockery, like some monstrous, diabolic Will-o'-the-Wisp.

Behind it, like a track—like a flaming spoor—the serpent of flame ran!

Footprints of fire!

I was plunging in pursuit of the thing, my automatic lifting. I fired. But, if I struck anything tangible, there was no apparent result.

"Missed?" That was Albertson's voice.

"I don't miss—" I caught myself, glancing at the shadow of Diana, beside me.

"Maybe," I said shortly, and ran on.

Nightmare race through blackness, guided by that floating core of flame! We followed the fire-snake as it writhed through the grass—grass that should not burn, at this season. A breath of dry, baking heat gusted back at us. It was strangely dream-like, this pursuit, with the rhythmic pounding of our feet, the hoarse gasping of our breaths, the dancing, silent core of fire that swayed mockingly before us.

Albertson found time to say:

"That isn't—Gaunt—anyway."

The blood was pounding in my temples. My eyes hurt with the strain of following that incredible track. Despite myself, I felt a subtle horror of overtaking the thing that fled.

Why did it flee? To find—sanctuary?

Then the serpent-track at our feet died and was gone. Only the fire-shape hung motionless in the dark.

Again I fired. And, as before, there was no result.

AND yet there was. Instantly the glowing, strange core of flame vanished. In its place stood—Simon Gaunt!

Expressionless, terrible, he stood there, twenty feet away, and my gun barked and jolted against my hand. He did not move. His face, his eyes, his whole body, glowed as though lighted from within, like a vessel for some incredible Dweller that flamed within his flesh!

The crackling snarl of my automatic died. There was only silence, and that oppressive heat.

I heard a choked little cry from Diana. She sprang forward, racing toward the horror that stood under the oaks.

I was at her heels, but too late. Red flame gushed out. She screamed, and I caught her as she fell back, moaning. When I looked again, Simon Gaunt was gone.

I lifted Diana in my arms.

"I'm going back to the house."

"Yeah." Albertson lit a match, but there was nothing to see—only a trail of burned, cindery grass. "I—I guess we might as well." He looked up.

Diana had fainted. Back on the porch, I laid her on a couch and examined her. Her face was slightly burned.

The radio still was blaring, and suddenly the porch was filled with Albertson's crowd, staring owlishly, flushed with liquor. Someone asked thickly:

"What's up?"

I told them. I told them just what had happened, because I disliked them violently and wanted to wipe the fatuous grins from their faces. I'd have liked nothing better than to scare them sober.

But it didn't work. A girl with a glass in her hand reeled toward Albertson.

"Swell gag, Don," she mouthed. "Hallowe'en stuff. Let's make that sacrifice for old Simon now, eh?"

I might have known it. They were too thoroughly, professionally plastered to notice an earthquake. I glared at Albertson.

"See if you can find some ointment in the bathroom," I snapped, and he vanished through the door with the others. The radio blared louder. I heard the scuffle of dancing feet. Then I saw Steve Mallory lined against the outside dark.

"I heard shots—" he said. "Diana! What happened?"

"She's all right," I said. "And if it's a fair question, just where the devil have you been?"

"Never mind that," he said impatiently. "I didn't find anything."

Albertson returned, with a jar of ointment, and Mallory took it from him, applying it to her face.

I told him what had happened. For his part, he said that he and his father had been—searching. That was all. They hadn't found anything.

"Yeah," I said again, and took out my automatic, checking it carefully. Albertson met my eyes.

"Blanks?" he asked softly.

"No. I had that idea, too. But my gun was loaded. And—blast it, man, I'm not that bad a shot!"

"According to Gaunt's own books, an elemental can leave the body it possesses at any time," Albertson said. "But it always returns."

"I doubt it," I remarked rudely, and slid a fresh clip into the automatic, slipping the weapon back into my pocket.

"I think it's time we stopped sticking our necks out. Or, rather, Diana's neck. Speaking for myself, I move we all get out of here, and get out pronto!"

"Come, come, Duke!" Aaron Mallory stood at the door, looking more like the skeleton of a vulture than ever. "We must be realists. I am no believer in the supernatural."

I felt a gust of annoyance. "You can believe in little red devils, for all I care," I said. "I'm thinking about Diana. This place is dangerous. Though I notice you didn't run any risks."

He tut-tutted me blandly.

"I see Diana is not badly burned. That's well."

ALBERTSON unexpectedly took my side.

"I think Duke's right. This isn't safe—for Diana, anyway. We'd better go. I found my flashlight—so I'll look around a bit, first. Coming, Mallory?"

"I'm staying with Diana," I said quietly. "With my gun loaded."

Aaron Mallory grunted.

"We'll look around. If that thing we saw was tangible, it couldn't have vanished without leaving traces. If it wasn't—I don't believe in it."

Steve shrugged, muttered something, and followed the others out. I heard them go slowly off into the night.

The darkness closed in, almost tan-

gibly, around the porch. Presently I realized that Diana's eyes were open.

"Hello, Duke," she said, smiling wanly. "I—I guess I ran right into trouble."

"How do you feel? Your face—"

"It hurts. Duke! It isn't—scarred—"

"Of course not," I reassured her. "Minor burns. Steve smeared salve on 'em."

"What happened?"

I told her.

"Steve's out there?" she asked.

"Yeah. With the others."

"I'm going to him," she said, rising.

"You're safer here. He'll be back."

"Duke," she whispered, looking at me, "don't you understand? I love him."

I looked at her in silence. After a moment I said:

"Yeah," and opened the porch door.

"Come along, then." My eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness.

"See anyone?"

"Not from here. Let's go out on the pier. We can see from there."

I followed her out on the rickety structure. It wasn't dangerous; the water was only waist deep at the But the boards creaked perilously under our feet.

We had nearly reached the end when a flare of light came from behind us. I heard a yell, in Steve's voice. Simultaneously Diana cried out, whirled, and raced back along the pier. I followed, guided by an intermittent red flame. It seemed centuries before I saw a knot of struggling figures—Steve and Albertson, grappling with a being that was human, but which glowed like fire. Aaron Mallory was crumpled on the grass near by.

Flame gushed out, and Albertson fell back, snarling. Then he hurled himself again upon that silent, ferociously battling thing with the glowing face of Simon Gaunt.

I pushed Diana out of the way. The automatic jolted in my hand. Simon Gaunt's figure sprang up, twisting free of his assailants.

He stood for a moment, a black hole in his forehead. Then he crashed down. . . .

And the white light of Albertson's flashlight told us the truth.

I stripped the mask from the dead face—the death mask of Simon Gaunt. The man who lay there had the brown, leathery face of a countryman. The blue eyes still were vaguely luminous.

"Who is he?" Diana whispered.

"I don't know," I said. And the same answer came from the others.

Albertson was rubbing his hands on his coat. "Ouch!" he said. "He must have had some acid smeared on his clothes. No wonder he burned my fingers!"

Steve was holding Diana close.

"It's all right, dear," he said. "We saw that—that glowing thing, and followed it. Then it seemed to turn into your father, and I tackled it. Albertson and Dad helped me." He turned to Aaron Mallory, who was rising, rubbing his head. "All right?"

"Sure. Just a bump on the head. Let's have a look at this chap!" Aaron bent, and fumbled at the dead man's eyes. He held up a little shell of glass. "Covered his eyes—see? They were treated with luminous paint, too, like the mask and his clothes."

CHAPTER IV

The Riddle of Fire

I PICKED up a cloak from the ground. On one side it was jet black; on the other, a twisting spiral had been drawn with luminous paint.

"And this explains a lot more. Wearing this, in the dark, he couldn't be seen, except as a shining flame. And the track in the grass—it's my guess he laid a trail of kerosene in advance, and touched it off as he ran."

Two other things we found—a small portable flame-thrower, crudely made, but effective enough. The other thing was a door in a tree.

The oak's great bole was hollow. A slab had been cut out of it and roughly wired so that it could be swung open easily. The edges of the wood were still raw and new, with sawdust clinging to them. This, ob-

viously, was how the masquerader had been able to disappear so magically.

Fire flickered up suddenly from the windows of the lodge.

Steve Mallory whirled.

"What the devil—" he snapped. "More of this?" We all knew what he meant.

We forgot about the body on the ground. All of us headed for the house, Mallory in the lead. His big figure loomed ahead of me as he burst into the porch and raced into the big room.

I saw him stop to stare. Then we were all inside the door, watching the group gathered around the metal altar against the wall.

A girl turned to face us—the one who had suggested that we perform the ritual ordered by Gaunt's will. In her hand she held the feathery body of a black cock; she waved it at us. She was drunker than the others.

One of the men was reading a ritual, in stumbling Latin.

The concavity on the altar was filled with glowing red coals that flared up now and then.

"It's okay," the girl called. "We're jush—just doing what old Simon wanted."

Diana said, in a tight voice:

"Stop them, Steve."

He moved forward, his eyes blazing—and two men lunged toward him, seized his arms.

"Gotta—finish it, now," one of them mouthed.

Before Steve could break free, the girl with the dead fowl had dropped it on the coals. The smell of singed feathers arose. She picked up a bowl, filled with dry herbs, and poured the stuff on the altar.

Instantly a fierce, raging flame rushed up, a blazing column that licked at the wall behind the altar. It drew our eyes. . . .

Steve tore free from the men who held him. He moved toward the altar—and paused, beside it, staring up at the wall as that fierce flame died down. I followed his gaze, and my heart jumped with excitement.

On the wall-paper—*writing was appearing!*

THE first thing we saw was the name, "Simon Gaunt." And then, brought out by the heat, brownish lines of script grew to visibility above it.

The message said, quite simply:

"I have been poisoned. Before I came to the lodge, he gave me this new brand of meat paste and insisted that I try it. Now I am dying, and I know my murderer will come here to make certain of my death, and that I have left no message. I think he will also want the necklace of rubies I have just bought for Diana's birthday, but I have hidden these in the artesian well under the pump, suspended by a long string.

"In my will, I have asked Diana to perform a certain ritual yearly. Knowing this, I have moved the altar against the wall, where, during the ritual, the heat of the fire will make this writing visible. I am being killed because my murderer is in need of money; I recently discovered that he has been stealing from the firm for several years, losing every cent and more in gambling debts.

"I waited for him to confess—I would have helped him then—but I waited too long. I am being murdered so that Duke can marry Diana and inherit my fortune.

"Simon Gaunt."

"Duke!" Diana turned slowly. "No!"

I was at the door, and the automatic was at my hand, covering them all, sobering even Albertson's drunken crowd.

"Please don't move," I said gently. "As I said before, I seldom miss."

Her eyes were wide. "But you couldn't have—poisoned Dad—"

"I poisoned him, Diana. I knew he'd found out about the money and the gambling. So I gave him the poisoned meat paste, and then drove up here to make certain. I searched the house, but I didn't find the message, or the rubies. It was clever of Simon Gaunt to write with invisible ink—milk or lemon juice, I suppose."

"You dirty—" Steve began.

"Shut up!" I nosed the gun toward him. "You talk too much. You talked too much to Diana—I thought I had

that sewed up, and then you came back and made her break her engagement to me."

"I love Steve," Diana said.

"A few last words, eh? Remember my auto accident? That happened on the way back from this lodge—I was hurrying to establish an alibi. A month in the hospital kept me from searching for the rubies—but I was willing to wait. After Diana threw me over, I realized I couldn't get my hands on Gaunt's money—but I could get the necklace, if I could find it. There was plenty of time, I thought."

I looked at Albertson. "Then you planned this party—with a treasure hunt! The worst thing that could have happened! I knew I had to find the necklace immediately, so I drove here yesterday. I couldn't find it. I needed more time, and I didn't want a gang of fools searching around the lodge!"

"That man you killed tonight—"

"Jim Nesbit? He's a tramp; I found him in a hobo jungle last night. I paid him to frighten you all away, so I could have a free hand to look for the necklace."

"You killed him." That was Diana.

"Of course," I said. "He couldn't have gotten away from Steve and Albertson. So I made certain he wouldn't talk."

"What do you intend to do?" Steve said.

"Kill you," I said. "You, Steve, and your father, and Albertson—and Diana. The rest of you won't dare to stop me. Then I'll get the necklace and disappear. It won't be hard."

"Kill Diana?" he asked.

I LAUGHED, very softly.

"You don't think I ever loved her, do you?"

Steve moved so swiftly that I was almost taken by surprise. I saw his foot shoot out against the altar, and the hollow metal bulk toppled over clangingly.

I fired. Mallory staggered.

From the altar gushed a flood of coals. They buried my feet to the ankles. Sheer agony blazed through me.

I leaped free, squeezing the trigger

again and again. But pain blinded me.

Pain and rage and red murder-lust. I felt hands clutching me, fought against them, fought as the gun was jerked from my grip, fought and fought till the crimson mists parted to show me Diana's white face, and the trickle of blood that ran down her arm. . . .

* * *

Tonight I die.

In a week Diana and Steve will be married. My bullets had wounded, but killed no one.

Tonight I die for the murder of two men.

It is, of course, blind superstition to imagine that Simon Gaunt, who worshipped flame, came back from the grave to thwart me by means of the fire he served. And yet I know, quite clearly, that it was not burning pain alone that made me lose my head that night. The coals buried my feet to the ankles; well and good. But there was something else. I looked down, involuntarily, and I am willing to swear that I saw a face limned on those glowing embers. It was the burning face of Simon Gaunt, and it was laughing at me.

I have told that to no one. I have no wish to spend the rest of my life in an asylum. In an hour, I shall walk to the chair, and another sort of fire will finish me.

I have not seen Diana, though she came to the prison. I do not wish her pity.

I am sorry I did not kill her. I want to die, so that I may forget her white face, and the trickle of blood on her arm.

I never loved her. I played a clever game for Gaunt's fortune, that was all. Over and over, from the very beginning, I told myself that I felt no emotion toward Diana Gaunt. But—only now, when it is too late. . . .

Why is it that I cannot forget the horror in her eyes when she knew the truth?

It is horrible to remember—

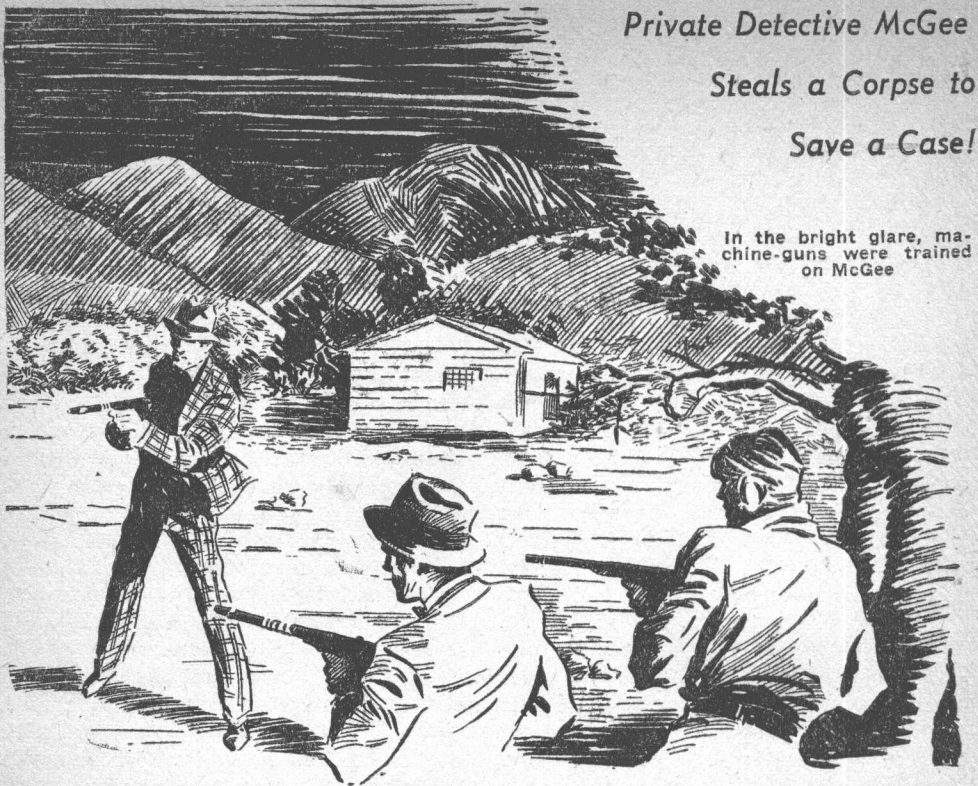
Soon I shall forget, forever. In an hour.

But—oh, God!—how long an hour can be!

Private Detective McGee

Steals a Corpse to

Save a Case!



KIDNAPED EVIDENCE

By JOSEPH J. MILLARD

Author of "Deadline for Death," "Master of the Walking Dead," etc.

THERE was a low hedge along one side of the Mainwaring estate, dividing the landscaped lawn from the gravelled driveway. In McGee's mad dash toward his parked car, he forgot this hedge. But he remembered it when thorny branches clawed at his wet pants legs and tangled with the bottom of his raincoat. He tripped, went over the low hedge in a helpless dive and landed on his face on the wet gravel.

The corpse of Jonathan Mainwaring bounced out of his arms, skidded grotesquely, and brought up against the back wheel of McGee's coupé.

McGee scrambled up, cursing breathlessly. Behind him, Hilda Mainwaring was still leaning out the window, screaming in high-pitched yelps of anguished terror. Other voices, probably awakened servants, were

taking up the clamor. Lights popped on along the storm-swept street and somewhere unpleasantly close, a police whistle bleated shrilly.

With panic clawing at his nerves, McGee scooped up the lifeless body, shoved it into the car and squirmed under the wheel beside it. The motor snarled and the coupé hurled wet gravel at the night and exploded down the drive like a frightened deer.

McGee caught one glimpse of a beat policeman lumbering up from the corner of Maple Street, waving his gun and blasting his whistle. Then he was clawing the coupé's wheel, skidding wildly to the right and screaming off down the dark suburban street. In the rear view mirror, McGee could see the bluecoat's gun come down and wink at him redly, but no lead touched the coupé and another screaming turn

blotted out even that sight.

The corpse of Jonathan Mainwaring suddenly bobbed forward and slumped against McGee's shoulder. McGee swore hoarsely and shoved it back with his right hand. When he brought that hand back to the wheel, it was darkly wet and sticky.

McGee made a gagging sound deep in his throat and scrubbed the bloody hand against his wet raincoat. His eyes were muddy, his bony angular face tight and shiny from the rain and the tension of taut nerves and muscles. Rain drummed steadily on the car's metal roof and the windshield wipers squeaked monotonously, louder and more nerve-wracking than the endless sucking whine of the tires on the wet pavement.

BUT louder than all these sounds was the mournful, sobbing wail of squad cars ripping through the night, converging on the neighborhood McGee was desperately fleeing.

McGee could easily imagine the radio call that was sending them to the hunt.

"Pick up Samuel McGee, age thirty-one, private detective, believed to have shot and killed the broker, Jonathan Mainwaring, at the latter's home tonight, afterward fleeing with the corpse of his victim. . . ."

"Here we go again!" McGee growled bitterly, talking aloud to his reflection in the windshield. "Screwball McGee is on the loose. Get your guns, boys. The Mad Irishman has another case."

Trouble, it seemed, simply hovered around waiting for an opportunity to drop with hobnailed boots onto McGee's defenseless neck. Every case he got was worse than the ones before and every one put him that much closer to the day when the profane and bitter Inspector Paul Eldritch would make good his threat to see McGee headed either for the chair or life on the rock pile.

It wasn't that Private Detective Sam McGee sought trouble. He fled from it with a whole-souled craving for peace and quiet. But some devilish fate seemed to doom him to a life of crazy cases and hair-breadth es-

capades. McGee swore earnestly that if he took the job of discovering who stole the sugar lumps at the Presbyterian Missionary Tea, it would turn into a wholesale massacre the moment he appeared.

That was simply the way his luck ran—and this latest uninvited fracas was a climax that dimmed the insanity of anything he had ever previously encountered. But this one was his own fault.

The louder screech of a siren clawed into McGee's thoughts. A squad car was headed toward him on the cross street ahead and there was no time to turn around and get out of sight. McGee took the only other alternative.

He slammed on the brakes, went into a looping, skidding slide and straightened in time to dive into a private driveway between two darkened houses. A moment later, sitting with the lights out and the motor idling, McGee saw the squad car flash meteorically past on the street behind.

When sight and sound of the radio car had died away, McGee backed into the street and headed toward the feverish glow of the city lights in the dripping sky ahead. Using side streets and alleys, McGee managed to avoid any more close shaves before he had circled the downtown section and drawn up at the rear of a small, square, dark building.

He got out, leaving the motor running, and hammered on the back door. Presently the door opened, spilling orange light around the silhouette of a small, knotty little man.

"Okay, smart apple!" the little man growled. "Beat it. This ain't no. . . . Hey, Sam, I didn't recognize you. Come on in and—"

"Can't, Jake," McGee said hoarsely. "Are you all alone?"

The small man grinned wolfishly. "You should ask. You think I do any entertainin' in a joint like this?"

McGee bent close and began to whisper earnestly. The small man started violently, flapping his hands in negation.

"Good tripe, Sam, you know what they'd do to me if I did. No! Not

even for a friend like you, Sam, would I—"

It took McGee ten solid minutes of impassioned oratory before he won his point. Finally the small man sighed, swore bitterly, and tagged behind McGee out to the waiting coupé.

BETWEEN them they got the body of Jonathan Mainwaring out and hauled it into the building. McGee came out a few moments later, alone, and got back into the coupé. He was breathing more easily, now, and color was coming back into his face. Before driving off, he reached down and snapped on the radio. The voice of a rapid-fire news commentator faded in as the tubes warmed.

"—Mrs. Mainwaring was alone in her room when she heard the sounds of gunshots from her husband's den downstairs. Running down the stairway, she saw her husband lying on the rug before his desk, the front of his dressing gown smeared with blood. Bending over him, gun in hand, was Samuel McGee, a private detective who has frequently been under police fire over his methods of operation. Mrs. Mainwaring positively identified McGee, whom she says has visited her husband several times recently on some mysterious business.

"At the sight of Mrs. Mainwaring, McGee snatched up the broker's body and fled with it, racing out through an open French window onto the terrace and getting away in his car. Neither Mrs. Mainwaring nor the police can offer any explanation of the mystery or the reason for the shooting. It is not even known for certain that Jonathan Mainwaring is dead, although his wife is sure that what she glimpsed so briefly was his lifeless corpse. McGee is still at large, but the object of an intensive police man-hunt. Stay tuned to this station for further developments in the myst—"

McGee swore harshly and snapped off the radio. He backed the coupé, swung around and headed south, following dark, twisting streets deep into the maze of warehouses and factories that hovered close to the railroad switch yards. Angling through

this district, he came at last to a short, quiet street lined with modest bungalows.

Driving down this street, McGee swung off and parked the coupé in the dark driveway of a warehouse a block away. Then he returned on foot, and swung in at the third bungalow from the corner.

The place was small and neat and dark. No lights showed anywhere in the little house nor in the houses on either side. McGee went around the bungalow to the garage in the rear and squinted in through the dark window. Enough light filtered in from the distant street light to show that there was no car inside. McGee grunted in satisfaction, backed into the shrubbery close by and made himself as comfortable as possible on the wet ground.

An aching hour dragged by and McGee was slowly crazy with the inactivity and the endless dropping of rain when the headlights of a car bounced down the street and turned into the drive. McGee tensed, shrinking deeper into the concealing shrubbery. He got a heavy .45 caliber automatic out of its holster under his left arm and tucked it into the pocket of his raincoat, keeping his right hand tight on the butt.

The car growled slowly up to the garage and stopped. A big, beefy man got out, hunched against the rain, and stood briefly in the beams of the headlights, fumbling with a padlock on the garage doors. The garage doors swung back, cutting off McGee's view, and the car snarled its way inside. McGee slipped out of concealment, went around the doors in a running crouch and into the garage.

When the big man shut off lights and motor and started to get out of his car, he backed right into the solid menace of McGee's gun. He stiffened, standing frozen with one foot on the concrete floor and the other still on the running board.

MCGEE could see the white blob of the man's big face swimming around slowly, trying to identify the man behind him. The private detective could feel an almost impercep-

tible quiver run up the gun to his own taut nerves, a telegraphed warning of big muscles setting themselves for explosive action.

"Don't do it, Paul," McGee said flatly, through his teeth. "I'm messed up so badly now that a little more can't matter. Come out the rest of the way slow and easy."

"You!" Homicide Inspector Paul Eldritch's voice sounded thick and strangled. "You won't get away with this!"

"I am getting away with it." McGee snapped as his fumbling left hand found and snatched the big detective's gun. "You can relax, now. All I want is to talk a few minutes while you listen. I knew you'd be home about midnight, even with your family away on a visit, so I came here and waited for you."

"You murdering rat!" Eldritch spat furiously. "This is one trick you won't wiggle out of. This time you'll fit the chair and there won't be any ifs or ands about it. We've got the town sewed up so tight you'll be nabbed the minute you—"

"I haven't been so far," McGee interrupted dryly. "And for the record, I didn't kill Jonathan Mainwaring."

"Then he is dead?"

"You'll get the answer to that one when I'm ready to give it. Nobody's tried to—to make any trouble for Mrs. Mainwaring yet, have they?"

"Trouble?" Eldritch bellowed. "Nobody but you, you—you snake. Seeing you shoot down her poor, defenseless husband and then snatch his body—"

"I *didn't* shoot him!" McGee raged. "And she didn't even see him shot. All she saw was a poor, dumb Irishman sticking his neck out, to save her life."

"Listen, Sam." Eldritch's tone grew wheedling. "What's this all about anyhow? Why'd you go there in the first place? What have you done with that man's body? You got some screwball idea in your noggin, I suppose, but it's the kind of an idea'll get you burned, sure as guns!"

"It might, at that," McGee agreed soberly. "Listen, Paul, while I tell you what happened. You won't be-

lieve it, but listen anyhow. Ten days ago, Jonathan Mainwaring hired me to guard him from attempted murder—"

"Who'd he think was gonna knock him off?" Eldritch barked.

"Hilda Mainwaring—his wife."

"Wh-a-at? Why you low-down. . . . Trying to throw the blame on that poor, grieving—"

"Shut up!" McGee snarled harshly. "I'm only telling you what he told me. His wife talked him into taking out a half-million-dollar paid-up life insurance policy two weeks ago. She argued that it was the only safe investment with conditions the way they are today and Mainwaring did it. The half-million was and is payable to his wife. Mainwaring didn't think anything of that until, a few days later, he accidentally opened some of his wife's mail and found it was all answers to her inquiries about steamship tickets and chinchilla coats and Pierce Arrow cars and the like. When he handed the letters to her, she denied knowing anything about them or ever making the inquiries."

ELDRITCH growled something unintelligible.

"Go on, scum," he spat then.

"Mainwaring was a rabby little Homer Feep kind of guy, outside of business hours, but he loved his wife. He tried to shut out his suspicions, but they wouldn't shut. Then, to top it, a man calls him at his office and says to tell Mrs. Mainwaring she can get a special bargain on some jewelry she was pricing. Mainwaring carried the word home and again his wife denied ever hearing of the firm or the jewelry."

"You mean," Eldritch said heavily, "she got him to take out insurance for half a million slugs and then started getting set to spend it before she whittled him off?"

"That's how it looked. Mainwaring was scared and sick, but he wouldn't go to the police. Instead, he came to me, begging not for protection for himself but for me to figure some way to break up the scheme before his wife got into trouble. He still was thinking only of her."

"So what did you do?"

"Investigated a little," McGee shrugged. "It sounded crazy and after I saw Hilda Mainwaring, I was sure it was a sour pie. You've seen her. She's one of the sweetest, finest little ladies on earth. Nobody could imagine her as a killer. At least I couldn't and I told Mainwaring so. I tried to quit and he raised the ante to keep me on. I stuck a few more days, with no signs of trouble, and went out there tonight to tell him I was all washed up."

"So," Eldritch broke in, "you got to arguing and he called you some names and maybe made a pass at you so you grabbed out your rod—"

"Don't be an ass," McGee snarled. "I got there and followed him into his den to talk. He stepped in first and some guy outside opened up through the window. At least two shots got Mainwaring and knocked him back into me. Before I could untangle and snatch my own gun, the guy had vanished. Then Mrs. Mainwaring appeared and like a flash, I saw the whole dirty frameup. So I snatched—"

"Like a flash," Eldritch growled sarcastically. "You and your flashes. Of all the phony gags I ever heard—"

"All right," McGee rapped suddenly. "The devil with you. I didn't figure you'd hear me out. I'm going to play it my own way and let you eat dirt when its over. So long, sucker."

"Wait, Sam!" Eldritch caught at McGee's arm, swinging him back. "Look, I'm sorry I butted in. Go on and spill the rest."

"Okay. Here's the way the whole thing came to me. Somebody on the outside put a bug in Mrs. Mainwaring's ear about the insurance. They sold her such a bill of goods that she sold her husband, figuring it was the right thing. When he took out the insurance, that set the stage. After that, this outsider went ahead with phony inquiries to big firms, using Mrs. Mainwaring's name and fixing it so the answers would get to her husband, apparently by accident."

"But, why? Why? It don't make a bit of sense, Sam."

"Why? You ape, to make Mainwaring suspect his wife and go to the police, that's why. He'd go to you and you'd do just what I did—snoop around, tell him he was crazy and forget the whole thing. Then he'd really get killed and you'd say 'Ah-ha' and pull her in."

"Eldritch sank onto the running board, holding his head."

"So we pull her in and who collects any insurance?" he groaned. "You know darn well insurance companies won't pay off if the beneficiary's supposed to have bumped the policy holder, you dope."

"Sure. But it wouldn't take you more than a few days at the most to run into a stone wall on your investigation. You couldn't pin anything on her because there'd be nothing to pin. You'd let her go and she'd collect the insurance."

"So what?" Eldritch growled beligerently.

MCGEE snorted, as if in derision at Eldritch's ignorance.

"So whoever's behind the scheme," he said, "forces her to hand over the money, telling her he has *proof* she killed her husband, and making the frame look so good that it scares her into doing as he says. Then he kills her, making it look like suicide, and leaving a fake suicide note confessing the murder of her husband. Maybe he even burns up a pile of dollar bills and says in the note that her conscience nagged her until she destroyed the blood money. That would close the case forever. Murder solved, guilty party punished and money accounted for. The real killer would be absolutely in the clear, with half a million to spend as he pleased and nobody to trip him up."

"That," Eldritch gusted, "is absolutely the most outlandish pipe dream I ever heard. You've done a whale of a lot of talking but you still don't give any reason for beating it off with Mainwaring's corpse."

"You're sitting on your brains again," McGee said wearily. "Look, sonny boy. Without the corpse you can't prove death, can you? All right, and until you can prove Mainwaring's

death, the insurance company won't pay off. So I'm standing between somebody and a half-million take, and Mrs. Mainwaring's in the clear. The killer had a good scheme, but I made it back-fire. Sure Mainwaring's dead—as dead as your imagination—but nobody'll know it officially until the guy who killed him is dead or behind bars. You want to make something of it?"

Eldritch tugged at his thinning hair. "When I think how peaceful crime was before *you* opened shop!" he mumbled. "So who's behind this carnival of murder you got so beautifully doped out, Screwball? How you gonna trip the murderer?"

"It's between three men," McGee said thoughtfully. "When I walked into the murder tonight, I got a flash of this idea and worked by instinct when I snatched the body. Most of this I reconstructed afterward when I had time to think. At first it was simply that nobody had any other reason to kill Mainwaring. He was such a harmless, likable little guy, with no enemies and his business competely on the square. That was why I jumped to this idea of why he was killed. Then, thinking back, I figured who might be behind it.

"For one, there's a fellow named Ashley, the insurance agent who wrote the policy. He'd insured Hilda Mainwaring before and was a frequent caller there. Then there's Lofting, Mainwaring's lawyer, who was an old family friend and the guy she jilted to marry Mainwaring. The third possibility is Luger, the family doctor. When Mainwaring first came to me, he'd been doing some nosing and had found out that either Luger or Lofting suggested the insurance. He thought Ashley, the agent, hadn't been brought in until afterward, though nobody's in a better spot to plan such a deal than the guy who sold the policy."

"All right," Eldritch said briskly, getting to his feet. "You maybe got something, at that, Mac. I'll put men to work on all three of 'em right away. You hand in Mainwaring's body and I'll call off the hounds. Of course, you'll have to sit in jail for a couple

of days but if this works out like you got it doped, I'll see you get clear."

"Oh, no," McGee cried violently. "You don't slap my pants in any jailhouse while you investigate. The guy behind this will be too clever to leave holes, and I'll wind up behind the usual eight ball. There's only one way to get the killer. I keep the body of Mainwaring and use it to smoke out the guilty rat. He'll be desperate to get his hands on that corpse."

"You crazy mick!" Eldritch bawled furiously. "You play ball my way or I'll send you over if it's the last thing I do! Either come down with me now or I'll have a 'shoot-to-kill' broadcast on you and put every reserve cop in town on—"

"I was afraid you'd be stubborn."

SAM MCGEE sighed regretfully. His left fist balled and came up from his side. Eldritch heard the sharp rustle of McGee's raincoat as the blow started. He tried to dodge and succeeded only in ramming his big square jaw straight into the punch. He sighed explosively and went down in a heap.

McGee rummaged around the garage, found a coil of clothesline rope and used it effectively. Finally he gagged the inspector and rolled his limp form into a corner.

"A fine cop you are," McGee snorted at the deaf ears. "You forgot to tell me I was under arrest."

He climbed into the inspector's small sedan, kicked over the motor and backed out the driveway into the street. Ten minutes of tortuous driving along twisted streets brought him to the south edge of the city. He turned onto a small, rutted country road and drove steadily until the road ended suddenly at the edge of a cavernous pit.

McGee got out and stood for a moment, staring down into the pit. It had stopped raining, now, and the lightening sky reflected on the gleam of water far below. Off to one side, the headlights caught the gaunt framework of a steam shovel and the towering bulk of sifting screens.

This was a clay pit, the only one of its kind in that part of the country,

from which a local pottery manufacturer dug a peculiar shade of red clay for the making of vases and lamps. It was deserted at this hour of the night, with not even a watchman on duty.

McGee stood for a moment, staring grimly down at the blackness of the pit. Then he gingerly let himself over the edge, slid down the greasy clay slope for a few yards and scrambled back up. When he reached the top, he was a mess. His pants legs and raincoat were liberally smeared with red clay and his feet were merely shapeless blobs of the same substance.

McGee spent twenty minutes cleaning himself off, removing the worst of the accumulation. Then he got back into Eldritch's car and drove rapidly back into the city.

He stopped presently beside a white house, set back from a wide street. A small illuminated sign on the lawn bore the name "J. L. Luger, M. D." There were lights on in the house, despite the lateness of the hour, and a big sedan was parked in the driveway.

McGee hesitated, scowling. Finally he shifted his gun back to his side pocket, went up over the lawn and rang the bell.

Presently a light came on overhead. The door opened, framing a chubby man with a black Vandyke beard and gold-rimmed spectacles. He stared at McGee's gaunt, mud-smeared figure and his lips tightened.

"Yes-s-s?"

"You Doc Luger?" McGee growled.

"I am. What is wrong? An accident, perhaps?"

"Not yet, Doc," McGee said grimly. "But any minute, now, if you don't behave. Scram along inside and don't beef."

He jammed his gun into the chubby man's paunch and pushed. The pressure of the gun and McGee's menacing attitude drove the bearded man backward. McGee followed him into a white-trimmed entry hall, kicked the door shut with one muddy heel, and jerked his head toward a lighted doorway down the hall.

"In there, Doc. And don't get any ideas. This thing goes *bang* and somebody gets hurt every time."

"What—what's the meaning of this intrusion, sir?" Luger found his voice. "Put that weapon down or I shall call the police."

"What's wrong, John?" A slim, immaculate, gray-haired man suddenly appeared in the hall doorway, his eyes widening at the sight of McGee and the gun. "Shall I call for help?"

"Go ahead," McGee suggested gently, moving the gun. "Try it, friend." He jerked his head toward Luger. "Who's this monkey, Doc?"

"I," the slim man said frigidly, "am Cyrus Lofting, attorney-at-law. I demand to know the meaning of this outrage!"

"Lofting!" McGee's breath gusted out and a grin tugged at his wide lips. "This is just perfect. Inside, you two, and don't crowd to see who gets shot. If you behave, nobody will."

HE FORCED the two furious men ahead of him, into a comfortable, book-lined den, slapped a careless hand over their pockets, then nudged them down into chairs. McGee himself took a stand in the center of the floor, gun in hand, face twisted in an ugly snarl.

"The sawbones and the mouthpiece. This is fine." His lips twisted in a crooked grin. "You want to see Mainwaring again?"

He shot that question out suddenly, harshly, studying them narrowly. Both men started violently and wariness came into their eyes.

"Yeah, I'm Sam McGee, if that's what you're thinking. Screwball McGee—Eight Ball McGee. The only guy in this whole town who knows where Mainwaring is right this minute."

"Wh-where is he?" Dr. Luger choked, bending forward. "Is he badly hurt? What have you done with him? I've got to see him. He may need medical—"

"Anything he needs," McGee cut in flatly, "I'll give him. If you want to see Jonathan Mainwaring again, start digging."

"Digging?" Lofting echoed blankly.

"Digging—deep into the bankroll, shyster. I've got Mainwaring and I'm keeping him until some of his pals

want to see him bad enough to dig up twenty-five grand."

"You—you scoundrel!" Lofting burst out furiously. "Don't you realize that kidnaping is a capital offense? You'll go to the chair for this!"

"Just remember that," — McGee grinned nastily—"when you get any ideas about tricking me. I can't fry any browner for knocking off a couple of dopes who got in my way. Are you going to play ball?"

"It's murder!" Luger cried hoarsely. "Jonathan was wounded. He may die for want of medical aid."

"If you love him so," McGee sneered, "buy him back and get to work, Doc. It's all up to you."

"But we can't raise twenty-five thousand dollars in a minute!"

"That's okay." McGee shrugged expansively. "I'll give you until noon tomorrow. If you spill to the cops or try to cross me, you'll never see Mainwaring again. I got him at a place where nobody'll ever find him—dead or alive. You raise the dough and I'll phone you at noon tomorrow and tell you where to leave it. Now sit tight and behave yourselves. I'm leaving and you'd better not try to stop me."

He stood in the doorway a moment, studying their furious faces. Then, with a mocking salute, he spun around and ran out of the house. No one followed or tried to stop him.

Ten minutes later, McGee drew up in front of an imposing apartment building. It was the type using an automatic elevator and at this hour, the lobby was deserted. McGee barged boldly in, consulted the directory, then took the stairs to the third floor. At the door of three-ten he leaned on the button and waited, hearing the muted whine of the buzzer inside.

After several minutes he heard shuffling steps beyond the panels and the door slid open, to frame a heavy-eyed man in striped pajamas and blue dressing gown. The man's sleepy eyes slid over McGee and down to the gun in his hand. Abruptly the sleepiness vanished, replaced by startled fear.

"You Ashley, the insurance peddler?" McGee growled.

"Y-yes, I'm—"

"Then inside, lug. I want to talk to you."

DRIVING the scared salesman backward, McGee slammed the door and jerked his head at a chair.

"I'll make this short and sweet, guy. You know what happened to Mainwaring tonight, don't you? Okay, I'm Sam McGee." He waited, watching Ashley's eyes flick over his mud-smeared clothing. "You know who I am and you know I'm tough and desperate. I got me a new wrinkle and I need you to help me play it, see. I've got Mainwaring in a safe place and he ain't too badly knocked around. If he gets fixed up soon enough, he might live. If he lives, your company doesn't have to pay out half a million bucks in cold cash. If he kicks off, you're stuck. So how much is it worth to keep your trap shut and buy him back, all in one piece?"

"I—I—" Ashley wet his lips, swallowed noisily, and tried again. "I don't—I mean, I never heard of such a thing. You want the Pinnacle Insurance Company to pay ransom for one of their policy holders to keep him from being killed?"

"Right," McGee barked crisply. "You pay twenty-five grand or you pay half a million. Make up your minds—but make 'em up fast. If anybody beefs to the law about this, Mainwaring dies and your outfit has to pay. I'll give you until noon tomorrow to work it out. I'll phone you here, at noon. If you want to save four hundred and seventy-five grand, it's your only chance."

"I—I'll talk it over with them," Ashley said.

"Don't strain a tonsil doing it," McGee growled, and turned to the door. "Remember, one phony play anywhere along the line and Mainwaring is all through. I get the same chair if I'm caught, whether he lives or dies, so I've got nothing to lose."

He went out, slamming the door.

In the sticky, ink-black darkness that preceded dawn, McGee crouched in the mud beside the little supply shanty on the edge of the red clay pit. His gun was in his hand and every

nerve in his body was wire-tight with a tension that put an aching sickness in the pit of his stomach.

This was the payoff. He had stuck his neck out to the limit, now. If his scheme failed, it was the electric chair for Sam McGee, and no fooling about it.

He had Jonathan Mainwaring's body and he had attempted extortion. Whatever his motive, those were the incontrovertible facts as the law would see them.

And from those facts, a jury could deduce only one answer— "We find the defendant, Samuel McGee, guilty as charged!"

Suddenly the tension flowed out of McGee's body, leaving him cold and ready. Somewhere, off in the near darkness, a faint splash had betrayed an incautious footstep. Someone was coming, walking quietly through the night.

His scheme was working! But so much still depended on the soundness of McGee's guesses—and it was all crazy guesswork.

QUIETLY McGee stood up close to the wall, waiting. Now that he was listening in the right direction, he heard other tiny sounds. The figure was coming closer, closer.

Without warning it was there—a blacker blackness at the door of the shanty. McGee could hear muted breathing, then the soft scrape of metal against wood. He tensed himself, lifted the gun and leaped at the dark figure.

He slammed into a thick, muscular body. There was a quick grunt of surprise and the body jerked furiously. McGee felt the cold hardness of a gun and slapped it away with his left hand, an instant before its flaming thunder split the night. Cursing, McGee wrestled with his unknown victim, slipping and splashing through the rain-soaked clay. He was clinging to the man's gun hand, fighting to keep the gun from exploding again, and his adversary was clinging with equal desperation to McGee's gun. Neither spoke a word beyond grunted profanity.

Suddenly McGee's foot slipped and

he started skidding. The movement help jerked his own gun hand free. He fell onto the body before him and slammed the barrel of his gun at a spot where he figured the head would be. It connected with a solid, satisfying *thock*. The squirming body went limp and McGee fell on it. This time he used his free hand to locate the unseen head and struck it again, hard enough to insure a long period of inactivity.

Then, grunting and panting, McGee kicked open the shack door and dragged his victim inside. With the door shut, he struck a cautious match and stared at the blank face of the man he had jumped. A gasping curse rushed out of his lungs.

He was staring at a square, reddish, totally unfamiliar face. For a moment, a sick sense of failure flooded McGee. He had banked his life on a desperate gamble and had failed.

Suddenly he lit another match and fumbled at the stranger's pocket, turning out a sheaf of papers and a small, black case. He looked inside the case and the sickness went out of his nerves. It bore the card with the name, "Martin Eckson, Insurance Investigator." McGee got up suddenly, blowing out the match.

"One down and two to go," he whispered softly. "The killer had better be one of those two, or . . ."

He started to turn away and swung his face full into the beam of an electric torch that suddenly flamed at him from the doorway. He had left the shack door ajar when he dragged the insurance investigator inside and this other man had slipped up to it without a betraying sound.

The flash beam caught McGee flatfooted. He blinked at it for a dazed moment while a man's voice, harsh and scratchy with tension, cried:

"There you are, you murdering kidnaper!"

The words were still coming from the unseen lips when the gun went off. It flamed behind the light and something like a padded hammer slammed into McGee's shoulder and spun him around. He felt his own gun go flying across the shack, then he

was sinking down onto his knees, scrabbling for it with his left hand.

The man with the flashlight came leaping forward and crashed into him, sending lances of pain through McGee's wounded shoulder. He went over backward, using his knees and his left hand to fight off the kicking, clawing fury of the attack. He was weak and dizzy from the wound, but he managed to get leverage for his knees and force the other man back so that he could swing a solid punch with his left hand.

The punch connected and the flashlight went rolling across the floor. McGee reared up, following his advantage, and punched again. The man grunted and rolled away from him.

A face flopped into the wash of the light and McGee's breath caught as he saw the unmistakable dark Vanddyke beard of Dr. J. L. Luger, the Mainwaring's personal physician.

Luger still held the nickel-plated pistol with which he had shot McGee, but he was dozey from the blows, and slow getting up. McGee reared forward and punched again. The doctor went out for keeps.

"That ties it," McGee panted, struggling to his feet and using the flashlight to find his own gun. "Now for the payoff."

Weak and dizzy, he struggled across the shack and stumbled out into the darkness. He had taken two steps across the wet clay when his knees suddenly gave out and he went down.

HE WAS still pitching forward when bright lights stabbed out from all sides, pinning him pitilessly in their glare. McGee knew the lights were on him and that men were pounding forward, but all he could do was sit in the mud and sob harshly. Then machine-guns in the hands of the sharply halting men were on him.

"You're covered, McGee!" It was Inspector Eldritch's voice, lashing at him out of the darkness. "One move and you'll be blasted! Throw away your gun."

McGee moved weakly and the gun tumbled into the mud. Then Eldritch and half a dozen of his men in plain

clothes, followed by uniformed officers were swarming over and around him, covering him with machine-guns and pistols and automatic rifles as Eldritch slapped at his clothing.

"You crazy Irishman, you've really fixed yourself now!" shouted Eldritch. "I almost believed your insane yarn back there until you knocked me out. Then, when I came to and worked myself loose, I found out about your going to Mainwaring's friends with a ransom demand and—"

"Sitting—on your—brains," McGee gasped, then he managed a twisted grin. "You dope, I—"

"Hey, Inspector!" One of the uniformed men was racing back from an inspection of the shack. "Mainwaring ain't there, but two other guys are—Doc Luger and an investigator named Eckson from Pinnacle Insurance."

"Luger?" Eldritch whirled, staring at McGee's grinning face through narrowed eyes. "Irish, what's behind this, anyhow? What was Luger doing out—"

"Who called you?" McGee cut in, recovering some of his strength. "Lofting, the lawyer, wasn't it?"

"Of course it was," Eldritch snapped. "He's right here with us now. Luger fell for your scheme and wanted to raise the money to save Mainwaring. Lofting did the right thing, though. He came straight to the police and told the whole story."

"That's right, McGee," Lofting himself snapped, pushing his white face into the circle of light. "You ought to know better than to expect an attorney, sworn to uphold the law, to play along with your schemes."

"You dope," McGee growled, grinning at Eldritch. "Lofting's the guy who shot Mainwaring. I got a good look at him as he fired through the window but I didn't know who he was, then. Later, when I went around calling, I saw him and recognized him instantly as the killer I'd seen shooting lead into Mainwaring."

"That's a lie!" Lofting yelled furiously, his face contorted with rage. "You were out of sight in the hall—"

He stopped short, catching at the

words, staring wildly around at the circle of gaping faces.

"That was what McGee himself told me, tonight," he creaked hoarsely. "He said he'd been out in the hall so he couldn't see the killer. He—"

McGee laughed harshly. "That won't buy you anything in court, Paul, but it points the way. You can see he's the guilty rat, Inspector, and with that to go on you'll be able to dig up evidence enough to burn him. Of course I didn't get a look at the killer, or I wouldn't have gone out on a limb like I did tonight. I had to smoke him out the hard way—and I did."

"But—but Luger and that detective—" Eldritch cried, bewildered.

"My brains," McGee said modestly. "I called on all three suspects with a wild yarn. But I first came out here and daubed myself with red clay. It's the only red clay in this section and I took good care to parade around where they'd notice it. I could just see their eyes glitter when they spotted my 'carelessness.' This *would* make a good hide-out, so each one figured I had Mainwaring hidden out here at the clay pit. I wanted them to think that so their reactions would betray the guilty one. But I made it definite that any police interference would get Mainwaring killed.

"Ashley and Doc Luger both wanted Mainwaring found alive, if possible, so they kept away from the police. Luger showed the most nerve by coming out alone to try to 'rescue' his friend. Ashley brought in a clever

insurance detective. But Lofting, here, didn't want Mainwaring found alive. All he wanted was his corpse located, to establish evidence of death so the insurance money would be paid. So Lofting went straight to the cops—and wrote his ticket to the chair."

ELDRITCH clenched his fists and looked at the sky.

"By heck," he groaned. "By heck, he's done it again. I get that Irish imbecile ticketed for the last walk and he wiggles out of . . . Watch him!"

Lofting, taking advantage of momentary inattention, was whirling away in a desperate bid for freedom. He kneed one bluecoat, butted another, and sprang out of the light.

A policeman off to one side raised his Tommy-gun. It stuttered for a second and something heavy and limp went crashing down into the deep clay pit to land with a splash far below. There were no further sounds of movement.

Eldritch mopped his forehead.

"Oh, well. That's the only kind of a trial where you can't fix the jury. Listen, you Screwball, where is Mainwaring's body? We've torn the town apart tonight—"

McGee laughed. "You always said the only friend I had in town was Jake, the morgue keeper, Paul. Jake was a real friend, tonight. He helped me undress Mainwaring's corpse, ticketed it as a floater out of the river, and stuck it in the John Doe cooler at the police morgue."

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SHE WHO LAUGHED LAST

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*A Cruel Circe Searches the World
to Find One Man Who Would
Refuse to Look Into Her Eyes—
and Become an Animal*

I DIDN'T sleep well that night. A man my age seldom sleeps well. Captain Emery's raving and groaning in the next room kept me awake. But I couldn't understand a word he said. Maybe there were no words, maybe they were foreign. The man had traveled and studied a lot.

I finally dozed off, but a while later a scream woke me up. I propped myself on my elbow and looked out. The moon was high over the sea, and lighted our grounds brightly. Near the park wall a girl was running—running fast.

She screamed again. Not so loud this time. Perhaps she didn't want to wake up the "Home," or maybe she was so frightened her throat was tight. I couldn't say. But right away I found an explanation. That girl must be the new gate-keeper's wife. The fellow

A head, with short, curved horns was floating over a bush

must have been drinking again, and was chasing her.

She disappeared behind the lilacs then, and I would have forgotten all about it, except that all at once I thought I saw a head with a pair of short, curved horns floating over a bush. After that something awfully low and broad streaked after her across an open space.

Funny, the way those shadows will take queer shapes at night, I told myself, and waited for her to show up from around the shrubbery. But she never did. The gate-keeper must have caught up with her, I decided, and had taken her back to his house.

But the memory of those "shadows" kept me thinking. If it weren't for my bum leg I'd have got up to take a look, but I couldn't. And I didn't feel like waking anybody else, just to make a fool of myself by butting in on a family squabble. I finally fell asleep.

...

IN the morning Yorgo Sarafoglou came to help me up. That leg of mine where a shark had stripped some muscle is all right once I'm on it, but getting up by myself is impossible.

"Did you hear anything queer last night, Yorgo?" I asked him.

"If you mean Captain Emery's raving, Captain Williams, I sure did. Couldn't understand any of it though, except the name of a woman he kept repeating. Sounded Greek to me."

I thought Yorgo was joking, seeing how he's Greek himself, and I meant to tell him a dying man's a poor joke. But what kind of humor can you expect from a man who's been a cook on a sponging schooner? "Calm Bay Home" for disabled sailors disregards former rankings. We got to tolerate each other. Besides, Yorgo had seemed dead serious when he said it.

"There's something else," he added, dusting off my uniform with his one good arm. "I'm not supposed to tell you, but you'd find out anyway. There's been a murder. The gate-keeper's wife."

"The gate-keeper's done it," I said with conviction.

"Nope, Captain Williams. The guy was drinking with the janitor and the

cook when it happened. Perfect alibi. Besides, a man didn't kill her. No man could have—like that."

"What do you mean?" I said, and something cold began to crawl up my spine.

"She's horribly ripped to shreds. Ripped by animal tusks. A big animal, the policeman said, after he covered her up. The tusks were no less than three inches long, and sharp. Not even the cap could guess what it might've been. And there are queer prints we found on the path and the beach. Cloven feet, Captain. As I live and breathe. Real big ones." He looked at me sort of confidentially. "You suppose the Sea Devil come back? I've heard—"

"Sea Devil, my eye!"

I hobbled past him to the refectory. I meant to tell Commissioner Guire of what I'd seen in the night, and I wanted to ask Doc Gillen how Emery was. But Guire was out, probably with the police, and Doc Gillen started talking before I could ask him anything.

"You're a pretty good friend of Emery's, Captain Williams," he said. "You should call on him."

"Is he any better, Doc?"

Right away I knew that was a dumb question. How can you expect a man to get better when he's eighty, and sclerosis plugs his veins up with lime, till his legs get to swelling bigger and bigger, and he's too weak to stand an operation?

The doc shook his head. "You may cheer him up a bit, now that he's conscious. Try it, anyway."

I figured what I had to tell the commissioner would keep, while Emery maybe wouldn't. So I got Captain Gustafson—at Calm Bay we're all captains—to come with me to see the sick man.

We didn't know it then, but Doc Gillen had been wrong. Emery wasn't conscious. He couldn't have been, judging by the crazy yarn he told us. At least, that's what Gustafson thinks. I'm not so sure.

When we came in Miss Stenger, the nurse, was propping Emery's shrunken body in the hammock bed he'd woven himself. His eyes were closed as always, for he was blind.

Only today the scars over his lids and sockets stood out red and ugly with fever.

"Morning, Captain Williams—how are you, Captain Gustafson?" he greeted us weakly.

It gave me the creeps to think that this blind man could tell us from six hundred others by our tread only. I hobbled to a chair where his blue uniform with foul-anchor buttons was hanging. Gustafson cupped his big hands where his ears used to be, one ripped off by a Spanish bullet at Manila, the other by a yataghan on the Mediterranean. He would hear a bit better this way, but not too good.

I tried to think of something cheerful to say.

"Understand you was having dreams last night, Captain Emery. Talking with a lady friend most of the time."

I had to say it loud for Gustafson's sake, and because the sea was beating hard at the cliffs right past Emery's window.

The sick man jerked up. And all at once I knew it was the wrong thing to say. His thin hands started shaking all over the hammock cover of his own scrimshaw work.

"A lady!" he screeched, and there was something queer, birdlike in his voice. "Did I call her? What was her name? No! No! For God's sake, don't say it! Don't ever mention it!"

Miss Stenger came toward him, but he was already quiet. His head slipped down on the pillow, and now I saw how his face had swollen overnight, making his small hooked nose look even smaller, sharper. Like a beak.

"It's over," he whispered. "All over. Give me death. Quick, clean death. Before she—"

The sea drowned the rest. The sea that had maimed us, and cast us like useless jetsam here into Calm Bay, was still reaching for us, trying to destroy us.

"Don't ever mention her, men," Emery moaned. "Don't ever call her name. If you do, she'll come, and you. . . . But you won't. Not after I tell you about her. You won't dare then."

He paused, as if listening to the sea, or to Miss Stenger's even breathing

from the arm-chair. She was asleep there already after the night's vigil. He started to talk, then. And this is the story he told. . . .

I WAS on the *Principessa*, under Captain Noregard. It doesn't matter how I got on her. I've been a lot of places since I ran away from the divinity school in Boston. Too much Latin, too much Greek in school for me. Out I went, and kept going till I found myself on the *Principessa*.

She flew the Rumanian flag and had a steady run between Constantinople and Piraeus in Greece, and what she carried for cargo only her captain knew. You'd see him bring on a small box in the Golden Horn at Constantinople. Then we'd nose her through the Marmora and the Dardanelles into the Aegean.

In Piraeus he'd walk off the ship with that box. That was all. I used to wonder about it. Smuggled jewelry, opium—you couldn't tell. But I got paid well for tending the steam engine. That was one of the first steam engines on those waters.

Everything went smoothly till one spring night a Turkish coast guard took after us. A funny hybrid, with one stack and three masts. Maybe she could have caught us, maybe not. Anyway, she fired a four-pounder across our bow.

Noregard yelled for full speed ahead and turned south. A cold wind was blowing in from the Black Sea, chasing up thick yellow fog. You know how many islands there are in the south Aegean. We could have hidden among them from the whole British fleet, except that after awhile the coast guard fired again—a lucky shot. We didn't have time enough to find out if it was our boiler explosion that killed most of the crew, or if the shell did. There wasn't time to think.

We took to the life-boat, all that was left of us. Captain Noregard, a Greek stoker, a fat Turk who kept counting amber beads and mumbling, an Armenian about as young as I was, but taller, and myself. The Greek and I took the first shift at the oars. The skipper was at the helm, but you could

tell he didn't know where he was going and didn't care as long as he got away from the coast guard.

All night we rowed, bailing out what the waves splashed in over the gun-wales. By morning we saw the island. It wasn't big. Mostly green, coppery rock and, like on all of them, some Judas trees in bloom, and wild grapes beyond the beach.

"What place is this?" I asked.

Noregard couldn't tell, but just then we turned a small peninsula, and the Greek stoker got up, his hairy hand pointed at something on the shore, and it seemed as if his face turned to ice suddenly, so white and blue it got. I looked where he pointed. There wasn't much to see. A tiny chapel hewed right in the rock, small columns, steps, and all. You could see such columns, only bigger, lying all over the Acropolis, and the Aegean islands are full of old Greek shrines.

Just then the Greek began to screech:

"Not here, Captain! Turn back! Don't land here!"

That was darn queer, asking us to turn back to the coast guard, and the sea that was swelling. And us with neither food nor water.

"Sit down, Nick," the captain said.

But it was plain that the Greek was out of his head. He jumped at Noregard and tried to tear him away from the rudder. And all the time he was yelling, "Turn back!" and looking at the shrine.

NOREGARD tried to push him off, but you can't argue with insanity. The third time Nick came up at the captain, the captain's gun came up faster. The Greek splashed backward into a wave. His head bobbed up once. I'd expected him to scream or beg or fight, but that big face of his was smiling. He said, "Thanks, Captain," and went under for good.

We landed right after that. Not by the shrine, but farther toward the village that showed up, stuck to the cliffs. The people who lived there must have heard Noregard's shot, for men were piling out, and then we knew we were in for it.

Lazzes, every last one of them, descendants of the Levantine corsairs. You could tell by the red sashes they wore, with knives and flintlock pistols stuck in. A mean breed, fishing only when they couldn't rob.

They came toward us, slowly and silently. The captain reached for his gun, but still they kept coming. There was one funny thing about that crowd—it wasn't made up of men alone. Their animals were mixed in. Shoulder to shoulder with the Lazzes stalked their horses and dogs and cats. It gave us the creeps to see them slinking along without a sound.

The captain had his gun out when suddenly a young bull broke loose from among them and charged full speed at us, his horns low. We turned and ran along the beach, all four of us. The young Armenian was first, then the Turk and I. Noregard, the oldest, was behind. The crowd wasn't silent now. Howling, barking, neighing, men and animals tore after us.

It couldn't last long, not with the animals running us down. A big black dog tangled with my feet. I plowed headfirst into the sand, turned over just in time to give him a chance to spring at my throat. Noregard fired, and the dog went up squealing. There was no fight left in him when he hit the ground. His squeal changed to a low moan that sounded funny for a dog.

I started running again, with Noregard's bullets whistling past me as he tried to stop the bull. The Turk was tearing the biggest cat I've ever seen off his fat neck.

I glanced back to see how close the pack was, and something colder than fear squeezed at my stomach. Where the wounded dog had fallen now there was a man, groaning and jerking. Maybe the captain's bullet had got him and he had fallen there on top of the animal. But the bull was too close behind me to think about it any more.

The crowd, beasts and men, had formed a crescent, the fastest of them at the points, trying to close in on us, pressing us toward the peninsula. They would have cornered us there easily, except that the little temple caught the young Armenian's eye. I

don't know what power guided him to it, but there he ran, and we followed.

And then, all of a sudden, laughter came to us over the howling pursuit. A woman's laughter. She was standing between the columns at the shrine's portico. I've never seen anyone stop so fast as those Lazzes stopped. They fell to their knees. That is, the men did. The animals just stopped, looking at the men who were continuously beating salaams on the sand.

The woman started down the stairway, still laughing, her eyes on the Armenian. I slowed down. Maybe I was too tired to run fast, maybe something warned me not to approach that woman. I can't tell. I only knew I wished then that I were back in the divinity school, studying dead languages and theology.

She was close to the Armenian. No one said a word. We were too breathless from our flight, too breathless from this beauty of hers. She wore a single white robe that fell in folds, covering her feet, so that she seemed to float instead of walk. And she was tall, taller than I, and blond, which is rare for the Levant these days.

We looked into her eyes, as blue as the Aegean water where the ship's screw churns it. So beautiful they were that we didn't even see all the evil in them—not till later. The Lazzes were still salaaming behind us, but we'd nearly forgotten about them.

The woman began speaking. I didn't catch on at first. But it came to me suddenly. She was speaking, Greek. No, not the jargon in which the money changers in Constantinople try to outshout each other. This was the old Homeric Greek, the Greek of the heroes and the gods.

I guess I was the only one who could understand.

"You run fast," she said to the Armenian, and her eyes were burning into the lad. "Fast and graceful—like an antelope."

Then she smiled at him and started backing away. There was nothing on his face but admiration. Without a word he followed her up the stone stairway and through the portico.

They disappeared inside. We could hear their voices, hers laughing, his imploring.

Captain Noregard tried to smile at me.

"Love at first sight," he said, and I knew from the twisted grin, from the unsteadiness of his voice, that he was jealous enough to curse.

"I wonder who she is?" I remarked. "Do you suppose she's a priestess of some kind?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and just then the Armenian's voice in the temple stopped. In its place sharp sounds came to us, like the clicking of hard hoofs upon the stones.

"I'm wet and hungry," the fat Turk said. "Do you think she'd feed us if we asked?"

"We can see," said Noregard. "Let's go in."

It was a good idea for, with the woman's disappearance, the Lazzes got up from their knees and they and their animals came closer.

But we didn't find her. We thought she might have gone to a grove of olives that we could see on the other side of the temple, past a stone fountain. From the marble basin below that fountain a big antelope, the kind with short, curved horns, was drinking.

"You run fast—like an antelope." The woman's words came back to me as I watched the graceful creature. I guess he was the tamest antelope I've ever seen. He just looked up at our approach, then came to us. It gave me the creeps, the way he stared, and it set me thinking.

The Turk reached for his knife.

"Maybe a steak, Captain?" He waited for approval.

SOMETHING worse than seasickness hit my stomach at his words. I grabbed his arm as the animal looked at me. Those eyes—I never could forget them! There was so much sadness in them they seemed ready to cry.

The captain saw it too. "Let's wait for her," he said. "The Lazzes aren't coming any closer. Maybe the place is taboo for them. We'll ask the woman about grub when she comes

back. I hope she comes soon."

Poor, foolish Captain Noregard. He didn't know what he was hoping for.

I sat on a stone and the antelope came to me. It made me feel funny, the way he nuzzled at my shoulder, as if he were trying to tell me something. I was thinking of the things I'd studied back in school, and watching the fat Turk. But the hunger had gone out of his pudgy face as he looked at the animal. And slowly fear crept into his eyes. Maybe he, too, had read the *Odyssey*. Maybe someone had told him of the witch who changed Ulysses' men into beasts.

But what was I thinking of? I—a man of some learning. I tried to laugh, but the antelope nudged me harder, and I couldn't.

"Emery, you fool," I could only say to myself. "Forget these crazy thoughts. This animal is just tame. That's all. The Armenian and the woman are having a good time somewhere in the olives. It doesn't make sense the other way. Nothing fits. Not even the name those dumb Lazzes called her by. It isn't the same, Emery."

But then, names change through the ages, get corrupted. Homer might have had it wrong.

"Where the devil did they go?"

Captain Noregard grumbled, and the jealousy was still gritting in his voice.

His big fingers played with the gun that had a shot or two left in it. He looked ugly, with his short black beard matted and wet from the sea.

The Turk was shaking harder and harder—maybe from the morning chill. Finally he picked up some twigs and branches and started himself a fire by the fountain. But that didn't help him.

He was still shaking when the woman came out of the grove. The Armenian wasn't with her, and I didn't ask her where he was. I was afraid of what she might tell me.

The captain jumped to his feet at the sight of her. But she looked at the Turk and burst into a peal of silvery laughter.

"You big fat pig!" she said, and laughed again. "You big fat shivering pig." Those huge blue eyes of

hers were on him across the fire, and he backed away. But he didn't back far, for her eyes caught his and stopped him. I saw him strain to break away. A strong, heavy man pulling like a newly caught Indian elephant at his chain. He couldn't make it. Then he reached for his knife, but his fingers opened the moment he grasped it. It fell to the ground by the fire, as step by step he went toward her, and she began to lead him toward the grove.

That was too much for Noregard. Jealous rage got the best of him. He whipped up his gun and sprang between her and the Turk. Maybe he would've shot the fat man, but she stepped in front of the captain, and her eyes caught his. She smiled understandingly at him, which was enough to make him drop his gun.

"Why is the black-haired man angry?" her rich voice lilted. "Does the black-haired one with bristles on his face like a hedgehog want to come with me, too?"

THE captain couldn't understand her words. He didn't have to. That flowing movement of her body, that age-old beckoning of her eyes were plain enough. Side by side with the Turk he went.

It was then that I couldn't stand it any longer. I couldn't stay alone with the antelope, the sea, the Lazzes, and my own doubts. I couldn't stay and wait—for what?

"Captain Noregard—stop!" I yelled, and started running after him.

He wasn't a big man, but a hard, close-knit one. Without even taking his eyes off her he struck me with his forearm. I reeled back and stumbled. The stone balustrade of the fountain caught me on the temple. For a moment I heard the woman's laughter growing wilder and wilder. Then the sun went out. . . .

The antelope's rough tongue on my cheek brought me to. One look at him and I remembered where I was, and knew that I had to get away. But where?

Now that the captain had drawn the Lazzes' blood, now that the woman was gone, they wouldn't stop at rob-

bery. They would kill me as slowly and painfully as only they could. The sea? The hope to live was strong in me, for I was young. Perhaps I could sneak through the grove, past the woman.

I picked up the Turk's knife and crept among the olives. There weren't many of them. I could see right through the grove as soon as I was in it. Nothing but cliffs behind it. One steep wall of cliffs where an earthquake had once sheared the island.

And something else I saw — something that sent me running back faster than I came. In a small clearing she was sitting by a marble amphora like the ones I'd seen in the museums. From a shallow goblet she was drinking a liquid that was red and sticky. And she kept smiling as she watched a huge boar chasing a little hedgehog in front of her. Murder was burning in the boar's mean, bloodshot eyes. The hedgehog's black quills stood up on edge defensively around the cringing body that was smaller than a rabbit's.

There was really no fight at all. There couldn't have been. Maybe the quills did hurt the boar when his tusks closed on that little animal. I don't know. I turned away, sickened by the crunching of thin bones.

The woman hadn't noticed me yet, but I couldn't reach the cliffs. If a twig snapped under me, if she turned her head, she would see me. Then she would look at me, and I was sure our eyes would meet, and after that. . . . Yes, if our eyes met I'd become—

Suddenly I knew what I had to do. It was ghastly, but it didn't frighten me—not half as much as the thought of the antelope, the boar, the hedgehog, and the Lazzes' animals.

I went back to the fire that was still smoldering. A few more dry sticks brought it to life. Then I thrust the Turk's knife into the flames. Fast! I had to be fast, before she tired of her sport, before she came for me. The blade got sooty at first, then started to glow. When it was cherry red I took it out.

My hand shook terribly, but I closed

my eyes and touched the flat side of the knife to my lids. Oh, yes, it hurt—hurt so that I wished I'd lose consciousness.

MAYBE I would have, but I heard steps—her light steps. She was coming from behind me, and couldn't see my face even when she stopped.

"Don't you want to come with me?" she asked. "Don't you want to belong to me, like the others?"

I didn't answer. How could I, with that pain and the fear?

That must have made her angry.

"Look at me," she ordered, and for the first time the lilt was gone from her voice. "Look at me, little man. After you do, you'll follow me and drink my red wine of—"

I turned my face slowly. She must have seen the burned wounds on my eyelids for she broke off abruptly, and it made me glad to know that I had won, that she couldn't reach me. So glad that I tried to laugh. It was a gasping, agony-distorted laugh. I stopped, for when she spoke again the lilt was back in her voice.

"You're wise," she mocked. "Wise as an old owl. You think you have outwitted me. For the time, maybe you have. But you have seen me, heard my voice. Though your eyes are gone, before the eyes of your soul you'll carry my image as long as you live, and you'll long for me. And when your longing gets so bad you can stand it no more, you'll call for me. I'll come then, and bring your friends with me. And then you'll become—"

I don't remember the rest. The pain in my eyeballs tore at my brain. Crawling on my hands and knees, I got away from the place, away from her. On, on—any place.

The Lazzes must have found me later. I don't know when or how. There is some nobility left in that old race, it seems. Fighting and running, I'd been their foe. But now that I was blind, they didn't harm me. Later on that summer, when their barrels were full of herring, they sent me with the fishing fleet to Constanti-nople where the American consul . . .

Miss Stenger, the nurse, woke up suddenly and jumped from the rocking chair.

"Captain Williams — Captain Gustafson!" she cried. "You shouldn't have let him talk so much. He's tired out. Go away now, please. He must have rest."

We went out slowly while she lowered Emery onto his pillows. Outside, Gustafson looked at me sadly and shook his head, his big hands still cupped around his earholes.

"Emery must be going fast. I didn't hear all he said, but what I did hear proves he's out of his mind. I'm going to miss him a lot, poor fellow."

WE PARTED there. I didn't feel like discussing Emery by shouting into Gustafson's cupped hand. I did a lot of thinking during the day, though, and tried to get hold of Commissioner Guire to tell him about Emery's story and the shadows I had seen the night before. But Guire was busy with the police who had come to investigate about the gate-keeper's wife. So I gave it up. He probably wouldn't have believed me, anyhow.

I didn't sleep well that night, tossing and thinking. Once I thought I heard a woman's laugh. It might have been my dreams, or maybe it was Miss Stenger, though I couldn't see why she would laugh beside a dying man.

Then, early in the morning, a scream woke me out of a doze. Of course, I couldn't get up by myself,

though I tried to. I had to wait for Yorgo.

"What was all the screaming about?" I asked. "How's Captain Emery?"

"He's gone," said Yorgo, and reached for my uniform.

"What do you mean? Did he die?" I liked old Emery a lot. Maybe that's why my voice sounded so hopeful.

"I guess so," Yorgo replied. "Last night Miss Stenger snoozed off, she claims. When she woke up toward morning the screen on the window was torn out and Emery was missing. He must have crawled out and fallen off the cliffs into the sea. Though how he did it with both legs dead I can't tell.

"And a funny thing, Captain Williams. The night light in his room being on, and the screen out, a big owl must have flown in. It scared Miss Stenger so she yelled when she woke up. Took me quite a while to chase the blooming bird out. It beat around the walls for a long time, as if it couldn't find its way. And when I finally pushed it out with a broom, it flew straight away over the sea. It seemed to be blind. But then, it was pretty light already, and all owls are blind in daylight."

I intended to tell him he was wrong, that normal owls see in daytime almost as well as at night, in spite of popular belief. But what was the use of arguing with someone who had been a cook on a Greek sponger?



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WHEN you're the husband of a lady newshawk, you've got to take things as they come. And I mean if you're a person who

never could be bluffed at "follow-the-leader," you're in for it.

I was saying something to this effect as Verda and I, having left our coupé

in a ditch beside a slippery mountain road, were heading into the wet gloom of that wooded mountain valley. "Sleepy Vale" some early settler had named it. But as I saw it now beyond the veils of a windless spring rain it seemed not so much sleeping as bewitched, frozen under the spell of some cold and sinister enchantment.

I looked at Verda, plodding doggedly a little ahead and wished that I had refused to let her come. What did I care if it did happen that she had lived as a child in this wild tip end of the county from which the weird story had come? What did I care if she had promised to give the readers of her column, "What Goes On," a first-hand account of the matter?

Glimpsing the set lines of her pert and lovely little face, the tension of her small body under the red-silk slicker, I knew now that it was no mere curiosity which had drawn her back here, but fear, a fear which she was willing neither to explain nor admit.

Still, I tried to keep my tone bantering as I said:

"With all the excitement going on in Europe, blitzkriegs, secret weapons, parachute troops and God-knows-what, I can't understand why people bother with these nut-rumors. The next thing, they'll be sending you to Rochester, Washington, to interview Straining Annie, the hen who couldn't lay."

Verda didn't laugh.

"If you had seen the face of that mountain-hiker when he told of the ungodly thing he saw, you wouldn't laugh, Bill," she said.

Well, maybe so. It was an eerie and nightmarish tale. The man had been hiking through the woods, he said, and had come into the mouth of the cave to rest a little while. There he had noticed, deeper in, a party of picnickers who had spread their lunch on the cave's floor. He had hailed them cheerily, and, getting no answer whatsoever, had stepped nearer.

Then he had noticed their faces. They were all turned toward the cave's depths, staring, he said, with the most awful expressions of horror he had ever seen on human faces. He said it struck him at once that terror so utter could not co-exist with life, and it was only as

a second impression that he noticed the weird immobility of the group.

They hadn't moved an inch, not a fraction of an inch. Great ghostly stalagmites reared along the walls at this point, the man said, and the figures of these people seemed strangely blended with them, frozen there in the most commonplace postures. The woman was in the act of handing a sandwich to a boy of about ten. The man was on one knee, holding a bottle of beer.

A little girl was bending over, her chubby hands extended towards a small black and white dog. And even the animal was standing like a thing in terra cotta, its pelt bristling, its teeth bared in a silent snarl at something in the cave's depths.

The man said he had forced himself forward then with buckling knees while the full force of the terror on those frozen faces dawned on him. Then he had reached out and touched the man, had found his limbs as stiff and cold as marble. He admitted that he had turned and fled then.

It was the one believable part of his story. He had run to the village and a party of queerly reluctant men had accompanied him back. But when they got there they had found nothing in the cave at all.

My comment was that there had been nothing there in the first place. Verda seemed to think differently.

We had been climbing steadily, our footfalls muffled by the leaf mould, and had come into a region where tortured junipers and aspens broke the uniformity of pines. Beyond this a bald meadow was visible, and above it in the rocky hillside, the mouth of a cave, half hidden by thickets.

THE sense of eeriness began to creep over me then. The rain had ceased but drops glistened like diamonds on the motionless leaves. No whisper of breeze disturbed their immobility, and the yellow light that came from a setting sun beyond the clouds cast a poisonous aura over the whole scene.

"Do you remember, Bill," Verda broke the silence with a hushed whisper, "how in the story of Perseus and Medusa the writer speaks of 'the pale

yellow light that broods over the country of the Gorgons?"

"Country of the Gorgons!" I exploded. "I suppose it's Medusa, the Gorgon, in that cave, turning people to stone! Well, I'm worried about something nearer home—where we're going to spend the night if we can't get that car out of the ditch."

"Oh," she said, "I'd thought of that. The Coll summer lodge is not far from here. Alton would be tickled for us to use it."

I FROWNED at that. Not that I had anything against Alton Coll. He was rich, and a poser, and a childhood friend of Verda, but had been no rival of mine. My dislike, I suppose, was the same every self-made man feels for the silver-spoon fellow of Alton's type, who roams the world—well heeled—pretending to discover the secrets and mysteries of strange races, and then goes about lecturing women's clubs in the role of one who has "lived among the natives."

"He's not up here now, is he?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I think he's gone to Mexico. But he'd be delighted for us to go in and make ourselves at home."

Well, I didn't doubt that. He and Verda had played together in this very valley when they were children. He was the son of rich summer vacationists, she the orphaned niece of the old village doctor. But all the same I didn't want to spend the night in his damned lodge. I wanted to go home.

I said as much, but Verda's feet were already whipping a path through the wet grass of the meadow, and presently we had fought through the thicket and were standing in the mouth of the cave itself.

The place had a musty, dank, evil smell. In the dim light we could see the stalagmites shining whitely, huddled there like the bloodless ghosts that swarmed to Ulysses' offering of gore in Hades.

Verda must have had some similar thought, for she shivered and I caught her arm.

"You don't have to go into that damned place, darling," I said comfortingly. "That story was pure hooey. If

not, they'd have found some sign, but they didn't."

"That's just it, Bill," she said, "they didn't. It's as if the cave itself had swallowed them up, *absorbed* them!"

"Rot! I'll go in just to show you. Then we'll go back."

She put out a hand to stop me but drew it back and followed as I stepped into the gloom. Our footsteps sounded hollowly.

The rocky walls were lichen-covered, glistening with a sweat of dank dew. Deeper and deeper grew the gloom as we proceeded, and presently we saw the pool of water, shining dully on the floor like some giant's shield flung there eons ago.

"Uncle Henry used to say," Verda whispered, "that all things have conscious life—trees and plants and even rocks. He used to say that when the Gorgon turned men to stone, they just went back to an earlier form of life—the form in which life originally arrived on Earth from the stars."

I'd heard those crazy theories, but I thought it was a bad time to air them. The fact is I was already beginning to have a queer feeling that those slimy walls were encroaching upon us as we progressed. Now I caught Verda's arm and we stopped and stared at the pool.

Pale growths of obscene, fat toadstools sprouted from the ooze about its marge. They rose in swollen masses toward the gleaming stalagmites along the walls. The crazy thought occurred to me that here were visible links in the chain of life that seemed to blend into one sentient substance.

For, as we advanced, our shadows, thrown dimly by the yellow glow from the cave's mouth had made the banked masses of fungoids seem to move. They gave the illusion of life, writhing and weaving snaky heads, like the half-animal barnacles on a ship's hull.

And then—pure fancy, of course—the sleek-skinned stalagmites, almost a flesh-pink in color, appeared to crawl with a weird sympathetic pulsation, as if they too were only one degree less alive.

But I shook this fancy off, struggling against the cave's oppressive atmosphere. I was about to pull Verda back when I saw the cat.

She was one of these roving house cats, I suppose, wild enough to roam the fields, yet too tame to fear humans, and she was moving along the opposite wall of the cave. A lank, loose-skinned Tabby of a pinkish color, she moved with the long deliberate strides of the huntress while behind her tumbled with babyish clumsiness five little bundles of identical fur.

I caught Verda's arm and pointed. We watched while the cat and her litter moved on toward the pool. Field mice, she's after, I thought, or maybe young rabbits or the nest of some cave-dwelling bird.

And then something queer happened.

The cat had pushed through the fringes of the toadstool bed and turned to follow the tunnel's sudden twist. But facing that angle which was invisible to us, she suddenly stopped. The kittens stopped, too.

The cat's head was lifted; a sudden quiver shot through her muscles and a hiss started through her bared teeth. Started but broke off, as I never heard an animal's cry break off before. And then she froze, literally froze, with one front paw uplifted and her lashing tail paralyzed.

It happened so suddenly that I was stunned, but Verda, with a cry, started past me toward the kittens who had likewise gone rigid in their tracks.

"Verda!" I made a grab at her. "Stay back here!"

BUT she was already past me and as I spurted forward to catch her my foot slipped on a slimy rock. I shot forward in an awkward sprawl among the toadstools and pulpy water growths at the pool's edge. I fell face down among the poisonous fungoids that, shaken, seemed to give off a strange sweetish odor that filled the cave. Then I was up, mud-spattered and panting, plunging toward Verda who was already some yards ahead.

"Verda, come back!"

Wiping the slimy water from my eyes, I abruptly halted. Verda had stopped. Against the deep gloom of the cave's depths I saw her bending as if to snatch the kittens up. But her head was lifted, staring, and her body had gone strangely still.

"Verda!" I shrieked in panic, already beginning to realize that she could probably no longer hear me. Then I reached her, touched her, felt the cold rigidity of her limbs.

I tried to shake her, move her, chattering insanely as I stared into her set, horror-contorted face. But it was no use. In desperation I lifted her then, as one lifts a log, and started staggering back toward the outside.

The sweetish smell was all around me now, and presently my knees began to buckle. Whether it was sheer terror, or the touch of Verda's cold flesh setting up a sympathetic paroxysm in my body, I could not tell. But as I slogged through the slimy pool my movements grew slower. Great weights seemed fastened to my feet, seemed tugging at my nerves and muscles. With a wild sense of nightmare I felt as if the cave itself were sucking me back, sucking my very being into its insensate embrace.

Praying, yammering to myself, I somehow floundered on. Once I staggered and fell, but managed to shield Verda's body from the jar. Half lifting, half dragging her, I wormed my way in a partial faint toward the open air.

I made it somehow and then my consciousness dimmed and flickered and went out.

What brought me to my senses, I suppose, was the roar of the landing plane. I sat up suddenly, stared across Verda's rigid body and saw in the fading dusk the great birdlike shape zoom down and come to rest in the meadow! Next instant two figures piled out and came running up the slope.

I rose, instinctively reaching for the gun in my coat pocket. Then the first figure burst through the thicket, throwing back his helmet and goggles. I thought I must still be dreaming. The man was Alton Coll! "Alton!" I gulped. "How on earth did you—"

He halted, staring wildly at Verda.

"Is she—" he went down on his knees and grasped one of her hands. "There's a pulse," he gasped. "Thank God, I got here in time!"

"In time?" I repeated dazedly.

Alton looked steadily at me. His thin pale face was drawn, his dark

[Turn to page 100]

A THOUSAND YEARS OLD AND STILL LIVING!

A strange method of mind and body control that often leads to immense powers never before experienced is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country rarely visited by outsiders and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western World.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind power, capable of surprising feats, from the delay of old age to the prolonging of youth and the achievement of dazzling business and professional success. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep by the suggestions of associates, by what we read and by various experiences.

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ing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

Our accepted ideas of old age and death, he claims, would prove utterly wrong if we could escape from their hypnotizing influence. He points to the exotic Joshua Trees of the California Desert, many of which are over a thousand years old and still living. Some are thought to be two and three thousand years old. Life and youth, he says, can persist several times longer than people think. In Tibet this is believed and certain methods, based on this belief, are employed. Incredible ages are often ascribed to sages there. "The methods are too new in the Western World," he says, "for us to have authoritative data. But they may be instrumental, meantime, in prolonging our youth and increasing our mental, physical and spiritual powers."

"The time has come," he declares, "for every enlightened man and woman to achieve the greater health, success and happiness possible through this ancient but remarkable method of mastery." His amazing 9,000 word treatise is now being offered by The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 96-L, Los Angeles, Calif. They offer to send it free to any readers of this paper who quickly send their names and addresses. Readers are urged to write promptly for the free treatise.

eyes burned feverishly under the dome-like brow.

"Bill," he said, "why in God's name did you let her come here? Didn't you realize the danger?"

"Don't talk in riddles," I snapped. "If you know what's wrong with her, say so. Will she be all right, will she come out of it?"

Still looking at her anxiously, he nodded.

"Yes. But it's lucky you managed to drag her out in time. I was on my way back from Mexico when I happened to get the home town paper and see that column of hers. Just like her, coming up here for a story! I knew I'd have to get here and stop her and I've been flying steadily ever since. But just now, when I saw you two lying there, I thought for certain I had failed."

"But what do you mean—what would have happened if I hadn't—"

"SHE'd have turned to stone," Alton said solemnly.

I stared. Was he crazy? He read my thoughts, went on:

"Verda probably hasn't told you much, Bill, or you'd never have let her come here. But she knew and I know, just as these close-mouthed valley people know, that this cave is 'bad'. Things have happened here over a period of years, and the natives have got so they won't talk about it. There are forces in there that are inhuman, uncanny, horrible beyond imagination."

"Alton," I said, "you can't mean that you believe in a—in a Gorgon-monster that turns all who look at it into stone?"

Alton Coll looked away.

"The Gorgon," he said gravely, "like all other myths, was based on something real. The Gorgons had their birth in the sea caves of Libya. What they were, I don't pretend to know. Behind their mythological symbol is some awful force with the power to transform living flesh into stone, by some sudden and mysterious process of petrification. That seems self-evident."

He looked at Verda again; the color was returning slowly to her cheeks.

"She'll be all right. I can tell because I went through the same experi-

ence. If Gaines here," he gestured toward the stocky figure of the mechanic who had followed him and stood silently by, "hadn't pulled me out in the nick of time, it would have been all up with me."

"But you say," I interrupted, "that Verda knew this?"

"Knew it? Why, of course she knew it. Don't you know about her uncle? He vanished in that cave ten years ago."

"She never told me how he died," I said.

"If he did die," Coll answered. "People around here, you see, said the old man was crazy. The fact is old Henry Ames believed in a sort of animistic philosophy and had a theory to account for the weird processes at work in that cave. He vanished while investigating."

So that was it. I recalled now Verda's whispered words about his belief in the *livingness* of stone. And if the old man had been really mad, wasn't it possible that he might be still alive, haunting the depths of the cavern, busy at some unholy business? Was that why Verda had been so set on coming here, yet so fearful, so reluctant to confide in me?

"Well," I said, "we'd better get Verda to a doctor anyhow."

"Luckily," Coll replied, "I have a doctor at hand. Dr. Leander has been using my summer place while I was away. I'll get him at once. But, Bill, we'd better do more than that, we'd better do something about this place—either destroy the thing that's in it or seal it up forever!"

I looked at his grim, feverish face. All these years he must have known, but must have been afraid to do anything, after his near-disasterous experience. Now he was determined. And I agreed with him.

"I've got guns at the lodge," he went on, "and dynamite. If you're game we'll try to get at the source of this hellishness. But if the *thing*—whatever it is—drives us out, we'll have a charge of dynamite already set, and we'll blast the cave's mouth shut forever. You've got a gun there. You can guard Verda until we get back with the doctor and the weapons."

They went back through the thicket and headed into the woods, leaving me racked by a thousand crazy doubts and conjectures. Was it possible that such a thing as Coll suggested really existed? Even now, after what I had seen with my own eyes, it was hard to believe it. But if not, then what?

Gripping my gun, I stared into the cave's mouth, seeking some clue in that abysmal darkness. Was Verda's mad uncle still roaming those black corridors? Was he carrying on some weird experiments that required living, human subjects? Undoubtedly his madness must be the reason Verda had mentioned him so infrequently. And if this were true, it was natural that she should have wanted to come here and investigate for herself.

And yet—ten years was a long time for an old doctor to live in there.

Doctor. That brought back the Dr. Leander whom Coll had mentioned. I had heard of the man, but didn't know much about him, hadn't known either that he was Alton's friend. But Alton was apt to pick up all sorts of freaks. He was gullible, a sucker for flattery, and a fool. Had he lent his place to some man who was using it for sinister purposes?

If so, it would be poor strategy to wait until Leander was summoned. I tried to think of what I had heard about the man, but couldn't remember much. He had been connected with the faculty of the state university, I thought, a research man, chemotherapy his field.

Suddenly I remembered that weird smell in the cave, that faintly sweetish odor which tugged at some hidden memory. What had it been? What connotation did it evoke? I was standing there sniffing the air when the crisp voice from behind me ordered:

"Get your hands up!"

I whirled, starting to raise my gun. But the muzzle of an automatic was already leveled at my middle.

"Can you fly a plane?"

The man was small but thick-set, long-armed. Under a bristling thatch of thick hair, his face was a pallid mask; weak eyes glared from behind thick spectacles. The memory of a news-photo flashed into my mind.

"And what if I can, Dr. Leander?" I asked.

"So you recognize me?" he said. "Very well. I judge you can fly, from your answer. You're going to accompany me to the plane and pilot it according to my directions."

I stared at him, hesitating. I knew now that my suddenly formed theory must be correct. Only I had formed it too late. Leander, surprised in his nefarious work, whatever it was, by Coll's sudden return, was seizing this desperate chance to escape.

"But my wife," I said, sparring for time. "I can't leave her."

"Pick her up then," he ordered, "and bring her along."

I stooped. To attempt to shoot it out with him would endanger Verda. But if I obeyed, once in the plane we were both at his mercy. But if I could manage to shield her with my body—

I fumbled, getting my hands under her; my eyes were still on the barrel of Leander's gun. Suddenly I lurched, throwing myself across her as I dived at his middle. His gun, flung up by my charge, blasted into the air; then my head struck his belly, catapulted him back. He struck the ground with a jar and I leaped upon him.

He fought like a wildcat, raking my face with his clawed fingers, gouging at my throat. But I was stronger. Forcing him into a position where I could get a swing at his head, I brought the butt of my automatic smashing against his skull. He relaxed and lay still.

I sprang up, half expecting to meet the rush of a confederate. But apparently he had none, had meant to escape alone. Yet there must be an assistant somewhere about; someone must have been in the cave to release the deadly power that had paralyzed Verda. And Leander himself hadn't come out of there. Now if I waited, allowed myself to be taken by surprise—

NO, attack was the best offensive. It meant leaving Verda; but helpless there she ran less risk of being harmed than if she were conscious. Besides, Coll would be returning any moment now. I stooped down, tied Leander's hands behind him with my handkerchief, bound his ankles with my belt.

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Then, gripping my automatic, I stepped into the cave.

It was almost dark outside now and the gloom within the cave was dense. I had a small pocket flash, but I dared not risk using it. As slowly and as silently as possible I crept toward the pool with its ghostly guardian stalagmites.

I sniffed the air as I went. Though I still could not identify the smell I had detected before, something told me that it was the clue to the danger. I would be safe until I inhaled it. Then—

I reached the pool, pushed through the rustling toadstools, felt my way along one dank wall. The cave became a tunnel, twisting this way and that until all light was shut out. Still I groped on in total darkness, the echoes of Coll's wild talk accompanying me like a ghostly escort. Living flesh turned to stone by some ungodly chemistry. Absurd, of course, and yet—

Abruptly I stopped. I had been feeling my way along the wall to my right, running my hands over the sleek damp surface of the stalagmites when, with no warning at all, my fingers touched something that caused my blood to freeze. It was cold and damp, and crystal-hard like the rest, but—yes, there could be no mistake—it had the shape of a human hand!

They say the basic fear of all is horror of the unknown. I can believe it. If actual physical fear for my life had been foremost, I should never have flashed on my light at that moment. But in the instant that I recognized that unseen shape for what it was, all physical fear was swallowed in the vortex of a sheer mental horror so awful that it swept all caution aside.

I flashed on the light. And what had been a vague and hideous conjecture became a still more hideous certainty.

Hand it was, that cold, clawed crystalline thing, thrust out like a branch from the trunk of this queer stalagmite. But that wasn't all. For the shape of that humped stalagmite itself was vaguely, horribly human—the shape of a crouching man, the outstretched hand still taloned to grip something which might have been—a bottle.

I was too numbed now with horror to draw back as my eyes flew among the massed and monstrous formations.

I began to note others that, like the first, were slightly different in color, whiter and with shapes too hideously suggestive to be accidental. There was a woman, also extending a hand as if proffering a gift; there was a lad half rising to his feet, and there—most gruesome of all—was the chubby shape of a little girl!

"This is madness!" I said. "It must be the light, throwing grotesque shadows." But I knew it wasn't. Misshapen and featureless as these contorted shapes were, they were certainly what had been the picnic party that the mountain hiker had seen. And if that were so—

A my rational theories collapsed before the awful thought that Coll had been right, that some power, monstrous and beyond human comprehension had its habitation here.

And then I heard the hissing.

It came from somewhere deeper in the cave's shadows, yet I found myself unable to turn and face it. For there suddenly flashed into my mind the memory of a painting I had seen of the Gorgon's head—that fearful Medusa-visage, twisted with agony, with the living snakes that grew out of her skull, writhing and hissing in horrid convolutions. The Gorgon's head that turned men into stone. If I turned, saw it hanging in the fetid dark—

I couldn't— And yet I did.

It was the smell that released me. For as it drifted to my nostrils there flashed into my brain the identifying word: "Geranium." With that came the memory that explained all. But with it too came the realization of a new and no less actual danger.

I WHIRLED, spraying the light down the crystalline aisle, sweeping it over the massed stalagmites. Then I saw the bulky shape in gas mask and coveralls, crouching by a huge stalagmite against which leaned a bullet-shaped drum such as are used for compressed air.

It was from this that the hissing came—the hissing and the geranium smell. I raised my gun, fired.

The man must have been unarmed, must have depended on the deadly invisible gas to overpower me before I could shoot. At any rate, as my gun

[Turn page]

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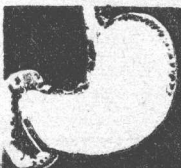
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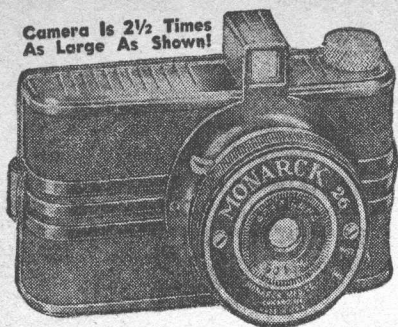
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blasted, I saw him clutch his belly and topple back with a scream. It was very nearly the last thing I saw.

For the geranium-smelling gas, which I now knew to be some far more potent development of the "nerve-gas" identified by that smell and reputedly used by the Germans, was still jetting from the cylinder. And already my muscles were being invaded by a strange debility, were freezing to rigidity. I couldn't have run. Upright I might have staggered a few steps; but then I should have stiffened to immobility. What I did was simply relax, let myself fall to the floor.

I fell flat and, with my nose as close to the floor as possible, took a deep breath of the purer air and began to crawl. It was like pulling some terrific weight to make my muscles act, but I knew that every inch was taking me farther from the source of danger. "On, on," I kept rasping through locked teeth as I fought off the slow freezing of my limbs.

And now the pool was in view, and beyond it faint light seeping in from outside and a distant mutter of voices. They must have heard my shot, must be debating the best way to rescue me! Thank God, Alton had come back in time. Even if I collapsed now, they'd drag me out.

But what was that? Another hissing sound, a spark traveling across the floor at the cave's mouth. My heart sank. It was the sputtering fuse carrying fire to the dynamite charge!

There was only time for me to throw myself in a wild lunge against one wall. Then the world cracked open with a titanic blast, as, roaring like an avalanche, the ceiling of the cave came crashing down.

I saw only that first blinding flare, for I had buried my head under my folded arms. When I raised it again, rocks were still rolling and rumbling, and the air was full of dust and the stench of burned powder. But the cave-in must have been confined to the opening. I was uninjured.

Uninjured, yes—but buried alive!

I snapped on the flash, flung its beam forward. A huge mass of dislodged rock sealed the cave's opening securely. But how had it happened? Why had Coll set the blast, knowing I was inside? Or had he known it? Perhaps

Leander, his senses recovered, had duped him with some lie.

I got up and staggered toward the barrier that cut me off from the living world. Perhaps I could yell and make them hear me. There would still be time to dig me out.

The barrier, I found, was composed for the most part of huge blocks of stone ripped from the ceiling and walls by the blast. There were interstices through which currents of fresh air were coming. I leaned nearer, listening to the voices outside. Leander was speaking.

"But I tell you I didn't, Alton," he was whining. "I didn't know it was you. I just sneaked out here to find out—"

"The hell you did!" Coll cut him short. "You meant to escape. You meant to take your formula with you and leave me holding the sack with this mess you and your assistant made of things while I was gone."

MY blood ran cold at that. My last hope of rescue faded as I realized that Coll was the real fiend behind it all. I listened as he raged on:

"I warned you to be careful. But no sooner had I got away to contact our buyers than your blunders started—coming to a climax in the damn fool carelessness that let those picknickers get caught by an overdose of the gas. When I heard about that I knew I'd have to get back here and take charge."

"But we didn't know they were in there," Leander babbled. "We were working with animals deeper in the cave and the fumes leaked out and overcame those people. We had to cover up as best we could. We couldn't bury their bodies, of course. The graves would have been noticed, animals may have spotted them. But we took them deep into the cave and hid them among the stalagmites. I worked out a formula for a calcareous compound almost exactly the color of the stalagmites themselves, and we poured it over those dead people. If this woman and her husband hadn't come nosing in before we were finished they'd never have been found or noticed in a thousand years."

"But they did come in," Coll stormed, "and you let the man escape. He was

[Turn page]



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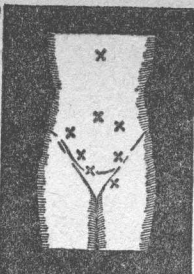
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armed, too. If I hadn't arrived in the nick of time, handed him that wild story which I knew would trick him into going back in there where we could dispose of him safely, our whole game would have been lost. But why go on? When a man's been the sort of fool you have, he's ripe for a purge."

The doctor's wild scream broke off Coll's speech.

"If you kill me," Leander shrieked, "you'll never get the formula. You think my process for changing the acetyl choline into a gaseous form is all there is to it. But it isn't. There's the element that causes the instant muscular rigidity, and you'll never find that out—"

Coll laughed.

"I'll find the formula on you after you're dead!"

A shot rang out. I knew the murderous drama was finished.

In the stifling darkness I shivered with hopeless desperation. What would Coll do with Verda? Against the barrier of these rocks a Titan would be helpless. And Verda was only yards away, utterly in his power!

I turned, searching the darkness as if for some spark of hope. If there were any other outlet from the cave, Coll wouldn't have trusted to the blast to seal me up—

But wait! Had he trusted to it? Hadn't he expected the man in the gas mask to finish me off with the deadly fumes? And if they were using the cave for an experimental chamber wouldn't they have provided some secret exit in case of surprise?

Spurred by this hope, I plunged back into the cave. This time I kept my light on and raced swiftly through the twisting labyrinth, searching the walls for some branching tunnel. I passed the man in the mask, lying dead where he had fallen by the gas cylinder which had ceased to hiss. An aperture among the stalagmites led into a smaller chamber, and here, with a gasp of joy, I saw the tunnel that led out.

It was narrow and low and I had to stoop to pass through it, but it led up at a sharp angle and presently I was able to glimpse the night sky. Crawling out I found myself on a narrow ledge above the cave's mouth. Clumps of cactus shielded it from the view below. I crawled to its edge, stared down and

saw two shadowy figures bending over Verda's body.

"Still unconscious," I heard Coll mutter. "That's good. We'll pile her into the plane and by the time she comes out of it we'll be across the line in Mexico."

"What about Fred—in the cave?" the mechanic Gaines asked.

"The hell with him!" Coll barked. "Get hold of her."

They began to lift Verda's body. The gun was in my hand, but with both of them that near to Verda I couldn't shoot. And the airplane was only yards away. I couldn't stop them before they got there, and once at the plane it would be too late!

As they straightened under her weight, I grabbed a small rock and hurled it at a spot of brush some twenty yards from them. It struck with a crackling sound that caused them to pause.

"What's that?" Coll snapped. He dropped Verda, turned.

I FLUNG another rock. Coll took a forward step, raised his gun and fired at the sound. I got a bead on him then and pressed my trigger.

Which of my shots struck him, I don't know, but his gun ceased to blast; he dropped, began to roll down the slope. At the same time Gaines' gun started chipping splinters from the rocks about my head. I swung my gun down on him, but it was empty.

"Another shot," he yelled, "and I'll kill the woman."

Well, there was no choice now. Even if I just lay still he might carry out his threat. I had to draw his fire. I staggered up in full view, started plunging, in a small avalanche of rocks, down the steep gradient toward him.

Slugs whistled past me as I tried to duck and yet keep my balance. One gouged the wrist of my outflung hand, and then, as I had hoped, his gun was empty too. He stooped to snatch the second weapon from Coll's hand, and straightened just as I came floundering down to his level.

He never got a shot with that second gun. There was a terrific impetus in my rush and I struck him like a tornado. The impact flung him back. As he staggered up, I closed in, slugged

[Turn page]

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my gun butt against his skull.

I was glad I didn't kill him. Gaines lived to expose not only Colls' and Leander's scheme to perfect the deadly nerve-gas and sell it to a foreign power, but also details which made it possible for the F.B.I. to round up the secret agents with whom Coll had been negotiating. As for the gas formula itself, it wasn't found. Leander, too wary to carry it on his person, had hidden it in some place from which it has never been recovered.

Verda woke from her paralysis while I was flying her back to the city in Coll's plane, and when I told her the story she did not seem greatly surprised.

"Yes, I thought perhaps it was Alton," she said.

"You did? And you didn't tell me!"

"If I had, Bill," she said, "you'd never have let me come. I had to hide the real reason for my fear. Of course I wasn't sure, but I knew Alton's character—a vain, mediocre man with no principles—just the type a foreign power would win over for a spy. That's why he made those lecture tours of his. They were his front. As for the gas, he dropped a hint about that once—before the war started—boasting about a secret he'd learned that would make the old Gorgon stories come true. I remembered that when the hiker told his story, and it set me thinking."

"And Alton suspected that you might have remembered it," I said. "He knew when you came here that he had to get you out of the way at all costs." I gave a retrospective shiver. "And he didn't miss it much. But from now on, darling, I'm wearing the pants. And if there are any more 'follow-the-leader' games, I'm going to be the leader."

She was agreeable—for the moment, anyhow.

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THE SCARLET JESTER

By **JOHN H. KNOX**

COMING NEXT ISSUE

MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Continued from page 13)

small mid-western town. After the interview, Miss Scott had several hours to spare before her train arrived. It was then she recalled that an Alice Dover, a former class-mate of Miss Scott's younger sister, lived in this town. So she telephoned Alice asking the young girl to have lunch with her at the hotel.

Alice came over at once, greatly honored. The local girl was in excellent spirits, for she was wearing an engagement ring put on her finger only the night before by her fiancé. They were to be married within three months. During the luncheon the two women had tea, and Miss Scott admitted to Alice an interest in tea-leaves agreeing to read Alice's fortune.

But as the older woman glanced at Alice's cup, she was horrified. She saw a perfect image of an open casket containing a young woman's body. The coffin stood between a double window and an open door—and the blue coloring of the china cup gave a weird effect—death in a room of blue. But before Alice could notice it, Miss Scott smudged the tea-leaves and pretended to read a happy fortune for Alice from the changed design.

Six weeks later, Miss Scott visited that town again; and since Alice had invited her to call on her next trip, the representative took a taxi to Alice's house.

But it was not a happy visit. Alice's mother met Miss Scott at the door where the visitor learned that Alice had died the day before—a suicide due to her lover eloping with another girl.

Miss Scott wanted to pay her respects to the body—but as she entered the tragic room, the memory of that tea-leaf reading struck her with all its horrible significance.

There lay Alice, peaceful in death in a coffin standing between a double window and the open door . . . and the room was painted blue—the exact likeness in every detail to that tea-leaf reading of six weeks previous, which the hand of Death must have fashioned in uncanny miniature.

THE HOUSE ON THUNDER MOUNTAIN

LAST Spring a group of New York metaphysicians were excited about the prospects of examining an old house in the Adirondacks where strange phenomena had been reported—and where relics of the French and Indian War had been found. That house was the only remaining ancient structure in that vicinity—all the others built more than a hundred years ago had been burned mysteriously at one time or the other.

This house was on Thunder Mountain Road about three miles from the village of Stony Creek. An elderly woman of high standing occupied the place alone with her two faithful dogs—and it was she who had reported the strange incidents. At one time

[Turn page]

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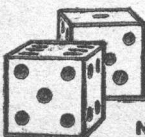
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in the moonlight she had heard a noise of wagons and men in a sparsely wooded section beyond the house—and looking out the window she saw soldiers in costume of the French and Indian War, trudging along as though to battle.

Some of them had their shoulders to wheels of ancient wagons which were apparently stuck in the mud. Later it was learned that the spot where the woman had seen the phenomenon, was the exact location of an abandoned military road used by the army in 1765.

At another time, guests of this woman had seen her open her door to let in a bedraggled dog who walked over behind the stove, lay down and then disappeared. The woman told them it was her dog, which had been killed some weeks before. There were other times when friends had seen strange people, looking in the window of the house, who disappeared into thin air when approached and questioned.

Thus it was that the day before the appointed time to visit this Thunder Mountain House of mystery, destiny struck, preventing, perhaps, one of the most remarkable investigations of psychic phenomena.

Let a native of Thunder Mountain, in his own words, tell just what happened:

"We saw smoke—soon we realized that the old house was on fire. It seemed that flames burst forth from every section of the house at the same time. We tried to get into the cellar window to save the elderly lady, but hot tar from the scorched roof dropped on our backs. Suddenly, a terrific blast of smoke and fire filled the entire building. It was too late. The wonderful woman and her two dogs perished in a fire the likes of which no one has ever seen in these parts before."

Is there some strange destiny which prevents psychic researchers from discovering the secrets of the unknown? Too many similar cases have happened in the past to be coincidental. Does the angel of death protect her mysteries from the prying eyes of scientists? Who knows?

THE WHIP OF DEATH

NOT far from North Charleston, South Carolina, there is a small graveyard. No bodies have been buried in it since 1860, and the few gravestones today are worn down by the ravages of wind and storms of the past hundred years.

One of those tombstones contains this wording: "He died by the whip of God."

This man had been the owner of many negro slaves on his plantation. He worked them almost beyond human endurance. When they would drop from exhaustion, he used a whip which he kept handy on a workbench in the barn. Even his white neighbors disliked the man.

One afternoon he became exceedingly ugly when one old slave working in the barnyard did not move fast enough when ordered to work harder. Any little instance of this kind was enough to send the plantation owner into a rage.

The negro saw the cruel master heading

for the barn, and the poor slave knew what that meant—the whip. "Please master," he begged, "don't whip me!"

The other slaves huddled near the barn, cringing in fear as the master turned and snarled. "You black loafer—I'll show you"—and he opened the barn door heading toward his workbench.

The old negro dropped on his knees, lifted his head and arms in supplication and prayer: "Don't let him whip me Massa God—paralyze his hand with yo magic power."

No sooner had the religious old man uttered those words, when there came a scream from the barn.

The young slaves rushed to the barn at once for they knew the master was in trouble, and in their childish loyalty their only motive was to help.

But they were too late, for according to the records still available on this strange occurrence, this is what happened:

"When he went to his workbench to get the lash, he didn't know that it had fallen behind the bench, for coiled on the bench was something which had all the appearances of the whip he sought. But it was not the whip—it was a rattlesnake which bit him on the arm as he tried to pick it up. He died in agony, two hours later."

But according to the records in the Milligan family, neighbors of the victim, there was no trace of the snake after it had bitten the slave owner. The whip was on the barn floor, indicating it had fallen from the man's hand.

A theory advanced by Dr. G. Milligan, a descendant of the neighboring family, is that the victim was not bitten by a real snake—but that the sudden mental reaction of the raging man, who was frightened by the thought of picking up a snake—caused

[Turn page]

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

DEATH HAS A VOICE

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the physical reaction which resulted in death. This is the basic idea of the voodoo curse. The old slave had used it unwittingly. Perhaps he was descended from a long line of African witch-doctors.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra:

I understand that there is a strange spot of ground somewhere in the South where nothing will grow because that spot was cursed. Is this true? And where is it?

George Chase.

Dear Mr. Chase: It is true that nothing will grow on that spot which is about forty feet in diameter. It is located in Chatham County, North Carolina, about ten miles from Silver City. It is supposed to have been cursed by slaves who were sold on that spot.

Dear Chakra:

Is it possible that one can paint masterpieces or compose great music while under a trance?

Millie Dilmor.

Dear Miss Dilmor: There are many cases of trance-genius although the person in normal state has no talent. One famous case is that of Miss Doris Gould, 24-year-old daughter of a London taxi driver. She has painted great

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pictures while under trance, and signs them as William Manners. She cannot remember doing them and cannot paint while conscious. The paintings are considered masterpieces.

Dear Chakra:

Is it true that accidents to parents are often duplicated in the children to a remarkable extent?

Helen Wessler.

Dear Miss Wessler: There are thousands of such cases. A recent one was reported where a Mrs. Mathilda Striebing lost her husband under the wheels of a train. Ten months later her daughter was killed in exactly the same way while on way to school. No explanation can be given for the accidents.

Dear Chakra:

Is it true that a person under great pain, perhaps due to an accident, has clairvoyant powers?

Henry Mull.

Dear Mr. Mull: Emotion caused by pain or intense excitement or injury enables the subconscious to come through more readily. Recently a girl in an auto accident and suffering pain, screamed out that her cousin had just died, although she had no way of telling. This happened to Cleo Wethington of Clementsville, Kentucky.

Dear Chakra:

Is there a ghost ship on the Atlantic Ocean?

Mark Henning.

Dear Mr. Henning: Reports continually come in about a ship being seen on the Atlantic. The description is always the same. When other ships approach it, it disappears.

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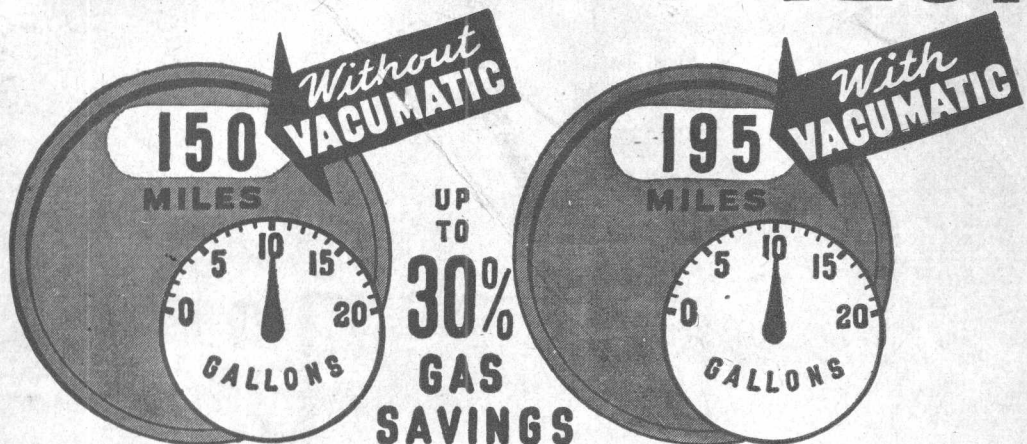
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