TERROR TALES

THEIR FLESH IS SOFT AND TENDER!

A BLOOD-CHILLING MYSTERY—TERROR NOVELETE

by WAYNE ROBBINS

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A NOVELETT OF THRILLS AND CHILLS

by DONALD DALE
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VOLUME ELEVEN JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1940 NUMBER FOUR

TERROR TALES

TWO BLOOD-CHILLING TERROR NOVELS

Girls Who Lust for Death.................................Russell Gray 4
Crazy old Georgie said that the lake god had taught him how to make the girls come to him with unleashed passion in their hearts. Of course we laughed at him—until the lake god came for his revenge and turned our peaceful camp into a shambles of blood and horror!

Brides for the Frankenstein................................Wayne Rogers 86
Why Graham Haskell trembled at the thought of flying lovely young Dora Moore to Moosehead Lake, he could not have told—for no man could have foreseen the incredible horror that awaited them there... where a maniac doctor sought, with drug-induced lust, to create a race of mad giants!

TWO NOVELETTES OF WEIRD MYSTERY

Their Flesh is Soft and Tender...........................Wayne Robbins 30
Rayne Hubbard sat there, waiting for the call of the Monster of the Cairn—the call that would send him to join the pack of half-human beasts whose ghastly hunger could only be sated by the tender flesh of those they loved!

Pray That She Stays With the Dead!......................Donald Dale 56
When Dennis Avery lay bound and helpless on the floor of that hellish den and watched the incredibly horrible beast man bend lustfully over his beloved Maria's unconscious body, he prayed only for strength enough to release the poisonous vapors that would kill them all!

TWO SHORT STORIES OF EERIE MENACE

The Dictator and the Zombie.............................Ralston Shields 44
General Ortiz betrayed the most sacred pact a man can make—and doomed himself to a fate more horrible than even his own diabolical imagination could have contrived!

I Am the Madman!.........................................Wyndham Brooks 72
Because I killed Lauren, my wife's own brother, my marriage is the mockery of the damned—for his death, staring face is driving me on to that ultimate pit of horror where he will have his revenge.

TRUE FEATURE OF ROYAL TERROR

Monsters of Monarchy....................................Charles Boswell 81
Tsar Ivan, "The Terrible," had only one hobby—death!

AND—

Murder on Ice..............................................The Editor 3
The thin veil of civilization...

Black Chapel..............................................A Department 112

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MURDER ON ICE

A

WE sat at our desk writing this column, cold chills are still running up and down our spine. We have just returned from having lunch with a man who told us a tale as harrowing as anything we have ever heard.

Our friend lives in an apartment fronting on a street in the East Eighties. Late one night he was sitting by the window when he noticed a large refrigerated meat delivery truck drive up and park by the curb directly below him. Two men got out of the driver's cab, walked around to the rear and got in.

When he looked up again, a few minutes later, he was just in time to see a man jump out of the truck, slam shut the door and stride away.

Early the next morning our friend remembered the truck and went to the window to see if it was still there. It was—and while he stood there, the man he had seen the night before walking away, came back. He unlocked the door and got in the rear of the truck. An hour passed and the man did not emerge. Then our friend recalled that these trucks were usually operated by two men—he had seen nothing of the other man!

Feeling vaguely uneasy, our friend called up the packing company. They informed him that they would send someone up right away.

In a few minutes an official of the packing company and two policemen arrived. Our friend repeated his story and went with them to the side of the truck. One of the police grabbed at the door-handle and yanked it open—and then he stepped back suddenly, his face a sickly green. “Mother of God,” he murmured.

Our friend crowded around the door with the others, and then he too fell back, his stomach churning with horror.

There was a man inside there—a horrible, grinning caricature of a human being. He was seated on the carcase of a beef and in one hand he held remnants of a human leg!

As he saw the others looking in at him, the madman leered at them and brought that ghastly bit of frozen flesh up to his mouth and sank his teeth into it . . .

Later, at the police station, our friend pieced together the whole story—or as much of it as will ever be known. The previous night the two men had gone into the back of the truck together to rearrange the load prior to making their last deliveries. Suddenly something cracked in the mind of the assistant driver. He grabbed a mallet and hit his partner over the head with it. Then he jumped from the truck.

All the rest of that night he wandered from bar to bar, his madness reaching frenzied heights as he drank and contemplated what he had done. In the morning he returned to the truck—and found his partner a frozen corpse. His distorted brain could think of only one thing to do: to saw up the body, as he was used to sawing beef!

Our friend told us that even the police surgeon gagged as he described how he had found the dismembered parts of the unfortunate driver's body all neatly hanging from hooks in the truck's ice compartment. It was all so logical—and so completely horrible! . . .

How delicate is the balance-wheel of sanity!

—The Editor.

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3
Girls Who Lust for Death

A Novel by RUSSELL GRAY

No one could have done more to protect those lovely young girls than we did, but we were powerless against that ghastly thing that lived in the lake—which took them from us and returned them later, as shattered, living corpses!
CHAPTER ONE
The Coming of Horror

THAT afternoon practically everybody at camp was down at the lake. The weather was sultry, stifling, and the only relief from the heat was in the water. I was chief life guard at Black Birch Camp, and that day I had
my hands full. Pete Cooke, my assistant, was at the crib, watching over the weaker swimmers and children. I was in the light rowboat, hovering around the float, which was a hundred feet from shore, and chasing back swimmers who got too far from safety.

Black Birch Lake was by no means a dangerous lake. Scarcely a mile across at the widest part, it just about provided elbow room for a good swimmer. But people have been known to drown in puddles, and that year I’d pulled out more than one competent swimmer.

Sweeping the lake with my eyes, I saw a white bathing cap bobbing near the beginning of the swamp. I blew my whistle, but the cap didn’t pay any attention. So I went after the swimmer.

Bea Hart was with me in the boat, lying indolently in the stern and letting the sun bake her. Her swimming suit was a strip of silk about her hips and another which hardly confined her breasts. Most girls don’t show to advantage in modern swimming suits. But Bea did. She had a slim, curving body that must have disturbed many a man’s sleep. It did mine.

And her face went with her figure; oval, in which delicate features were set, large hazel eyes, and honey-colored hair.

She was a member of the camp social staff—singer, comedienne and occasional pianist. I guess I was one of a dozen men who had fallen for her that summer, the difference being that in my case she reciprocated. Which made everything swell—for me.

When I got closer to the swimmer, I saw that it was a girl.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Turn back!”

She ignored me, kept stroking toward the swamp. The jungle-like swamp, which extended for a couple of miles back from the lake, took up half the shore-line on the opposite side of the camp. The marshy growth came right up to the edge of the water. It was impossible to get a foothold on the shore. I couldn’t think of any reason why anybody should want to go there.

I skimmed the boat in an arc between the girl and the shore. She was Mary Jardine, a guest. A life-guard is lord of the water, and it’s his privilege to be snappish with anybody who disregards the rules for safe swimming.

“I don’t give a damn if you drown,” I said, “but it will give the camp a bad reputation. Now get back.”

She laughed up at me. And then I didn’t know what to say, because I saw that she wasn’t wearing her bathing suit. She had removed it while swimming and had tied it about her waist. Beneath the surface I could see the vague outline of her figure. Well, a lot of people take off their suits in the water, so it didn’t mean anything. Or rather, it didn’t until she turned on her back and started to float.

FOR a moment I was astounded at her brazenness. If I had been alone, I would have been pretty flustered and, I guess, somewhat amused. But with Bea Hart in the boat with me, my reaction was simple anger. Mary Jardine’s conduct was an outrageous insult to Bea, the way I saw it.

“Get back, or I’ll drag you back!” I yelled, not looking at her.

“Come in and see if you can do it,” she replied.

Bea’s face clouded with rage. She snapped: “I’ll drag you back myself.”

She reached over the gunwale and got her fingers in Mary’s hair under the cap.

That did the trick. Mary screamed and cursed and thrashed. When Bea released her, she struck out for the float.

“Thanks,” I told Bea with a grin. “You got me out of a hole. Damn those guests!”

Bea wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes went past me at something beyond the boat. I turned my head. Standing on the swampy shore not twenty feet away, with
his legs in muck up to his knees, was Georgie.

My first reaction was to wonder how he could possibly have got there. He couldn’t have swum because his ragged pants were dry, and a human being couldn’t walk through the swamp. I knew because I and a couple of other fellows tried to explore it several weeks before, and we’d been forced to turn back before we had hardly started.

But the farmers in the neighborhood insisted that Georgie lived in the swamp. He was never known to buy anything in town, so he evidently subsisted on berries and small animals which he caught. Standing there, he looked something like a swamp creature. Clad only in filthy, torn pants, his hair and face and chest were covered with grime and bits of foliage. Had he been able to stand erect, he would have been a tall man. But his constant posture was a slouch and his shoulders were almost level with his ears, so that he was simply broad. He had puffy lips and an ape-like nose and no forehead. A glance was enough to mark him as an idiot.

He was looking with something like wistfulness at Mary Jardine’s white bathing cap which was moving away from him. Then he turned his head toward us and shook it.

“You chased her away,” he said in the sad, shrill voice of a child. “She was coming to me.”

That should have been funny. Imagine an attractive girl like Mary Jardine having a rendezvous with an idiot in a swamp. And yet there was her strange behavior—the fact that she had refused to turn back, that she had shamefully displayed her nudity not only to me, but, I realized now, to Georgie as well.

I turned to see how Bea was taking his words, and I got something of a shock. Her hazel eyes were fixed on Georgie with a serious, intent expression. Not with revulsion or even with humor, but with something in them which I could not quite define and which frightened me.

“She was coming to me,” Georgie repeated doggedly. “They’ll all come to me. All the pretty girls like me.”

I laughed then. “Sure, Georgie,” I kidded him. “You’re quite a man with the women.”

He nodded gravely. Then he spoke to Bea: “You’re pretty. I can make you like me too.”

And his tiny, blood-flecked eyes moved over her, seemed to strip away what material covered her body. Bea sank down a little in her seat, shuddering.

“Why, you!” I spluttered. I snatched up my oars and started to row the boat toward him. I was suddenly angry enough to leap out and fight with him there in the swamp.

Bea leaned forward and gripped my arm. “Don’t, David. He’s not responsible for what he says.”

Her words cooled me off. I’d simply be making a fool of myself. I turned the boat around.

GEORGIE evidently wasn’t aware of my anger. He said in an eager, confiding tone: “You can make the girls like you too. The lake god told me how.”

“Poor boy!” Bea whispered. “It must be terrible to be an idiot.”

“So now we have a lake god,” I said. “I’ve got to tell Nerry about it, so he can put it in his ads. ‘A one hundred percent genuine lake god thrown in free with every forty-seven-fifty reservation at Black Birch Camp.’ ”

As a matter of fact, I didn’t think it was funny myself, and it wasn’t surprising that I didn’t get even the flicker of a smile from Bea. She sat twisted in the stern of the rowboat, staring back at the spot where George had stood. He wasn’t there any more, having disappeared in the swamp where no human could walk, but
where he managed to live on an equal basis with the other swamp creatures.

When at last Bea again looked at me, that intense expression was still on her face, and something else which looked like the dark shadow of fear. In spite of the blazing sun, I myself felt a sudden chill, although I couldn’t for the life of me tell why.

Mary Jardine swam out to meet the boat when it was within ten feet of the float. Of course she had her suit on now.

“Sorry about what happened back there, David,” she apologized. “Your manner made me mad and I tried to put you in your place.”

I didn’t believe her. The fact remained that she had been swimming resolutely toward Georgie and that within another thirty seconds she would have been out of the water without wearing a thing. And, as I sat in the boat looking down at her, she was careful not to let her eyes meet mine.

I grunted and let it go at that. Mary Jardine swam to the float. For a while, then, life became lazy again, with Bea and I drifting around the float in the boat. I roused myself once when a rowboat containing two couples started a waterspraying fight with the people on the float. While I was trying my best to break up the horse-play, one of the girls in the boat, trying to grab an oar, jerked out an oarlock with it. The oarlock disappeared under the water.

Mary Jardine, who had been standing at the edge of the float, cried, “I’ll get it,” and made as neat a dive as I’ve ever seen. Everybody on the float and in the boats watched for her to reappear. Seconds clicked off. I heard somebody say: “Mary’s a marvelous swimmer.” I stood up, staring at the water, and I could see others watching uneasily. Time moved sluggishly. At last I was sure that something was wrong, and I dove off the boat.

The water wasn’t more than eight feet deep at that part of the lake. I touched bottom, looked around. I didn’t see her.

I came up, drew in air, and said: “This is another of her jokes. She probably came up on the other side of the float.”

PEOPLE on the float looked. When I was assured that she was nowhere in sight, I went down again. All I found was the oarlock. I broke through to the surface and saw anxious faces around me. Ice formed in my heart. Mary Jardine had been down at least three minutes.

A guest shouted, “She must have got caught on something.” Two of the guests dove off the float. I saw Pete Cooke, my assistant, swimming toward me. I went down a third time.

After a while all but the most expert divers were cleared out of the water. And for two hours a score of us continued to dive for the body, stretching out in an ever widening circle. At length we had to give it up.

Bea Hunt was waiting for me on the shore with my beach robe over her arm. Warily I got into it.

“My God, David, I pay you good money to protect the lives of my guests!” Cuthbert Nerry yelped. “And here this girl is drowned right in front of your eyes.”

Nerry was owner of the camp—a wizened, hairless little man who went in for chewing dead cigars. The tip of his cigar was bobbing up and down in front of his face.

I said: “She didn’t drown. Her body would have been down there. There’s not enough current in the lake to take her body ten feet in an hour.”

Nerry’s teeth clenched hard on the cigar. “Then what the devil happened to her?”

I thought of how Mary Jardine had been heading, earlier, for the swamp where Georgie had been waiting for her. “Maybe she came up on the other side of the float for air and then, swimming most of
the way under water, made for the opposite shore," I muttered.

Nerry scoffed at that and so did all the others who stood around us. As a matter of fact, I didn’t believe it myself. People on the other side of the float had been watching for her. She would certainly have been seen.

"The lake god!" Bea blurted suddenly. "Huh?" Nerry removed his cigar and stared at her. "What’s that you said?"

She realized at once how ridiculous she would make herself if she repeated Georgie’s words about a lake god. "Nothing," she murmured. "I was just thinking that it’s almost as if some monster in the bottom of the lake seized her and bore her off.”

Somebody snickered. Bea flushed and moved against me.

"Is everybody going nuts?" Nerry demanded. "Monsters and gods and a body just disappearing. Tomorrow I’ll have the lake dragged. We’ll find her all right."

I put an arm about Bea’s waist and we walked slowly toward the camp. Mary Jardine was too good a swimmer to have drowned save if she had been caught in some underwater growth or had hit her head on the bottom. And I had been down there a minute later. It didn’t make sense, unless one took Georgie’s idiotic words about a lake god seriously—and that wouldn’t have made sense either.

CHAPTER TWO

Return of Mary Jardine

At ten o’clock that night most of the guests were dancing in the social hall. Supper hadn’t been a particularly cheerful meal, but the gloom had worn off quickly enough. The guests, who were paying good money for their vacations, weren’t going to let a small matter like a drowning spoil their fun.

I walked alone along the shore of the lake, looking at the quiet water shimmering in the moonlight. In the social hall, Bea Hart, accompanied by the band, was singing a plaintive love song. Her voice wasn’t anything exceptional, but always in the past it had been very pleasant to listen to. It wasn’t now. She was so flat that it hurt.

Was it the mysterious death of Mary Jardine that bothered her, I wondered, or something more personal, something that touched her more directly? From the moment we had seen Georgie standing in the swamp, I had sensed a fear, or something worse than fear, emanating from her.

A three-quarter moon had a cloudless sky all to itself tonight. I looked over the placid water and wondered if truly anything infinitely monstrous lived in it. Nonsense, of course. The biggest thing in the lake was an ancient snapping turtle measuring two feet in length.

Bea’s song stopped and there was a scattering of polite applause. Then the band struck up a number.

The social hall overlooked the lake, with the front veranda standing directly over the water on stone piers. I went up the three steps to the side veranda and moved around to the front.

As I turned the corner, I heard a voice say: "I tell you the life guard nearest the drowning is responsible. If I’d been there instead of at the crib, that girl would be alive now. The trouble with David is that he spends too much time on the lake looking at Bea instead of attending to business.”

It was Pete Cooke, my assistant, talking. He was a smooth looking lad with thin lips which were generally surly. He’d never liked me because he believed that our positions should have been reversed. He’d been slated for the chief life guard’s job until my application had come in.

"Nuts!" Buster Ramsey, the social director, snapped. He was a dapper man, given to loud sports clothes, who aspired
to be an actor. "I wasn't twenty feet away and David acted as quickly as possible. I say there's something screwy about the whole thing."

Cooke laughed through his nostrils. "That's David's alibi. It's always easy to blame something else when your inefficiency has let somebody die."

Charlie Banks, who had been leaning against the railing, straightened his big bulk. He was athletic director and roomed with me. Lazily he removed his pipe and tapped a forefinger against Cooke's chest.

"I think, Pete, that you are going to get your face pushed in," he drawled.

I stepped forward. "I can handle my own battles, Charlie," I said. "Except that tonight we've all got to fight together against something out there in the lake."

"Getting mystical?" Cooke's lips curled. "That's always the way of a yellow-belly."

BUSTER RAMSEY drew in his breath and both he and Charlie waited for me to take a poke at Cooke. It was plain that Cooke was deliberately trying to goad me into striking him on the hope that I might be fired and he'd step into my job. And I suppose I would have done it too. I haven't an easy temper and I don't like being called yellow.

I started for him. It was the scream which stopped me.

As one, the four of us turned. A boy and girl, who had been necking on one of the stone benches near the social hall, were on their feet, staring at a spot of white where the water met the land. The girl screamed again. I saw that the white thing, half in and half out, was the naked body of a girl.

I was the first to reach her, and behind me came Charlie Banks and Buster Ramsey and Pete Cooke and everybody else who had been in the social hall. I didn't have to look at the girl's face to know that Mary Jardine had returned.

She was alive—or rather, there was a spark of life still in her. Her arms, which had been thrashing feebly, as if she were trying to swim on land, fell limp as I got my hands on her shoulders and pulled her all the way on shore. Charlie helped me turn her over on her back.

Other voices screamed then, and they were not all female voices. Mary Jardine's naked body was a shambles. Her lovely breasts were practically gone, and there weren't many other parts of her which were anything but bloody, ragged flesh. She'd managed to live that long only by a miracle. Her eyes were closed and her lips motionless, but her pulse throbbed faintly.

I swept her up in my arms and trotted with her to the administration bungalow. Men ran at my side. I kicked open the door to the rest room and placed her on the couch.

Dr. English, the camp doctor, arrived at the bungalow a minute after I did. As he was bending over Mary Jardine, Nerry came in, his dead cigar working furiously between his lips.

"Clear the room!" he ordered. "Charlie, don't let anybody in here and get the other members of the staff to quiet the guests."

I stayed in the room. Nerry glared at me, then grunted and walked over to the couch. Dr. English, his face blanched, threw a cover over the girl. She was dead—mercifully.

"Well?" Nerry asked.

Dr. English shook his head. "I can't understand it. Her body has been horribly clawed, as if by a monster."

"Tripe!" Nerry snapped. "She drowned and fish ate part of her."

"No," I said. "She was alive when I got her. And she was still alive when Doc saw her."

"That's right," Dr. English said. He kept on shaking his head. "But it's incredible how she could have been under water all this time and lived."
“She must have swam over to the swamp,” Nerry hazarded. “The brambles tore her to pieces. She just had enough strength left to return.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t make any more sense. I tell you she couldn’t have swum to the camp without having been seen.”

NERRY’S shoulders slumped. “My God, this will ruin the camp. There’s a rumor going around that there’s some kind of monster in the lake, and you, David, are doing your best to help spread it. Does anybody beside you and Doc know that she was alive?”

“I doubt it,” I said.

“All right.” Nerry waved his cigar. “Just what happened to her we don’t know, but we’re not children. We know there’s no monster living in this lake—and if there were and he dragged her a mile under water to the swamp, she couldn’t possibly be alive. I still think she got to the swamp under her own power—God knows how!—and the brambles did that to her. But if we tell that kind of story, our guests will get crazy ideas about monsters and lake gods and what not. Because we don’t know why she went. By tomorrow there won’t be a guest left. I’ll be ruined and thirty people will be without jobs, including you two. Here’s the story. She drowned and her body was washed ashore. She’s been dead at least five hours.”

Dr. English and I looked at each other and then at Nerry. “I think we ought to call in the police,” Dr. English muttered.

“What will that do beside ruin the camp?” Nerry said. “Will you tell me how on earth she could have been murdered?”

Dr. English bit his lip and then nodded. Nerry looked at me. There was silence while my mind raced.

Perhaps, after all, Mary Jardine in some way or other had managed to reach the swamp without having been seen—drawn by the hellish force which had pulled her to Georgie that afternoon. It could have been Georgie who had done that to her. But what proof had I? The police would simply laugh at me, and all that it would accomplish, as Nerry had pointed out, would be to throw the staff out of their jobs with the season hardly started. All of them needed their jobs as much as I did mine.

“All right,” I said reluctantly.

 Nearly everybody in the camp was gathered outside the bungalow. When Nerry and I appeared there was a sudden silence. He made a short speech in which he said that Mary Jardine had regrettably been drowned, as they all knew, and her body, torn by rocks, had been washed ashore. The girl who had been the first to see her interrupted hysterically to state that she had observed Mary Jardine’s arms moving. Nerry smiled patronizingly and spoke about optical illusions caused by moonlight, and everybody else smiled a little. He said that there was no reason for anybody to be nervous, that camp life would go on as before, that where there were swimmers there were sometimes drownings, and that henceforth the life guards would be doubly vigilant.

For a while the guests continued to stand about in little whispering knots. Then little by little they trickled toward their cabins.

Bea Hunt had moved to my side as soon as I had come out, and she stayed there. She smiled wanly up at me as we walked arm in arm to the staff bungalow.

“I had all sorts of silly notions about what had happened to Mary Jardine, but Nerry explained it reasonably,” she said. “Frankly, I had been worried and a little afraid. I had the ridiculous idea that Mary Jardine’s death was somehow tied up with Georgie.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I’ve a confession to make, darling,” she
went on. "When Georgie looked at me while I was in the boat, I felt—well, I can't explain it exactly, but it was something unspeakably vile."

My scalp tightened. "Vile?" I said. "You mean you wanted to go to him?"

She put her face against the side of my arm. "It's not easy to tell you this. I felt a wave of revulsion come over me, of course; he's always affected me in that way. But there was also something—well, fascinating about him." She laughed hollowly. "Don't get me wrong, darling. It was the kind of fascination every repulsive thing has."

Yes, I told myself dully, that was it. But all the same I was afraid.

At the door to her room I held her tightly in my arms and we kissed many times. I hated to let her go, but my own room was two doors away and it would be easy to keep watch over her.

CHARLIE BANKS was undressing when I entered our room. I lit a cigarette and sat down at the window. The staff bungalow was el shaped and from my room I could see Bea's window. The shades were drawn and the light was on.

"Mary Jardine wasn't dead," Charlie said bleakly as he pulled off a shoe. "I was right behind you and I saw her move and it wasn't a trick of the moonlight."

"She died in the bungalow," I told him quietly.

His second shoe thumped on the floor. "I suppose Nerry's story was wisest. What on earth do you think happened to her?"

"Maybe nothing on earth. Or maybe nothing that belongs on earth."

"Don't get light-headed," Charlie said. "We'll have a better chance to figure it out in the morning. Coming to bed?"

"Not yet."

The light in Bea's room went out. The sole entrance to the bungalow was right next to my window and I could see if any-body entered or left. I could also see the broad lawn which fronted the guest cabins.

The one and two-room log cabins nestled in a semi-circular black birch forest around the lawn. Nerry was able to charge stiff rates by offering rustic surroundings combined with country club sports facilities and city comforts. The logs with which the cabins were built were as genuine as the tiled hot and cold showers in each cabin. The clientele, on the whole, was divided between those who could easily afford the exorbitant rates, and the stenographers and bank clerks who skimped all year for a two-weeks' spree in the summer. We had some pretty rich people as guests and some pretty poor ones, and it wasn't always easy to tell which was which, except perhaps that the poor ones tipped more lavishly.

Several hours dragged by, and still I sat at the window. All lights had long ago gone out. Nothing stirred. Below my window a katy-did sang persistently.

Suddenly my nodding head jerked up. A hulking form was shuffling across the lawn. The moon was bright enough for me to see him clearly, but even in dimmer light I would have recognized the slouching gait and powerful hunched shoulders and bared barrel chest of the idiot Georgie.

I was halfway out of my chair when the second figure came into view. It was that of a girl, racing barefooted with wild hair flowing down her shoulders, and she wore nothing but a pair of transparent sleeping pajamas. Georgie had already disappeared amid the black birches. Eagerly she ran after him.

CHAPTER THREE

Lust of the Damned

AT THAT distance and in that uncertain light I could not recognize her. Past my mind flashed the chilling thought
that she might be Bea Hart. It was bare-
ly possible that while I had been nodding
sleepily, Bea had slipped unseen out of
the bungalow to keep an unholy tryst with
the idiot.

I froze at the window, trying to dis-
tinguish who she was. I couldn’t. Then
she too disappeared amid the black
birches.

As I snatched a flashlight from the top
of my dresser, I recalled Bea’s words
about how, while Georgie had been look-
ing at her from the swamp that afternoon,
something unspeakably vile and yet fas-
cinating had possessed her. I stopped off at
Bea’s room, and my hand trembled as I
gripped the doorknob.

Fortunately the door wasn’t locked.
Moonlight streaming into the tiny room
revealed Bea soundly asleep in bed.

With a sigh of relief, I shut the door
and went out of the bungalow. Noise-
lessly I padded across the clearing toward
the spot where both Georgie and the girl
had entered the woods.

When I stepped in among the trees, I
had to use my flashlight. There was no
sound of human voices. I moved around,
Spraying the light, not sure what I was
going to do if I did come across Georgie
and the girl. Possibly I would be able to
beat some sort of confession out of him
which would make more sense than his
wild raving about a lake god having told
him how to make the girls like him and
come to him.

It took me five minutes to find them.
Even when my flashlight shone fully on
them, they weren’t at first aware of my
presence. That Georgie had made some
hellish pact with an incredible lake god or,
more likely, with the devil himself,
seemed probable at that moment; for only
some other-world power could have made
a sweet girl like Emma Carley thirst for
the obscene caresses of the idiot.

I had recognized her at once. She’d
been at camp for a couple of weeks now—
a sweet, unassuming little blonde of about
nineteen, who, as far as I knew, was one
of the few girls at the place who didn’t
slip away evenings with members of the
staff or unattached male guests. And now
here she was with her red mouth pressed
against Georgie’s bloated lips!

Georgie had ripped open the front of
her pajama coat and one of his stubby,
dirty hands was impatiently pulling it
down her back, while his other hand was
cressing a curved white breast. Her tor-
sso was squirming, but not in an attempt
to break away from him. Indeed, she
was throwing herself against his grime-
covered, hair-matted chest, and with her
own hands she was eagerly helping him
denude herself completely. His tiny idiot
eyes were yellow coals of lust, and on her
face I saw the same expression of lustful
idiocy.

My stomach turned in me. And for
moments my unbelief held me silent and
motionless.

Georgie was aware of my presence first.
His head came up and he blinked in the
light. Suddenly he swept Emma Carley
up in his arms and dashed in the opposite
direction from where I stood. I went after
him.

I’d raced a couple of hundred feet
through the trees when I came across
Emma Carley lying on the ground. When
I bent over her, she sprang up, evidently
unhurt. Georgie must have realized that,
burdened with her weight, he would have
difficulty outrunning me, and so he had
simply dropped her.

WITh a moan she threw her bare arms
about me and flung her torso, nude
now save for tattered pajama trousers,
against me. I broke her grip, threw her
off; but she’d delayed me long enough to
give Georgie a chance to get away. I
don’t think she did it deliberately. I was
a man, and so, because of the horrible
thing that had been done to her, she
wanted me, just as she had wanted Georgie.

She grabbed my legs and pulled herself up along my body. Then she was against me again, and I confess that it was something of a temptation to return her embrace. But I managed to fight down the rushing blood at the feel of her attractive, almost naked body. I pinned her arms behind her back and lifted her and carried her toward her cabin.

She kept squirming and moaning and groping for my mouth with hers. I was busy fighting her off, and at the same time maintaining the mood to fight her off. Yes, she was desirable.

I kicked open the door of her cabin, thankful that she didn’t share it with another girl and that we had met nobody on the way. Without bothering to be gentle, I dropped her into the shower and turned on the cold water full force. She sputtered and tried to get out, but I shoved her back, getting myself a thorough wetting in the process. I’m a firm believer in the virtue of cold showers; they’re good for a lot of things. And this shower was good for her.

When I at last turned the water off, she was shivering violently, frozen to the bone. I dried her thoroughly, grimly thinking that I was getting practice for being a lady’s personal maid. All resistance or lust had gone out of her. She stood docilely as a child until I finished. Then I picked her up and tossed her into bed and drew the cover over her.

“Why did you go out to meet Georgie?” I asked.

She looked stupidly up at me. The lust in her eyes had been replaced by a dull film. I repeated the question a couple of times. She buried her head under the pillow and pulled the blanket up to her neck. In a couple of minutes she was asleep.

The whole business was mad, of course. I wasn’t sure if I was dreaming this or not.

I locked the windows from the inside and the door from the outside and returned to the staff bungalow.

Once again I opened the door to Bea’s room.

She was breathtakingly lovely as she lay in the moonlight which streamed over her bed. The blanket covered her only to her hips and the low-cut nightgown revealed the upper slopes of adorable breasts which were milky white in contrast to the vigorous tan of her throat and arms and face.

Georgie had said to Bea: “You’re pretty too. I can make you like me. The lake god told me how.”

No, I didn’t believe in the possible existence of lake gods or anything like them; but the fact was that Mary Jardine had mysteriously disappeared and even more mysteriously returned after she had been drawn to Georgie, and that as innocent a girl as Emma Carley had thrown herself at Georgie. I recalled how the idiot had looked at Bea with unholy desire and something cold and clammy slithered over my heart.

IN MY room I awoke Charlie Banks and told him what had happened. He sat up with the sleep suddenly gone from his eyes.

“Hey, are you trying to pull my leg?” he demanded. “I tried to make this Carley girl and I couldn’t get to first base. Neither could any of the other boys. And you try to tell me that she and this idiot Georgie—”

“It’s the truth, Charlie,” I said. “I can hardly bring myself to believe it. I want you to get dressed and watch her cabin until morning. Here’s the key. I’m going to plunk myself outside of Bea’s room.”

He nodded and threw his clothes on. “I’d like to get my hands on this Georgie,” he muttered as he went out. “I want the first chance,” I said.

When the breakfast bell rang, Charlie
returned. He was as sleepy-eyed as myself. Nothing else had happened during the remainder of the night. We took cold showers.

"I guess we ought to get the sheriff after Georgie," Charlie suggested.

"On what grounds? That I caught him making love to Emma Carley? That's no crime. And think of what it will do to her reputation."

"I guess that's right," he agreed. "But we ought to do something."

"Such as?"

"I wish to hell I knew."

That was just the way I felt.

I stopped off for Bea and we went down to the dining hall. Emma Carley was already there, and when we passed her table, she looked up and nodded as if nothing at all had happened during the night. I'd expected her to at least flush at the recollection that I'd given her a shower and dried her, to say nothing of my having seen her make wanton love to Georgie and then try to do the same thing to me. She wasn't that good an actress. The only explanation was that the events of the night were a complete blank in her mind.

The horror I'd been feeling since I'd stopped Mary Jardine from swimming out to Georgie heightened. Something could not only turn her into a creature of evil, but could also make that period disappear from her memory.

As the sun rose higher, the heat mounted also. Most of the guests started to trickle down to the lake an hour after breakfast. The only thing that would have kept them out of the water was fear, and they weren't afraid because they didn't know what I knew, or thought I knew.

I had a lot of work to do. First, to persuade Bea not to go near the water.

"Why not?" she demanded. "Do you think the same thing will happen to somebody else as happened to Mary Jardine yesterday?"

"It's remotely possible," I muttered. "Then why not keep everybody out of the water?"

"Because I haven't the power to," I said. "Nerry would fire me if I ordered them out of the lake, and nobody would take me seriously if I told what I feared. For my sake, darling, you'll stay out?"

She said yes and I kissed her and left her. I rounded up everybody on the staff who was a good swimmer—Charlie Banks, Buster Ramsey, a waiter named Joe Martin, a couple of musicians named Cal and Manny. Counting Pete Cooke and myself, there were seven of us.

"I'm going to try to keep the swimmers concentrated around the float," I told them. "We don't have to worry about the non-swimmers in the crib. The seven of us are going to enclose the swimmers in a sort of circle and we'll keep our eyes peeled every minute. If anything goes wrong, we'll all dive at once, and we'll keep diving until we find something."

"What?" Pete Cooke asked with a sneer. "A mermaid who's lonely? Or rather, a merman?"

"Shut up!" I snapped. "I'm giving orders. If you want to go home, say so."

Cooke grinned. "I like it here. I also like playing games in the water."

Buster Ramsey said: "You really think there's something in the lake that'll try to nab another swimmer."

"No. I don't. But we're not taking any chances. Maybe I'm being a sap, but I wouldn't care if it might save a life. One more thing, fellows. Don't let anybody know what we're about. Pete, you stay near the west side of the float. Charlie, you take the east side. Joe, hang around in a boat about a hundred feet north. Cal, be ready for a quick dive off the far end of the crib. Buster and Manny, float and swim about between the crib and the float. I'll be in a boat. Let's go."

Emma Carley didn't come down to the
lake. I was glad and sorry at the same time.

Nothing happened that morning. The fellows became bored and shot me amused looks. When the first bell for dinner rang and everybody cleared out of the lake, they kidded me about my master-minding having scared off the lake god or monster of Black Birch Lake or merman or whatever it was that had a yen for pretty girls. All I said was that I expected them to maintain the same positions that afternoon. Charlie Banks was the only one who remained silent. He kept looking at me with a queer expression in his eyes.

Late that afternoon I saw Emma Carley walking down to the water. A tight knot formed in my stomach as I watched her trim little figure dive off the dock. When she reached my boat, she held onto the gunwale for a minute and discussed the swell swimming weather we'd been having lately. Her eyes, looking up at me, were clean and innocent, and again I got a distinct feeling that I must have dreamed the events of last night.

I tied my boat to the dock and swam back, staying as close and as unobtrusive near her as possible. Charlie also had his gaze fixed on her.

I wasn't more than fifteen or twenty feet away from her when it happened. I'd turned my head away from her for a few moments, and when I looked again in her direction, she wasn't there any more.

That might or might not mean anything. She could simply have ducked under water for a couple of seconds. But I went under water anyway, and as I did so, Charlie Banks dove from the float.

I couldn't find her. I stayed down as long as I could, swimming under water to the spot where I had seen her last. As I started to the surface for air, a grey, waving shape came toward me. I grabbed at it, and at the same time the shape grabbed me.

Charlie Banks and I came to the top together, arms about each other. I yelled to the other fellows. Some of them were already diving. Then Charlie and I went down again.

It was the same as yesterday all over again. Nothing could possibly have broken through our circle. But after a few minutes it was obvious that something had, taking Emma Carley with it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Overturned Boat

The ringing of the first supper bell made us at last give up our futile underwater search. And like yesterday a crowd was waiting for us on the shore, except that they were more silent today and the shadow of fear hung over each of them.

Cuthbert Nerry took his dead cigar from between his lips when I climbed on the dock, opened his mouth, then shut it again without saying anything. What was there to say? I went past him to where Bea was again waiting for me with my beach-robe. There wasn't any color in her face. I patted her arm and got into the robe and we started off together.

For two or three minutes we walked in silence. Then Bea's voice came low and quavering: "What's down there, David? If you hadn't persuaded me to stay out of the water, I might have been the one to have been taken."

"No," I said. "You were safe enough."

Only one girl had been in danger that day—the girl who had sought to make love to Georgie. Yesterday it had been Mary Jardine; today Emma Carley. And I had let Emma go to her death.

A hand touched my shoulder. Pete Cooke and Buster Ramsey had come up behind us. It was Cooke's hand.

"I'm sorry about what I said last night, David," Cooke apologized. "This afternoon I was as close to Emma Carley as
you, and I couldn’t do anything to save her either. You’re right, David—it’s uncanny.”

“Uncanny’s a mild word for it,” Buster Ramsey put in. “I could swear that it couldn’t have happened, and yet—Well, anyway, this time we’re sure she didn’t swim to the swamp.”

I nodded and said nothing and went on with Bea. Something heavy in my throat kept me from talking.

At the door of her room I left Bea and entered my own room.

Charlie was there ahead of me, stripping off his swimming trunks. He turned slowly when he saw me, and for what seemed a long time we looked at each other.

Then he said in a flat, emotionless tone: “Damn you, David! You deliberately sent that girl to her death!”

He had guessed, then. I gulped and did not answer.

“You knew that Emma Carley and Bea Hart were in danger,” he went on bitterly. “That’s why you asked me to guard Emma last night while you guarded Bea. This morning you told Bea not to go into the water, but you let Emma go. I suppose you were laying a trap for whatever took Mary Jardine.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I figured that with all of us on guard, the thing couldn’t harm her.”

“You used that poor girl for bait,” Charlie spat out. “Why didn’t you use Bea?”

“Because it wasn’t her the thing wanted. Not today. Georgie makes the girls desire him, and then the thing in the lake takes them. It was after Emma today. Don’t you see that we have to stop it, and I thought that would be the only way?”

With a snort of disgust he strode into the bathroom and slammed the door after him. I dressed and called for Bea.

We were late for supper. As soon as we entered the dining hall, I felt the gloom. And covered by the gloom, ready to burst forth and overwhelm the camp, was panic.

HALFWAY through the meal, Nerry made a speech. It was the same sort of speech as last night, but there was less conviction in his voice. Then Buster Ramsey got up. He announced that there would be no social program that night; that he thought it would be a good idea if a number of men would take boats and cruise about the lake.

He didn’t tell why. He didn’t have to. If Emma Carley returned in the same way as Mary Jardine had, there might still be
a remote possibility of saving her—or, at any rate, of discovering what had abducted her and how.

Charlie Banks came in and made a point of not sitting down at the table with me. I felt like hell.

Not as many people fled the camp after supper as might have been expected. First of all, the men felt duty bound to help cover the lake, and their wives and sweethearts remained with them. In addition, not many guests had yet fully realized the horror which had gripped the camp; in the midst of a heat spell it would be extremely inconvenient to pack up and search for another summer resort to finish out their vacations.

I hated to leave Bea out of my sight, but my place was on the lake with the others and certainly she was safer on shore. I went in a canoe with Buster Ramsey.

For several hours every boat and canoe—about fifteen in all—was on the lake. Nothing but serenity. I kept near the swamp. All quiet there, too, save for the cacophony of myriad insects.

And then the sound for which we had all been waiting cut through the night. A voice calling out on the other side of the lake. All the boats started converging in that direction. The lake was dotted with flashlights.

Ramsey and I had been furthest away, but our canoe fairly leaped in the water and we were among the first to reach the spot. On a grassy slope, just beyond where the swamp ended, the naked form lay. Pete Cooke, who had discovered the body, had lifted her in his arms and was carrying her into a canoe.

“She’s alive!” he cried.

Charlie Banks was handling the paddle. His mighty back swayed back and forth as he sent the canoe toward the camp. Cutting across the lake was shorter than by land.

The rest of us followed. We were grim and silent and afraid. I’d got one glimpse of Emma Carley and I didn’t need any more. Her body was no longer white. It was covered with a mantle of blood.

She had been unconscious when Pete Cooke and Charlie Banks had found her, and she never regained consciousness. For an hour we stood outside the administration building. Then Dr. English came out and soberly announced that she was dead.

Bea sobbed quietly against my chest. At my side Buster Ramsey whispered: “She was probably carried from the swamp and dumped on the shore. Pete says that only half of her body, the half which was in the water, was wet.”

“But she was alive!” a guest named Sidney Kearns whispered hoarsely. “She couldn’t have got to the swamp alive. I was on the float when she went down and took care to watch the other side all the time.”

There it was again—impossible, but it had happened!

Ramsey said: “Why the hell don’t we clean out the swamp?”

Charlie Banks’ voice rose quietly. “Did you ever try going in there? All of us combined couldn’t cover a hundred square feet of it, especially at night. Tomorrow the police will come, but I doubt if even they will be able to do the job.”

“Tomorrow!” Kearns laughed mirthlessly. “Tomorrow there won’t be a single soul left here. I’m not ashamed to admit that I’m getting away as soon as I can.”

THAT was when, for the second time that night, we heard a frantic voice calling us from the direction of the lake. The women held back and some of the men, but the rest of us ran like mad in that direction.

One of the musicians, who had gone to the social hall for a sweater he had left there, had seen the overturned rowboat. It was his voice which we heard.

The flat bottom of the rowboat was
floating only about fifty feet from the shore. A few of us got into boats and pulled it to the dock and turned it over. Those flat-bottom rowboats capsize only with the greatest difficulty. In view of preceding events, it seemed clear that somebody from outside the boat had turned it over, spilling whoever had been in it into the water. We didn’t have to guess at what had happened after that. The same dreadful thing which had reached out for Mary Jardine and Emma Carley now had the occupant or occupants of the boat in its power.

There were about twenty of us on the dock, nearly all men, and we simply stood looking helplessly at each other. Once more I’d left Bea behind, and I started worrying over her, but my place was there on the lake.

“What are you waiting for?” Nerry growled. His cigar was not in his mouth or between his fingers. “Get out on the lake and look. There might still be time. And some of you go along the shore.”

We didn’t move any too quickly, each of us certain in our hearts that it was too late. It was always too late.

Buster Ramsey and I again got into a canoe together. We’d hardly taken a couple of strokes when a medley of loud voices rose from the shore. We returned to the dock.

Not many feet to the side of the dock the body of Will Madison had been found. From the waist up he was out of the water. He lay flat on his face, his arms outflung. There seemed to be no sign of violence on him until Pete Cooke turned him over on his back, and then we saw the ugly gash on his temple.

“Just knocked out, I think,” Cooke said, and a couple of us helped Cooke work on him. Within a minute or two his eyelids fluttered open.

Will Madison blinked into the flashlights shining down at him, then sat up with a jerk. “Fannie!” he moaned.

So there had been two in that boat! I thought of his wife, Fannie Madison, a tall, attractive brunette. They’d been married only a few months, I’d heard—a couple of nice kids, very popular with the staff and the guests. Now the lake god or whatever it was had taken her.

Madison ran his hands over his forehead. He said haltingly, as if it hurt him to remember: “I was out in a rowboat with Fannie, helping the others search for Emma Carley. I shouldn’t have taken her along, I guess, but she insisted and we both thought it was something of a lark. When Emma Carley was found, we started back with the others. Fannie got hysterical at the sight of that poor girl and I stopped to comfort her and our boat lagged behind the others. We were close to shore when something grabbed the side of our boat and turned it over. We’re both good swimmers, but she didn’t come up to the surface. Frantic, I dove. Under the water, something grabbed me and held me under. I fought like mad, but I didn’t have much chance against it. When I couldn’t draw another breath, I broke away and came up. The thing was right behind me. Before I could turn to meet it, the whole sky seemed to fall down on me. That’s all I knew till I woke up just now.”

“Have you any idea what you were fighting?” Ramsey asked.

“No,” Madison said. “It was too dark under the water. But it felt like a man, although I’m not sure.”

“It was a man all right,” Charlie Banks grunted. “A monster doesn’t sock people over the head.”

“But it wasn’t a man who pulled the first two girls away under the water,” Cooke put in.

“Fannie!” Madison shrieked his wife’s name and sprang to his feet. “You didn’t find her? She—she’s out there with—it?”

Nobody had the heart to answer him.
His shoulders slumped and he stood there sobbing.

Suddenly I stepped toward him. "What's that around your neck?" I asked.

He looked down at the tiny rubber bag tied by a string around his neck. Stupidly he fingered it.

"This?" he muttered. "I don't know."

He removed it. The string drew it together, making the inside of the bag water-tight. Out of the bag his trembling fingers drew a sheet of yellow paper. By the light of my flash I read the message over Madison's shoulder. Tiny black letters printed with a hard pencil said:

Your wife, Fannie Madison, is in the hands of the lake god, as, by this time, you no doubt know. We are in a position to intercede for her. If you follow our instructions exactly, she will be returned unharmed. If you do not, she will come back in precisely the same way as Mary Jardine and Emma Carley.

In return for using our good offices with the lake god, our fee will be fifty thousand dollars. In addition, you will shortly learn that Adele Lane and Carol Berkwell have also fallen into the power of the lake god tonight. The same offer holds for them. We advise that Gridley Lane and John Berkwell, parents of the girls, be communicated with at once.

The lake god will wait no more than twenty-four hours. At the conclusion of that period we will not longer be able to hold him off and they will meet the same fate as Mary Jardine and Emma Carley.

When you, Madison, have raised the fifty thousand dollars in small, unmarked bills, burn a single flare on the dock. When Lane's money is ready, burn two flares. Three flares will tell us that Berkwell has fifty thousand dollars prepared.

In view of the fact that we can hold the lake god off for only twenty-four hours, we suggest that you do not waste valuable time in a vain search for us or the lake god or the girls.

I TOOK the note from Will Madison's numb fingers and read it aloud.

"So that's it?" Nerry exclaimed. "Kidnap-
“Our jobs are gone. The camp is ruined.”

“I haven’t been officially notified yet,” she insisted. “As far as I’m concerned, I still have a job. Anyway, I’m too tired now to think of anything but bed.”

I realized then how weary I myself was. It was not only because I hadn’t slept that night. It was as much the strain and the gnawing consciousness that I was responsible for sending Emma Carley to her death.

At her door we kissed briefly. Then in my own room I again took up my post at the window. Somehow, I resolved, I would manage to keep myself awake another night.

Within a few minutes the light went out in Bea’s room. I burned cigarettes. From the window I saw the guests in flight. Then little by little the noises and the confusion died away, and all the lights, save those in the administration building, went out. No doubt Will Madison was frantically trying to get his father to raise the fifty thousand dollars, while Nerry was communicating with the parents of Adele Lane and Carol Berkwell and the police.

Under my window the katy-did started singing. Charlie Banks hadn’t come in yet. Vaguely I wondered about that, then my mind grew hazy as my weary head started to droop on my chest.

Suddenly I was awake. A nearby door had opened and closed. I looked at Bea’s window, saw that it was still dark, then went out into the hall. And there was Bea.

Her back was toward me. She was walking toward the front door on bare feet and she wore nothing but the sheerest of nightgowns. By the light of the naked electric bulb which hung overhead, I could see every curve of her body through the spider-web material.

“Bea!”

She turned to face me. Her lips parted in a smile and I saw the gleam of her white teeth. She came to me quickly and threw herself into my arms.

I stood rigid, every slow, heavy beat of my heart audible in my ears. This girl in my arms wasn’t the girl I knew and loved. Her body was familiar, yes—soft and warm and enticing through the thin material. But something had happened to her face—something strange and ugly. There was a strange fire in her eyes and a slackness about her mouth, and there was something subtly weaker, almost degenerate, about the rest of her features.

With a hoarse moan, she pressed her lips against mine. Her nearly nude body put fire into my veins, but it also sent crawling horror in my brain. Roughly I pushed her away. Then, remembering how throwing Emma Carley under the cold shower had helped last night, I lifted her from the floor.

She continued to writhe and moan with desire, pressed herself against me, glued her mouth against mine.

I was too occupied holding onto Bea to hear sound behind me, if there were any. A terrific impact against the base of my skull knocked me stumbling forward. I felt Bea fall from my arms. I tried to catch her. Then the blow was repeated and blackness possessed my brain before I hit the floor. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Swamp of Evil

ABRUPTLY consciousness flooded back. I sat up, resting my back against the wall and pressed my fingers against my throbbing temples. There was nobody in the hall.

Pressing my palms against the wall, I pulled myself groggily up to my feet. The door to Bea’s room was closed. I pushed it open and switched on the light. She
Cuthbert Nerry was still making calls to the two other girls' parents and to the police. They couldn't help me. Nobody could help until it would be too late.

It seemed an eternity before I reached the lake. I got into a canoe. Weights seemed attached to my wrists as I paddled. I headed straight across the lake.

At last the canoe was nosing in among thick lily pads and then between some kind of red berry bushes which grew out of the muddy water. When the canoe stuck, I swung my legs over the side. Mud oozed up to my knees; water came as high as my waist. I sloughed forward to ground which was covered by only a couple of inches of mud.

There was no path in the swamp; nothing but a mass of almost impenetrable slimy growth. Brambles made tatters of my shirt and pants. Sometimes I was on dry land; sometimes on thick layers of roots; sometimes in several feet of stagnant water. Direction had no meaning. I could wander for hours without moving far from the same spot.

But I had to go on. Somewhere there must be a path. It was impossible for even Georgie to make his way without one. I had entered the swamp at the place where I had seen the idiot standing yesterday when Mary Jardine had been swimming toward him.

AFTER a while nerves alone carried me on through the small section of the nightmare world which was scooped out of the night by the beam of my flashlight. I slumped against the trunk of a gigantic tree, wondering if I would ever again have the energy to move.

And then, above the chatter of insects, I heard laughter almost in my ears. Two voices laughing—a man and a woman. Bea and Georgie!

Somehow I roused myself and started in the direction of the voices. Then I
thought better of it. After a few steps I might lose the direction. I returned to the huge dead tree whose gnarled, barkless branches began a few feet from the ground. Calling up what strength remained in me, I climbed the tree. Slowly I pulled myself above the highest nearby growth, and after a few feet more I saw them.

The moon was directly above the clearing which was some three hundred feet away. I saw two girls and two men—Fannie Madison and Adele Lane and Georgie and a thin man I'd never seen before. Neither of the girls wore a stitch of clothing.

Fannie Madison was doing a wild, obscene dance, while the thin man divided his attention between watching her and drinking out of a bottle. Georgie was fondling the white body of Adele Lane who was simpering with obvious pleasure.

Where was Bea?

Suddenly a form stepped from a copse of dead trees and strode across the clearing. My eyes popped; my body jerked with astonishment. The newcomer was Charlie Banks.

It might have been the sudden movement of my body which broke the rotted branch on which I rested. Or perhaps my weight would have snapped it anyway. I fell.

The soggy ground kept me from being injured. For a while I lay there, too tired, too heart sick to rise. Then, with the thought that Bea must be near the others, I lifted myself to my feet.

I did not hear the voices again. For a time I blundered around. During the fall I'd lost my flash; moonlight couldn't trickle through the growth.

Presently I saw a patch of moonlight ahead. When I reached it, I stood on the shore of the lake.

I was some distance from where I had left the canoe. It might take me the rest of the night to get to it. The only hope for Bea and the others was for me to get help at once. Starting from this point, we could spread out and close in on them. We would get every man who remained at camp, rouse the neighboring farmers, urge the state police to hurry.

Pulling off my tattered shirt and trousers and kicking off my shoes, I waded into the water. The camp dock was less than a mile away. Ordinarily the distance would have meant nothing to me. Now I had hardly the strength of a kitten left.

But as I swam, strength flowed back into me. It must have been the blow on my head rather than lack of sleep which had weakened me, and now, aided by the cool water, the effects were wearing off. Halfway across the lake I was stroking smoothly.

I was passing the float when the thought struck me. Probably the knowledge that Charlie Banks was in with the fiends gave me the idea. He'd been near the float when Emma Carley had disappeared; and
now that I thought of it, also when Mary Jardine had not come to the surface. And it occurred to me how it could have been managed.

I got my hands on the side of the float and worked my way under the surface. The float rested on airtight drums. Because swimmers sometimes scraped their bodies on the rough sides of the drums, Pete Cooke and I had nailed a five-foot border of boards around them.

WITH my head under water, I felt for the edge of the boards. Instead of my hand coming up on the other side of the border, it was stopped by a floor. It had no business being there. Somebody had built it, forming a five-foot high water-filled compartment under the float.

I came up, took in air, and went down again. Knowing what I was looking for, it wasn’t hard to find. A door swung open in the compartment. I didn’t bother to go in. It was pitch dark under the water, and besides, I knew all I had to do.

Charlie Banks, or an accomplice hiding in the chamber, had grabbed the girls under water and pulled them in and closed the door. Of course it was filled with water, but no doubt breathing tubes, with outlets among the lily pads near the shore, ran into it. The accomplice could lie in the chamber and breath through the tube for hours if necessary. And when he got a girl in there, he shoved one of the tubes into her mouth. She had a choice of breathing through it or of drowning. She could make no outcry. Perhaps there were chains in there to which she was fastened. Later, when nobody was left on the lake, she was removed to the swamp.

So much for the mumbo-jumbo about the lake god. But Charlie and the others were many times more fiendish than any supernatural creature.

Quickly I swam to the dock. Weariness and despair were gone. Inwardly I was a seething ball of rage. Forgetting that I was clad only in a pair of clinging wet shorts, I strode toward the administration bungalow.

Feet crunched on the other side of a weeping willow which I was approaching. Some instinct caused me to stop dead. Joe Martin, one of the waiters, came into view, walking swiftly and stealthily toward the swamp.

There could be only one reason why anybody in camp would want to go to the swamp at this time of the night. Joe Martin was one of Charlie Banks’ accomplices. He was hurrying to get his share of the girls.

CHAPTER SIX

Road to Hell

NOISELESSLY I followed Joe Martin. Until he reached the beginning of the swamp, it was easy enough. My troubles began when he entered the thick, soggy growth.

There wasn’t really a path. It was more of a shadow of a route along which the growth was thinnest and the ground firmest. There must have been some kind of markings which Martin was following—unnoticeable except to one who knew what to look for. I didn’t. Often I lost the dark outline of Martin ahead and sometimes even the dot of his flashlight. Several times I strayed off the route and rough roots and murderous brambles were hell on my bare feet and torso.

If not for the moon, which had the cloudless sky all to itself, I would have lost him for good. It glowed through the dead branches of leafless trees, and sometimes, when we were in a treeless area, I had to crouch to keep from being seen.

The deeper we got into the swamp, the clearer the path grew. I hadn’t the re-
motest idea where we were or where we were going.

After what seemed like hours, we came to a tree-covered hillock, the base of which was strewn with enormous boulders. Carefully Joe Martin picked his way among them. Suddenly he disappeared from sight.

Although I went at once to the spot where I’d seen him thirty seconds before, I couldn’t pick up the trail again. I blundered around among the boulders, gashing my bare soles on sharp edges. I don’t think that I would ever have found the entrance if I hadn’t heard the voices.

A girl screamed in pain, and accompanying the scream was harsh laughter. The voices seemed to come from the heart of the hillock. Frantically I tried to get to the voices and couldn’t. Somewhere there was an entrance to a cave so cleverly hidden that I, who knew that it had to be very close to me, couldn’t find it. No wonder the fiends hadn’t been worried about the possibility of the police searching the swamp.

Suddenly the scream sounded very near. I crouched behind a boulder. Under the streaming moonlight, a naked girl came running so close to me that I could have touched her. And right behind her, swinging a whip which flicked skin from her back, came the thin man I had seen earlier that night in another section of the swamp.

The girl stopped, turned and lifted her arms. The whip curled across her plump, quivering breasts. She screamed again, but it wasn’t only agony that I saw in her face. Her eyes flamed with horrible pleasure. She advanced a step or two to meet her tormentor, taking the full force of the lash across her abdomen. Then, her scream turning into a moan, she threw her arms about the man. She was, I saw, Carol Berkwell.

He chuckled and lifted her from the ground. She covered his face with pas-
sionate, abandoned kisses as he carried her back in the direction from which she had fled. His short, thin frame staggered a little under her buxom weight. I followed him between a labyrinth of boulders.

In less than a minute I came to the cave entrance. Standing among the shrubs which obscured the entrance, I looked in. Several kerosene lanterns revealed a rather large chamber which had been scooped out of the hard dirt. Heavy timbers shored up the roof. The cave must have been dug years ago—for what purpose I could not guess—and probably Georgie had found it and made it his home.

FOUR nude girls were in there—Bea and Fannie Madison and Adele Lane and Carol Berkwell. All of them, I noticed, had cruel welts across their bodies, and yet on the face of none was the slightest hint of pain. And, what struck me as even more horrible, none showed any sign of modesty; indeed, all wantonly flaunted their nakedness.

There were also four men: Georgie and Joe Martin and the thin man who’d whipped Carol and a thick-set man with bloodless lips and a pock-marked face.

The entrance of Joe Martin must have interrupted the orgy. The girls were sitting on the ground, looking up at him with dull, emotionless eyes. The thin man was flicking the whip against his boots and the thick man stood with arms folded and a sneer on his lips.

Only Georgie and Bea seemed unaware of Joe Martin’s presence. They sat with their backs against one wall, while the idiot’s filthy hands ran intimately over her adorable body. She smiled up at him—the wholehearted thoughtless smile of an infant—and her torso arched and quivered under his vile caresses.

Something twisted inside of me. I was about to plunge recklessly into the cave when Joe Martin turned toward me. I shrank back. But his eyes dropped be-
before they quite reached me, focused on something near the entrance which was out of my line of vision.

"So it's you, Martin!" a voice within a few feet of me said. "I figured that somebody in the camp was the chief rat."

I shifted my head to where the shrub was thinner and I saw Charlie Banks. He was lying on his back, with his hands and feet tied.

Joe Martin demanded of the thick-set man: "How'd he get here?"

"Skinny and Georgie were playing outside with a couple of girls when he comes along. Got no idea how he'd found 'em. He comes charging in to break it up. Lucky I was just coming through the trees. I bopped 'im with a rock. Figured the boss might want to use him for something, so we tied 'im up."

So I had been mistaken as to Charlie Banks' role! He had come to the swamp for a lone search and, like myself, had blundered upon the fiends.

Joe Martin grunted. "That part was all right. But what the devil's the idea letting the other girls around loose? Suppose one of them gets away? You had the first two girls to play around with. Wasn't that enough?"

The man named Skinny grinned. "Can we help it if they want us to beat 'em and love 'em? And don't worry about them running away. They like it here. I don't know what Georgie does to them, but he sure has a way of making them wild."

While they'd been talking, I'd managed to get myself down on my stomach and crawl forward so that I was directly behind Charlie without being seen. Carefully I stretched my hands out, touched him. With myself against those four, the odds were overwhelmingly against me. If I could get Charlie free, things would be more nearly even. I'm pretty husky and Charlie had twice the strength of myself.

Joe Martin whirled toward Georgie and Bea. "And you, take your dirty hands off her!" he snapped. "She's not for you. You have the pick of plenty of other girls."

The idiot clutched Bea's unrestrained body to his hair-matted chest. "Mine," he said. "I like her."

Everybody's attention was centered on Georgie. My hands moved to the rope which tied Charlie's wrists. I felt him stiffen; then he shifted over on his side to make it easier for me. He couldn't see who it was, but it was enough for him to know that somebody was trying to release him.

"Look, Georgie," Martin was saying in the slow, patient tone of somebody arguing with a child. "There are lots of other girls. Look at those three. They're prettier."

"No," Georgie said. "She's mine." And he almost crushed the life out of Bea.

She smiled blankly up at him. His fingers, tearing at the tight knots, were like ice. I got one knot loose, another, but there were still several to go.

Joe Martin bit his lips. He didn't want to start a fight with the powerful idiot, and yet he was anxious to get Bea away from him. It was plain that Martin wanted her for himself.

Feet padded on the ground near me. I sank lower, pulled my hands in among the shrub, held my breath. I saw feet striding into the cave.

"What the hell's going on, Joe?" the newcomer demanded. "You guys are going crazy with these girls. You'll queer everything. Can't you hold out for another twenty hours? I know for certain that Madison and Berkwell and Lane are coming through with the money. But the chances are that the police will go through the swamp anyway and you've got to lay low here with the girls. Don't let them go out of the cave and keep them quiet."

As the newcomer advanced further into the cave, I could see more and more of him. Then I got a look at his face. Almost I gasped. Buster Ramsey, the social director!

His eyes fell on Charlie Banks. "Well, what have we here?"

Martin explained while Charlie cursed harshly.

"We'll have to get rid of him," Ramsey declared. "Slash him up and dump him in the lake. And what the hell's Bea Hart doing here? Her folks haven't any money."

Martin shifted on his feet. "There's no reason why I can't get in on the fun. I've always had a yen for her. Only Georgie won't give her up."

Ramsey leered at Bea. "Can't say that I blame him. But settle it between you without causing any trouble." He scowled. "Guess we'll have to get rid of her too after a while. I'm getting a little tired of killing."

Charlie kept cursing him bitterly. Ramsey strode over to him, looked down on his white twisted lips.

"Sorry you had to butt in, Charlie," he said. "But that's your hard luck. Funny how once you get started on killing, the deaths mount up. I thought there'd be only two—Mary Jardine and Emma Carley, or any two other girls whose deaths would be used to set the atmosphere of terror. Well, that part of it worked. The rich families of these three girls here are so scared that they'll shell out immediately. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

HE WAVED a hand toward the naked girls. "This, I suppose, wasn't necessary. I didn't plan it this way. But I had to ring Georgie into it because he's the only one who knows the swamp and this cave is his. He showed us the path. He doesn't know what it's all about except that we help him bring the girls here. He's got something to feed to them and they go crazy with lust. It complicates it a little. Skinny and Mac, my assistants here, no doubt hadn't bargained for quite as good a time as this. Like myself and Joe Martin, they'd been wholly interested in the money; but now, it seems, I'm the only one left who isn't losing his head and sense of proportion over so much charming and responsive nakedness."

"Don't get so damn moral, Buster!" Joe Martin put in. "And make that damn idiot take his hands off Bea."

"Keep your shirt on, Joe. We can't risk antagonizing him. Once we get our hands on the money, we'll get all the women we want." Ramsey grinned at the idiot. "We might even get Georgie to teach us his technique." He turned again to Charlie. "It beats us how he does it. Some local farmers told me that Georgie's mother was a witch who lived in the swamp. He was born and bred here. Years ago there was a rumor in these parts that she had a very effective love potion for sale. She made the stuff out of herbs she found in the swamp, and I guess she passed on the secret to Georgie. From the way it works, I must say that she knew her stuff."

It was an effort for me to keep from rushing in there and going at the five of them with my bare hands. Ramsey was standing too close to Charlie for me to risk trying to loosen Charlie's bonds further. Charlie was thrashing about, tearing at the ropes.

If your heart is stout enough to stand these tales of terror, you are missing a rare treat unless you read HORROR STORIES!
Ramsey said: “He’ll be dangerous if he gets loose. Do your stuff, Skinny.”

An ugly smile appeared on Skinny’s face. He pulled a knife from his pocket. And at the same time Georgie stood up with Bea in his arms. I saw then that there was another chamber in the rear of the cave. The idiot carried Bea into it. Her whimpers of desire drifted out to me. Joe Martin stood gloowering after them, his fists opening and closing, but he made no move to follow. Obviously he was afraid of Georgie’s great strength.

In a minute or two it would be too late to save either Bea or Charlie. Yet the odds were five to one, which made failure inevitable.

I slid back from the mouth of the cave. There were many dead branches in the swamp, and it took me almost no time to find one which would serve as an effective club. A crude weapon at best, but it would have to do.

Then I rushed back to the cave, making no effort now at concealment.

Skinny was kneeling over Charlie, the naked knife in his hand. Ramsey and Mac watched intently, while the three naked girls sat around with blank faces.

As I charged in with upraised club, I saw Charlie’s hand flash out. He’d managed to loosen the rope around his wrist sufficiently to allow him to free his hands. His big right fist closed over Skinny’s wrist. Skinny screamed. Ramsey and Mac and Joe Martin yelled also and closed in on Charlie.

I don’t think that Mac was ever quite aware of my presence. My club cracked down on the top of his head. His skull split open.

Skinny screamed again. I glimpsed Charlie turning the knife in Skinny’s hand and driving it into the killer’s chest. Then I was swinging the club at Joe Martin.

He tried to duck and the club crashed against his shoulder. There was the sound of broken bone. He crumpled.

Charlie was up on his knees. He’d pulled the knife out of Skinny’s chest, and he had captured Ramsey’s arm in his powerful right hand. Ramsey shrieked and squirmed in a frantic effort to break the grip. Charlie’s lips were white, his eyes balls of gray ice, as grimly, deliberately, he stuck the knife into Ramsey.

I helped him remove the rope from around his ankles.

“One left,” he said. “In there.”

“Wait here,” I told him. “This is my job.”

He nodded. I took the knife from him and went into the second chamber.

Georgie heard me enter. He dropped Bea to the ground and whirled around, his mouth open in idiotic astonishment. Then, suddenly, he charged. His arms were outstretched to seize and crush me in his bear-like grip. But I was quicker than he. As he came at me, I ducked under his flying arms and plunged my knife deep into his chest. Then, while the shock and pain of the wound held him momentarily paralyzed, I got my hands around his throat.

Maybe the wound had weakened him, or maybe my fury would have been a match for his strength anyway. He clawed my face to ribbons before he slumped against the floor. And for a time after that I kept my fingers around his throat until I was sure that no more life was left in him.

When at last I rose wearily to my feet, Bea was waiting for me with that childish, degenerate smile on her face. She stretched out her arms to me, her lovely breasts lifting with the motion. Standing there naked, she was startlingly beautiful. I stepped forward to crush her against me. I checked myself. Not now. Not when she was like this.

Instead I pinned her arms behind her
back and carried her into the other chamber.

Charlie was tying up Joe Martin whose broken shoulder had sent him into unconsciousness. He looked up at me as I placed Bea on the ground.

“We’ll save him for the chair,” he said grimly. He patted my back. “That was good team work, David.”

“Yes. The girls will come out of it when the effects of Georgie’s hellish drug wears off. We’ll have to wait until then. And we’ll never let them or anybody else know what they were like while they were here.”

Charlie nodded. We dragged the bodies and Joe Martin into the inner chamber. Then, stationing ourselves at the mouth of the cave, we waited.

We had a hard time with the girls. They kept coming at us, begging to be loved. We drove them back. After a while they huddled in a corner of the cave and then one by one they fell asleep.

The sun was high in the sky when Fannie Madison awoke. She looked around with dazed eyes, then became aware of our presence and of her nudity, and she cringed in fear and shame. We explained that we had rescued her from her kidnappers, that they had given her a drug which had rendered her unconscious and that she had just awakened.

One by one, as the other girls awoke, we repeated the same story. Bea was the last to come to. This time I took her in my arms, and for the space of a minute we did not care that the others saw us.

We must have made a weird sight as the four naked girls and myself, clad only in shorts and covered with mud and blood, and Charlie Banks in his torn clothes, made our way out of the swamp. But it was no time for modesty. It hadn’t existed in hell, and we were coming from there.

THE END

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There were two reasons why the monster of the cairn should enlist Rayme Hubbard in his clan of sex-maniacs. And one was a secret which Rayme guarded even more closely than the damming fact that he had webbed feet!

CHAPTER ONE

Monster Unleashed

AFTER sending the body away with the coroner, Tolliver Jones dismissed the rest of the posse at the gate of my place and asked might he step in and talk a minute with me?

"Sure," I said. "Come on in, Tol," and the others said they would come back at eight the next morning, "to have a better look-see into that damned Indian cairn."

I lit the rubbish in the stove because it gets quite cold at that time of the year, especially when the fog sweeps up the Yakima river, and we sat close to the

It rose from its sleep of centuries to wreak havoc on an unsuspecting world. . . .
warmth drying out our soaking-wet pants legs. Tol eyed me for a minute in thoughtful silence while his Adam’s apple worked up and down along his red neck. He began unlacing his shoes.

“Better take off your shoes, Hubbard, and get your socks to drying.”

“No,” I said. “I guess not, Tol. I’ll be hopping off to bed soon, anyway.”

He sat a minute longer without relieving my mind and I began fidgeting with curiosity. The stove kept hissing from the moisture running down the unbricked chimney. Finally he said: “Well now, if you want to crawl in, why go ahead. We can talk while you undress, and anyway I guess I’ll have to be going. . . .”

“No hurry, Tol. I’ve got to make me a smoke first.” He looked disappointed again, but made no move to go.
"Must be lonesome for you," he said, trying to fill in with small talk, "living all alone. How are you getting along with Daisy Hevellin?" He was still eying my feet, and I switched them around uncomfortably as I grinned an answer.

"Well," I said, "maybe it'll amount to something. Sure hope so." But at the same time I told myself: "You liar, you like that girl too much to hope anything of the kind."

He nodded without interest and his eyes veered from my feet to my hands as I twisted a brown-paper cigarette and snapped a match.

"All right, Tol," I said with my lips firming. "Let's have it."

His neck grew suddenly redder and he looked at the door as though he were trapped. "Hubbard, now don't draw any hasty conclusions. But, oh—hang it all, I'd like to see your bare feet."

I arose deliberately and held open the door. "It's quite a walk down to Towannah, so maybe you better get started."

I stood in the door and studied his face through the fog and the darkness as he left. The drizzle collected and formed little globules on each grey whisker of his bleak face. Over his shoulder he spoke in an almost plaintive way. "Hubbard," he said shaking his head, "you ought to have showed me your feet."

Back inside I took off my shoes and studied my feet and thought about what had happened. Tol of course had been thinking about the footprint found near the mutilated body of the girl. Not that it could be mine—even old Tol would realize that it had been far too big. But there was that damnably persistent legend to think of, and I didn't like it, any of it.

We of the posse had made a clean search to the foothills, and then had turned back to wait until the morning would have lifted the fog. The road curves around two sides of my place, the west and north, so my south fence joins it at right angles there on the west. It was just at this point that we found Minnie Burke. It was big Torvigson who saw something in the tumbleweeds beside the road and let out a shout.

I was the last up, and they had thumbed off their flashlights before I could see very much.

"Dead?" I asked. "Turn on your flash, Tol—we better be sure."

"No," he said very slowly, "I don't think you want the flash on, Hubbard."

"What—don't be a damned fool! We've got to do what we can."

Some one else, Torvigson I think, repeated in a gentle voice: "No, you don't want to see, Hubbard." Then I started cursing them and they grudgingly turned on their flashes and I knew that they had been right. I didn't want to see.

She was naked and torn. But—there was no blood. The torn places were only slightly darker than the stark whiteness of the rest of her voluptuous body. Well, here it is, and I'll give it to you as easy as I can, because it isn't pretty. Her throat had been torn and worried by what could only have been teeth, and it was a wide open patch of viscous horror. But at the throat as well as other places on her body parts were gone, leaving yawning vacancies where chunks had been ripped away.

In numbed silence the boys began looking about the ground and it was Tol who called us to bend over a sandy place in the road with him. Some of us had stepped on a corner of it, but otherwise plainly distinguishable was the mammoth print of a bare foot. Gigantic.

There were scratches at the tips of the massive splay toes, as though made by claws; there were semicircular tracings between the toes. And it was so big that—no, it couldn't be human.

In the flare I saw Torvigson lick his lips and his hand came up to brush a full
Nordic cheek. He tried several times, and then made it: "That—that foot is webbed!"

There was a chilled silence while everyone dreaded speaking the thought that automatically followed. Finally: "Listen, boys," Tol pleaded uncomfortably, "we've got to investigate everything, haven't we?" Then he brought up a doubled fist. "Now I don't want a laugh out of any of you, see?—but you know that Indian cairn is right over the fence into the cottonwoods."

No one laughed. We climbed the fence and approached it through the dock and mullen and Russian thistles, and before we got there I was breathing the breath of cold horror. I didn't like the idea of investigating a thing like a three-hundred-year-old Indian mound in connection with a murder; but through the shifting curtain of the fog I could see that something was wrong at the cairn.

And, well, some of that girl's flesh had been gone....

The top had been pushed off the rocky mound, as if by a giant hand, and the rocks lay tumbled about the base. We climbed the mound, keeping closely together, and peered reluctantly down into the yawning crater at our feet.

"It can't be—not in this day and age," Tol muttered.

"Someone must have broken into it," Torvigson tried to explain. "You know the old legend about the monster and the ruby? Somebody wanted it...."

"He'd have to be crazy. You going to stand right there and claim you think there was a ruby at all, and that it blinded victims for the monster?"

I didn't say anything, but my mind was digging up that legend from the murk of the past, and I didn't like it. For an instant I felt a cold chill creep over me.

I have read that it's practically a universal custom—at least among superstitious peoples—to throw stones at certain evilly reputed cross-roads, supposedly to ward off malign spirits. And it is a commonly accepted belief among most primitive peoples that one must hurl a stone upon certain roadside crypts and cairns, thus adding year by year to the rock pile said to be imprisoning some horrid monster.

This old Indian cairn is just south of my place, back into the cottonwood grove, and the pile of stones over it has grown through the years to the semblance of a small mountain. Of course after the later generations of the whites came along the custom nearly died out, and was yielded to only by an occasional Indian passing from the reservation fifty miles up the valley.

Lately, though, the custom seems to have been revived.

The Indians say that there was something that never should have existed, and it lurked within the dank shade of the cottonwood grove, but sometimes wandered. According to their unwilling description it was a ghastly anthropomorphic thing, capable of assuming various forms, but by nature faintly human in structure, and faintly froglike—a batrachian monstrosity. He would come abroad of nights when the fog drifting up the Yakima provided the moisture his amphibian organs demanded, and his sickening webbed feet and hands are supposed to have closed about a screaming multitude of golden-skinned Indian maidens.

That's the way he—fed.

Then the whites came, and according to the legend there was a white woman who pleased his revolting fancy. Before the Indian medicine men came to her rescue and sealed him in his age-long crypt, a terrible thing happened....

IT ISN'T a wise thing to mention to anyone in the valley, but it has always been hinted that the taint of that monster's blood still lingers in present generations
and crops out in certain individuals. Of course, I’m ordinarily not the credulous type of fool who eats up anything like that, about webbed feet, and all.

"Let’s put it this way, boys," Torvigson summed up. "If something did break out of that hole by itself, then the scientists must be wrong. After admitting that, the sky’s the limit. What I mean is, it might have killed the girl. On the other hand, if someone went in after this ruby, why you remember what the legend says—" He studied us round and then went on:

"The legend says that this thing used the ruby’s flame to blind its victims’ eyes, so when the Indians finally succeeded in catching the monster, they did it by getting the ruby away from it and catching it with its own medicine. It was supposed to lie there forever fascinated by the flame of the stone lying on its forehead."

He chuckled halfheartedly as he concluded, to show that he didn’t believe a word of it.

"The Indian warned," I mused, "that the grave must never be opened, or the stone removed, lest he might be released. And then he would have the power to resurrect himself, and call all those bearing the taint of his blood back to him, to form a dreadful plundering pack, seeking food. . . ." They all looked at me oddly as we left and I realized that I had put more sincerity in my words than I meant to.

Thus, after Tol left my shack I sat and studied my fingers, peering at the faint scars along the inner sides of them, as though something was cut away when I was a baby. Then I raised my bare feet to ponder over the membrane that spreads between each of my toes. It’s nothing too remarkable; lots and lots of people are born that way, with a pronounced webbing.

But that was a dreadful time to let anyone else learn of my freak feet.

CHAPTER TWO

Monster’s Children

The next day was Saturday. The first person I saw was Daisy Hevelin who stopped in shortly before eight on her way to work.

"I just dropped in to see if you’re still planning on the Grange picnic. Or are you standing me up on that date too?"

This last very softly.

"Now, Daisy," I coaxed, "don’t take it that way, but with things the way they are. . . ."

"Very well," she said with her lips firm. "You needn’t finish. I’ve realized for some time how things were, but wouldn’t admit it to myself. I thought you would at least have the courage to tell me outright."

"It isn’t that way at all," I groaned. "If I could only explain—" I was going through hell right then. Now that my efforts were succeeding and I was losing Daisy it seemed as if the bottom was falling out of all that mattered. But I took a plunge, anxious to get it over with. "Daisy, you’ll probably never understand. But try to believe this—it’s something neither of us can help, something I can’t tell you." No, I couldn’t face it—couldn’t tell her about my feet. It would be—horrible. When I tried to finish my words skittered to a lame halt: "Maybe you’ll find someone else. . . ."

We were standing just outside the front door and she stooped and plucked a bright red tearose and began tearing the petals off it.

Just then a carful of men wheeled into the yard and Tol and Torvigson and a well-dressed stranger approached the two of us.

Impulsively Daisy held out her hand to me and said, "Goodby, Rayme." I knew she meant forever. For an instant there was wild pain in the flint-dry eyes, but
then anger returned and she tossed her sun-gold hair in defiance. “Don’t worry—there are lots more. For instance, Harry Sikes; he’d be as good company as you, anyway.” That was a taunt. We had laughed together about the way Harry Sikes’ eyes followed her down the street, and once I had warned him about keeping his place.

The three men reached us and had evidently overheard the last remark. Tol was grinning at me. “Harry Sikes isn’t available, Miss Hevelin.” Her flashing eyes told him to mind his own business and she turned toward her own little roadster.

“Why not?” I asked stupidly.

“He’s been gone ever since early last night.” Daisy half turned round at hearing that, and studied my face. My thoughts were of course following the path of everyone else’s at that moment. It was generally known that Harry Sikes down at Towannah liked to take off his shoes and show his webbed feet to the kids and anyone else who would look.

**IT WAS Torvigson’s worried nasal that spoke:** “There are some that say it don’t look so good—that the legend’s coming true. The monster’s calling those of his blood. . . .”

Daisy flashed me a bewildered look as she started the engine, and only as an afterthought slammed the door. I stood looking down the road after her car and

then turned round to catch Tol’s taunting grin. “Have some words, Rayme?”

“None of your damn’ business,” I muttered.

Tol kept on grinning as he introduced the stranger. “Hubbard, meet Mr. Sprong. He thinks maybe you two are related.” We shook hands. “He got in from the east early this morning.”

I said: “Well now, I do recall that great aunt Lizzy married a Sprong, so you must be their son. How are you?”

He nodded affably. “Fine, thanks. I’m Ronald—Ronald Sprong. My folks left your little valley way back in the nineties.”

Tol said: “It happens that Mr. Sprong is interested in the Indian mound. He sure came at the right time, didn’t he?”

“I’m connected with Blaine University’s archaeological staff,” Sprong said. “I was digging through some effects inherited from my family when I stumbled onto a hint of an Indian monster supposedly buried in a cairn here, so when my vacation came along I thought it might bear investigating.”

“You’re sure welcome,” I breathed fervently. “Shoot the works.”

He smiled. He wore glittering rimless glasses and his face bore an air of scholarly distinction that I automatically respected. I was pleased to find that I had a big-shot relative, and something told me that I was going to need him.

I had risen late, and hadn’t eaten yet
but I could hear the percolator chuckling through the open door, so I took the men inside. The other two refused, but Sprong accepted a cup with me.

He sat sloshing his coffee in a pro-
longed silence until Tol spoke, evidently reminding him of something. "Go on—
ask him."

Sprong looked embarrassed and then shrugged and began, after giving me a
good-natured smile. "Hubbard, were you
the person who opened the cairn last
night?"

I studied him a minute and then re-
turned his smile. "No. For that matter,
I might ask you the same thing—if maybe
you didn’t get in before this morning and
open it yourself." Then I added: "How
do you know anyone opened it?"

"You mean the monster?" he asked,
and I nodded.

"Well, all you have to do is look, and
you’ll see shovel marks on some of the
stones."

"Oh," I said flatly. "You’ve already
been over there this morning." Tol nodd-
ded brightly and watched me get mad.

"Leaving me out, huh?" I gritted. "No,
I didn’t dig into that cairn last night, and
a few more cracks. Tol, and I’ll shove
your teeth down your throat. I’m getting
tired of it." Of course I was lying in a
way, and had no right to get mad, but on
the other hand it hadn’t been last night
when I dug into the mound. Someone—
some thing, perhaps, other than me had
done it that time.

"I’ll drive Mr. Sprong back into town," I
said. "Goodbye, Tol." He flushed and
moved through the door as I dismissed
him for a second time.

When they were gone and the archae-
ologist and I were alone I breathed heav-
ily and poured it all out to Sprong. "I’m
going to need help," I said. "Someone
with a little more sense than superstition
has got to hold those boys in check. They’d
like to lay this thing at my door."

"Oh, they’re just talking," he said.
I gave him details about the monster
and the ruby that had the power of fasci-
nating victims, like a snake’s glittering
eyes, and wound up with: "They say his
blood is spread through the valley people,
and if ever released he would have the
power to call all his descendants to him,
when he needs them to help on his forays
for—for food."

"But a myth like that—you surely can’t
believe it?"

"It’s hard to know what to believe.
Look at the way the girl was killed. Any-
one—even a human—that would kill like
that would automatically be a monster,
wouldn’t he? And then, maybe whoever
dug in there released the spell on him, let-
ting him go. And there’s Harry Sikes
who disappeared. He isn’t bright anyway,
but he has webbed feet and maybe the call
came to him."

Sprong snorted and I felt sheepish.
I, wasn’t offended by his complete
skepticism, but I decided to take him
down a notch, anyway. I pointed at his
hands spread about his coffee cup, the lit-
tle finger daintily curled. "You sure can
tell we’re relatives, can’t you," I said, and
showed him the little white scars between
my own fingers where webbing had been
cut away. Scars that were duplicated on
his own fingers. . . .

That night I sat brooding, wondering
what my next—or first—step should be.
My eyes were on an old plugged chimney
hole near the stove, but my mind was out
somewhere in the gathering fog. One
minute I would curse myself and the next
I would wonder: Just suppose there is a
monster, when will his call come?

Suddenly I felt the pressure of eyes on
the back of my neck. I sat tensely for a
minute trying to down the sudden surge
of blind panic that came upon me, and
then without looking at the window I
made a grab and got my bird gun from the
corner and made for the door.
CHAPTER THREE

We Dine in Hell

THE gun was grim reassurance to my
flagging courage as I breastted into
the fog. I gave inward thanks that I had
thought earlier to load it.

"Stop in your tracks," I shouted into
the fog, and a pale figure froze as I moved
up. "Hello, Tol," I grated, "making a
little call?" I sighted the double barrels
straight into his face.

"You got it wrong, Hubbard," he said
tensely. "We came up to see if you were
all right."

"Thanks. I don't need a guardian; I
need less snoopers. You too, eh, Sprong?"

The archaeologist stepped up beside
Tol. "Mr. Jones convinced me you might
need help. There's a lot of truth to the
power of suggestion, you know."

"Yeah, Rayme—for God's sake lower
that gun, we won't bite. What if some-
thing came over you and made you, just
forced you, out to meet that—that thing!
You'd need some help. Harry, you know,
went, and now another man from on down
toward Shallow Water is gone. They
both had webbed feet, just like—just like—"

"Hold it, Tol," I snapped. I'm sensitive
about those feet, and having given up
Daisy because of them I had had enough
of the subject.

"What we really wanted to tell you,
Rayme, is about the Anderson girl. She
was on a weenie roast with some young
fellows up in the foothills, and just after
dark when they got ready to come home
they couldn't find her. She's gone."

I just managed to ask, "People think
it's the—same thing?" when I caught a
movement behind my two nocturnal vis-
itors. I stared in surprise, and something
so utterly sinister in the vague shape sent
my mouth dry and I couldn't warn them.
They were unsuspecting, each of them
apparently looking on past me. I didn't
see what happened to them, for just at
that minute a huge hand closed over my
mouth and a foul smelling body hugged
me close from behind and a fist jammed
the back of my neck. I felt one long shud-
der sweep over my body and conscious-
ness left me with labored slowness...

The sense of jogging movement brought
me slightly out of it at one time, and I
became dimly aware of high, keening
screams, and realized without interest that
we were moving toward them.

I awoke again to nearer normalcy and
knew that I was being carried slung
across a pair of giant shoulders. "You
out of it, Rayme?" a voice asked. "The
Master wanted you to join us."

"Damn you, Harry Sikes, let me down.
Don't you know what's happening around
here?"

"There's no use fighting it," he said
resignedly. "When the Master calls, you
have to come, just as I did. You can't
fight it when you've got the appetite."

"Appetites!" I cried. "Good God, Har-
ry, what—"

"Yeah," he said, "I guess you know
what I mean. There isn't long to wait—
we got another girl." That hideous sug-
gestion turned me sick. The reek from his
sweaty body seemed intermingled with
some more obscene odor, as though what-
ever unholy companionship he was keep-
ing in the mist had tainted him.

We shouldered into the grove after he
maneuvered me over the fence. He had
taken my gun—he's a giant specimen of
a man, and he handled me like a doll. We
came to a dense place in the heart of the
cottonwoods where the wild grape and
the creeper-vines scramble about to form
a little nook, and then we stopped.

The first thing I saw was another man
holding a girl. She was moaning in un-
controllable fear and pain, and through
the weird semi-luminosity imparted to the
mist by a pale sliver of a moon I could see
that he alternated between hitting her in the mouth to stop her screams and fondling her throat and bared shoulders.

"So soft," he whispered to her. "So soft and velvety and tender. You're so tender, little girl." I saw his hands wrestling at the front of her dress, and then it gave way with a ripping sound and revealed her jutting breasts to his avid gaze. "You'll know the ecstasy of our love before we——"

Something else obtruded upon my revolted eyes—the hunched, loathsome outline of the Master. God, I groaned, can it be true? Have I been wrong? It—this thing—was sickeningly suggestive of something that might crawl from some noisome, filth-spewing swamp; its movements were more nearly hops than steps, and from ten feet away its odor swept over me in a horrendous tide. I could just see the outline of its misshapen head.

I had to keep my courage up some way. "Your face isn't pretty," I said between chattering teeth. "Why don't you take off the mask?"

A QUESTIONING grunt, half hissed, answered me, and a spray of slime went over me. The thing continued coughing in a ponderous, methodical way before I began wondering if it could be trying to say something. I couldn't make out a word, and glanced up at Harry who was towering over me. The grunting continued and Harry listened with a kind of doting fascination. Then it came to me—the thing was speaking, but not in English. In Indian—some dialect of the Yakima tribes!

My mind reeled at that conclusion, and the last vestiges of doubt began slipping from me, leaving my soul naked before the monstrous truth.

Harry, I knew, had friends among the Indians, and I sensed that he would be understanding those slurred, slippery sounds. Soon he began translating for me.

"He says to tell you that now you belong to him, and you have to follow his orders. We will have our feast first, so we'll all be united with the blood-bond, and then he has work for you. He says you've got to find his jewel and return it to him. Tell the whites he can't rest without it. Whether you've got it, or someone else has, he says if it's brought back he'll promise to go back to sleep—after he dines once more to nourish him for another long wait." Harry thought a minute, and then added plaintively: "I didn't know he was planning to go back to sleep."

"Give me the gun, Harry," I begged, "and let me blow his filthy brains out."

"You couldn't kill him. And, anyway, it wouldn't be right; he's the Master, and there's—" His glance slid toward the naked girl and lingered.

The monster slithered closer to me and his searing breath swept into my face and his eyes gloated deep into my own. His lewd voice took up a monotonous mewing, hypnotic in effect. The wispy tendrils of the fog seemed to seep into my mind, and the command in Harry's words came to me only half-heard: "He says—remember about the jewel." Then I was regarding, as from some remote distance, the nude swooning body of the girl, and the long raking scratches that were appearing on her marble skin, and the pawing hands that were working, working at her. . . .

My last memory is horror of myself, because—I was interested!

CHAPTER FOUR

Show Me Your Flesh . . .

THE crashing of underbrush awakened me and I rolled over and sat up trying to remember. My face felt sticky and damp and I ran a sleeve over my mouth. Then it came back to me in a dizzy rush
and I turned sick wondering what was concealed on my face!

The sounds of approach through the trees continued and in spite of my dazed state of mind something shouted imperious command to me to roll out of sight into the trees, and I crouched there while the men came up.

Flashlights skittered eerily through the dark, throwing giant trunks into fantastic relief, and then the lights picked out the ground where I had been lying. Something ghastly was there. I stared in silent horror while the men gathered about the girl’s mangled body, swearing in awed and panicky voices.

*My work, I kept thinking, I did that!*

I heard the deep voice of Torvigson, and then that of Tol. “It’s Hubbard, all right. We got to admit that now. That there is his shotgun. He had it when his men came up behind you and me, Sprong. We got to find him and shoot him down like a—”

“Like a—frog,” someone finished, and there was no humorous intent.

“But why, why—” It was the horror-stricken voice of Sprong. “The man must be stark mad. He talked very queerly, I’ll admit.”

“Aw, the worthless lout, he’s sore at everyone else because they work their farms and have money, while he starves.”

It’s true that I have never set the world afire; but it seems to me that it’s my business if I prefer the easy-going life. Anyway, I have the consolation of knowing that I could be rich, if I wanted to.

But I had no time to brood there, so I crawled through the trees and got away from that spot. I sneaked along the fence toward the east so I wouldn’t stand so much chance of being spotted by any late comers, and made for the house. I came up through the barnyard and after peering up toward the house knew that they had been there once already.

The windows were bashed in, and the door hung from one hinge. I approached with caution lest someone had been left on guard, but the only person I saw was a girl. Daisy Hevill’s sobbing body was flung dejectedly into one of the armchairs.

*She heard me and flung up her head as I eased in the door. “Oh, Rayme! You’re all right, then!” She looked at me closely. “What—what’s that on your face?”*

“Oh, I hurt myself, Daisy—fell down.”

I prayed that I sounded convincing as I ran a towel across my face. “What are you doing here?”

“They got out of hand down at Towannah—a gang is looking for you. I followed hoping I could talk them out of it.”

“Out of what?”

“They think you’re the leader—that if you were out of the way the horrors would stop.”

“Oh. And, do you?” The world drew to a standstill as I waited for her answer. “Certainly not, Rayme. But we had better be going—” Her eyes clung to mine, pleadingly, and then her utter loyalty swept over me and I took her in my arms. For a moment we lingered in that close embrace before the frantic urgency of our situation forced us to action.

“Are you certain you’re not afraid of me?” I questioned tensely, and she shook her head in violent denial. “I know that you’ve heard by now about my—feet; you don’t think I have other things in common with those others?”

“Oh, no, darling.”

“Well, you’ve got to promise me one thing. If something comes over me so that I’m not myself, run, will you? Run!” Her inarticulate moans denied the truth of my fear.

“Just a minute,” I said. “I’ve got to get something before we go,” and I went and dug into the sot of the old plugged chimney hole. She asked what it was I
had brought forth and I said I would show her when there was more time.

We slipped down through the barnyard to the east again. Her roadster was a temptation, but its engine would have been heard and a faster car could have overtaken us. We crouched in a patch of mullen and thistles while we talked it over. It seemed probable that after the men finished searching the grove they would come back to the house and lie there in wait. So our best bet was to double back and get into the grove again and wait there until the hunt had cooled down and we could hit out for the hills across which lay the Columbia.

Our wait grew long. The fog seemed peopled with menacing faces, leering at the utter futility of our struggle. At last I put an arm around her and drew her roughly to me. “You’re so soft,” I whispered, “so tender and soft...”

The dark hulks of the men eventually left the grove and began converging stealthily on the house. We made the break then and reached the confines of the grove.

There remained the danger of meeting that grimacing horror again, but I thought I had it figured out. If he was human I wouldn’t be caught napping this time by his evil powers, but would knock hell out of him. And if he wasn’t human—if he was in reality some hideous abomination vomited from the past, why I had something to take care of that, too.

We paused in the upper corner of the grove, only a few steps from the brooding shadow of the stone cairn. Daisy’s little hand found mine and I squeezed it. The spectral moon glinted briefly through a rift in the fog and I could see into her face. Poor kid, she was smiling even though the shadow of dread lay across her face.

“What if it shows up?” she asked.

I reached into my pocket. “If this did it once it should conquer him again.” I held it out in my palm and it reflected the moon’s shallow light in a blood-red pool.

“O,” she gasped, with something of shock in her voice. “You had it all the time!”

“I dug it out several nights ago, and then filled the crater again. I had got to thinking about it and decided I might as well have it. I didn’t find anything very bad in there, either, only some very old human bones.”

“But—do you think you did right?”

“I don’t know,” I groaned in complete despair. “I keep wondering if it was serving a purpose there, and if my taking it released the monster to prey on the neighborhood. I met it tonight—I can’t tell you about that awful scene. But it demanded its jewel back.”

“You met it?” There was a rising, tremulous note of fear in her voice. “You went to the—the pack?”

I pressed her to me reassuringly. “But it won’t get the jewel, unless I have to use it as a last resort the way the Indians did—catch it with its own spell. There’s something that tells me I shouldn’t return it. Suppose the creature didn’t keep its promise and return to its grave; suppose it went on using the stone the way the legend says it can be used?” Then I caught myself and shook my head to clear it of such fearful speculations, and began studying the baleful fires slumbering in the heart of the stone.

“Look—isn’t it beautiful? Look...”

I felt a shudder steal over her body and her head turned away. “No,” she whispered, “I don’t want to, Rayme. I don’t want to look at it!”

“Go on—don’t be afraid.” My voice grew huskier: “You’re going to marry me, aren’t you, Daisy? And this stone will buy you lots of wonderful things.” I pushed it closer to her and grasped her shoulders to draw her around so she would have to look at it.
"No, God no," she pleaded. "I'm afraid of it." Then sobs began shaking her body. She looked fearfully up at me as though she were seeing something evil in my face and her voice took on the edge of hysteria. "I'm going now, Rayme. Try to understand, but I'm going back."

I pulled her close against me to force the direction of her unwilling vision, but her eyes clamped tightly shut. I can't explain very well the impulses that were coming over me; up till that night I had always thought myself a fairly good example of civilized animal. But from then on I was just—jungle animal.

My pulse was pounding in my throat like pagan drums and my words came in a feverish husk. "You're so tender, Daisy, so soft and tender. If you're going back, why that's the way it is, but look at the jewel first—look what you'll be missing!"

I must have hurt her. My free hand seemed to have developed a volition of its own and was stealing over her body, and suddenly her hands came up to push at my lowering face. But her movement opened her eyes, and they fell on the jewel and—fixed there.

"See," I whispered, "isn't it pretty? Look, Daisy, like eerie jungle fires around which night things creep and spiral." My hand was a slithering nocturnal shadow and it slipped inside the neck of her dress and ripped fabric away from her throat and alabaster shoulders.

"It is pretty," she whispered, making no move to withdraw. Her body was in the clutch of a spasmodic trembling that thrust her breasts against my hand. I kept the jewel fully extended and pulled away the scraps of her dress and began fondling her.

"Soft—and warm. . . ." I wondered in dim detachment if my own voice had fashioned those seductive words. My fingers dug into her shoulder.

"So pretty," her parted lips sighed, "so pretty." I had torn away the silken shreds of her underthings and my lips were running a fevered course over her pulsating throat. She was lying against the gaunt trunk of a cottonwood tree, and her wide eyes contained a pinpoint of red reflection from the ruby's fire.

A trickle of something moist seeped under my fingers deep in her flesh.

I heard a faint rustle behind me and then—thank God!—a shower of Roman candles rocketed within my skull, and I might as well have been a million miles from there, for all the harm I could do to little Daisy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Horror by the Crypt

I struggled through a world of red pain, groping toward some goal that was hazy and indeterminate, and I seemed oppressed with stifling menace. Then I heard a semifluid, coughing sound. Stones and rubble slithered beneath awkward feet, and there was moaning from a girl in pain.

Foul mouthing were an obscene obligation to the girl's voicings of terror.

I wrenched open my eyes and tried to move but my arms and legs were helpless in the grasp of powerful hands. Harry Sikes' idiot voice addressed me in gloating, gleeful tones. "The Master is glad that you brought back the jewel, Rayme. An' it was awful nice of you to bring us another girl."

"Merciful God," I moaned, "what is he doing to her, Harry? I tossed my body in a futile struggle for freedom but the grips at my head and feet retained their bruising power.

"Don't fight, Rayme. We're all gonna have some fun first, and then we—dine!" I pierced the mist with my eyes and they shuddered into a loathsome spectacle.

The Master was bending over Daisy.
What things the gloom mercifully hid from me were made doubly sinister and maddening through the medium of hearing. Puffy, scaled hands were wandering with hellish deliberation over the girl’s unclothed body, and I wanted to shriek at the thought of their clammy touch.

“Oh God, let me die,” her whispered prayer came. “Help me, Rayme, help.”

“She doesn’t realize the glorious thing that’s awaiting her,” Harry whispered, as though confiding some glad secret. “It’s an honor to serve the Master that way. They sort of go mad after he begins. They go mad and enjoy it even more than we do—before they die.”

The hell-spewed abomination was crouching ever lower over the girl, and I could see the frog-like lips, hinged like a toy animal’s, working up and down at her throat in a travesty of nuptial kisses. His hands were ebon spiders seeking a nightmare path across the nubile mounds of her bosom.

The awed pair crouching on top of me were deeply absorbed in the thing’s orgiastic preliminaries, and their breathing was coming in fascinated gasps. Now, I knew, was perhaps the one last chance...

I gave a sudden jerk to my feet and they tore loose from the clutch of my unprepared captor. I kicked back with them like a giant spring uncoiling and I felt the crunch of bone and cartilage beneath my heels. The hold on my arms and neck tightened until I was choking for breath. But in a wrestler’s quick movement I flung my feet up over my head and the momentum carried me over on top of Harry. He groaned in surprise but began tightening his arm about my windpipe. What saved me was a rock; I felt it beneath my outflung hand and brought it up in three methodical blows that slumped Harry to the ground.

Then I turned to meet the rushing assault of the amphibian monster.

“You fool,” he hissed, “now you die—”

“So you speak English, do you?” I shouted, and met him toe to toe, slugging in silent madness. Everything was so impossible anyway—and now to be exchanging blows with a thing like that—that I wanted to scream in abandoned hysteria. I think that finally I did—let’s call it a shout.

But I was handicapped. His foul hands seemed pulpy and soft, but for all that they landed with jarring force, while my own slid off his repugnant hide or else sank deep in with the blows cushioned to harmlessness. And all the time the stench of the thing was clogging my nostrils and misting my eyes like smarting acids.

I was forced back and up—up the slippery stones of the cairn to its very brink and I knew that he was trying to fling me over backwards. As I grappled with him to retain my footing I heard shouts of astonishment from below, although I couldn’t spare time to investigate. I feared that the monster’s human henchmen were coming to.

The lower jaw of the thing had flapped open in the mockery of a grin, and deep into that dark hollow I plowed a blow. It seemed to slow him and after that I worked on the face.

I caught finally a glimpse of tense figures watching from below, and knew that the posse had been drawn to the scene by the sounds of our battle. The glint of a gun barrel flashed in our direction, but the fight was too furious to allow a shot at one of us.

Another blow into the mouth made the thing groggy and then I brought my hands up with thumbs standing out and I used a rough and tumble trick I had seen in lumber camps. I rammed the extended thumbs into the thing’s eyes and felt hot fluids spurt into my palms. One solid blow answered his shriek of agony and he dropped. I knew that he had absorbed enough punishment to kill him—if he were human.
Well, he was. He died cursing me, and cursing the jewel that had appealed to his greed-crazed mind.

WHILE the rest of the men tore the greasy leather costume off him I told them my idea of the thing, and of course it’s the explanation I really accept for myself. I have to to retain my sanity.

I told them that I had dug into the tomb some days before, and had lived in constant dread ever since, with the darker side of my imagination fearing that some horrible thing might have been released by my act. And then this distant relative of mine came to seek out the legendary ruby and saw with his experienced eye that someone had been there before him. He must have found very definite proof that there really was such a jewel. After travelling so far, to be disappointed at the end, his mind tottered into madness, and his greed invented for him a ghastly plan.

He would shock the valley with an apparent revival of the monster, and force the one who had the jewel to bring it to him to ransom the people from this menace to its girls. And then old Tol spilled the hint to him that I obviously knew more than I was telling and Sprong realized that I was his man and concentrated his efforts on me. The two halfwits he had recruited helped carry out the semblance of the legend, and the horrible devices he resorted to appealed too strongly to their warped minds to be denied. Probably they too were kept drugged, as I suspect I was.

I didn’t tell the boys quite all, though. I had slipped the jewel from the madman’s pocket back into my own, and when they asked if there really had been such a jewel I laughed as though they were crazy. That flaming red stone is worth more than a dirt-farmer like me can ever use.

The boys decided it was best to keep the whole thing hushed up and blame the horrors on some wandering tramp, and so we shoved Sprong’s body down into the cairn and covered him over.

Daisy is still away at a sanatorium recovering from a sort of nervous breakdown, but her frequent letters leave me glowing with the knowledge that she understands everything.

Well, that explains it all. But I keep having some darker thoughts. For instance, we never received any inquiries from a “Blaine University” about Sprong. That makes me recall that the monster was supposed to be able to command various shapes. Silly, of course.

But at this very minute he lies in the cairn where the monster was supposed to lie, and for some reason or other the custom of throwing stones toward the spot has revived, and the pile is growing these days. It makes you think...
The Dictator and the Zombie
by RALSTON SHIELDS

General Ortiz ruled supreme and unchallenged—until he broke a promise and the lovely Consuelo made a pact with the devil!

THE POPULATION of the Caribbean island republic of Santa Rita may be divided into three groups. The great majority of Santa Ritans are mestizos, of mixed white and Indian origin. Then there is a minority of pure Spanish inhabitants, descendants of the ruling aristocrats of Colonial days; and another minority of Negroes—African blacks who were brought to the island to work as slaves on coffee and sugar plantations. These three classes remain quite distinct: the aristocrats holding themselves aloof and apart on the remnants of their once lordly estates; the mestizos living out their lives with a characteristic Latin-American mingling of violence and indolence; and the former slaves reverting more and more to jungle savagery, eking out an existence in the tropical rainforest, practising weird rites of Voodoo and pagan witchcraft.

General Manuel Ortiz, immediate predecessor of the present head of the Republic, was one of the comparatively rare cross-breeds between Negro and Indian to be found on the island. He was heavy and squat of build, with coarse, flattened visage, swarthy skin and—grotesque feature often produced by such a mixture of alien blood—kinky hair of a bright caroty red color. Ortiz had acquired a reputation as a cold-blooded, merciless dictator, even throughout the sisterhood of Latin-American nations—where dictators
are a common enough breed. He had fought his way to power with violence and trickery, and had consolidated his position by exercise of the immemorial privilege of tyrants—the wholesale slaughter of all his enemies and political opponents.

He had succeeded in entrenching himself securely in the lavish Presidential Mansion, facing the ancient cathedral across the plaza of the nation’s capital city, and here he gave himself over to the debaucheries of a Roman emperor on comic-opera scale. He created titles, fitted out his sycophants with gaudy uniforms, held receptions that began with stiff, courtly formality and ended in wildly drunken orgies. However, Ortiz was too shrewd to sheathe his claws entirely; he was always alert to find some real or imagined conspirator against his power, to be turned over to his inquisitors and firing squad. He did not want the populace to forget for a single day the strong arm of their ruler. And he knew enough of military psychology to see that the small but well-trained army he had built up was well supplied with living targets for its rifles—even if those targets were nothing more than blindfolded wretches trembling before a bullet-pocked wall.

As a general thing, a man was not seen again after he had been taken prisoner by President Ortiz’ police. And it seldom occurred to the victim’s friends and relatives to inquire about his fate, or plead with the dictator for mercy. If possible, they would escape from the island by the first available boat—or failing that, remain in fearful seclusion, hoping against hope that they, too, would not be involved.

The President was surprised, then, one hitherto uneventful morning, when an obsequious secretary bowed himself into the executive study to announce that doña Consuelo de Chavez y Bucareli would like an audience with his Excellency. Her brother, don Felipe de Chavez, if his Excellency recalled, had been arrested the previous week at his Excellency’s command, on suspicion of seditious activities. And the doña Consuelo had come to plead with his Excellency on her brother’s behalf. . . .

FOR a long moment, General Ortiz stared at his secretary with deep-set, murky eyes. “What is she like, Ramon? Is she young, is she—?” and he finished the sentence with a coarsely descriptive gesture of his hand.

The secretary nodded, with a faintly perceptible leer. “The doña Consuelo is known as one of the most attractive and lovely young ladies of your Excellency’s capital,” he said.

“Have her searched for concealed weapons, Ramon,” the General directed. “Then show her in. After that, I don’t want you to disturb me until I send for you.”

The secretary bowed himself out. “I understand, your Excellency,” he murmured.

Three minutes later, doña Consuelo was ushered into the ornate presidential study. At the sight of her, General Ortiz could not repress a long, low whistle of surprise and admiration. Even Ramon’s description had not led him to expect such a beauty as this. . . .

Consuelo de Chavez y Bucareli was a descendant of the oldest and most aristocratic families of Santa Rita. She was of the Spanish-Castilian type, with ash-blonde hair and lustrous brown eyes. Her complexion was white as the petals of cape-jasmine, and her lips had the natural bright scarlet hue of full-blooded youth. She was tall and slender; her figure, though virginal in outline, was rounded with the lovely curves of budding maturity. Consuelo was nineteen years old.

She stood patiently before the frankly offensive scrutiny of Ortiz’ blood-shot eyes. The President sat there for a full
minute, bloating and leering like a repulsive toad, before he spoke. Then, without any preliminaries, he growled, “You’ve come here to deny the charges my agents have made against your brother—is that it?” The words were an accusation, spoken with the guttural accents that had made many a wretched culprit quake as he stood before the executive desk. “Do you think I’m not competent to weigh the matter myself, without your interference, señorita?”

Consuelo answered in a low voice, that did not tremble, however: “Perhaps Felipe is guilty of the things of which he is accused, Excellency. I know nothing of that; he has not confided in me. I have only come to beg for one thing—for mercy. I ask your compassion, whether you find him guilty or not. He is young, headstrong, Excellency—but he will have learned his lesson. He will not offend in the future. I ask it of you in the name of the Mother of Heaven: do not punish him. I love my brother, he is all I have in the world.”

She did not lower her eyes; but tears swam in them, and glistened on her long lashes. “My brother—is not dead, Excellency?”

Again Ortiz waited before he spoke: deliberately tormenting the girl by delaying his answer to her direct question. Finally, he told her gruffly, “Your brother still lives, señorita.”

At that, Consuelo smiled—an angel’s smile, that transformed her lovely features like a benediction. “He—still lives,” she whispered. “Oh, Excellency—you will give him back to me! For the sake of the little child Jesus you will give him back!”

The tenderness of her smile, the innocent yearning in her voice, might have evoked pity in a statue of cold granite. General Ortiz squinted at her with goat’s eyes, and licked his lips.

“Felipe de Chavez,” he said slowly, “has been found guilty of treasonable intentions against my government. He was seen by my agents in the company of known conspirators. The penalty for his crime, señorita, is death before a firing squad. If I give the command to save him, it will be purely as a favor to you.” Suddenly, the man’s tone changed curiously; he spoke his next words with an inflection that was oily, persuasive. “Are you prepared to give me something—in return for that favor, chiquita?”

On one of her slender fingers was a ring, set with a huge, mysteriously green emerald. She extended her hand to him, so he could see the jewel. “I have this ring, Excellency. It was my mother’s. Our family has been in want many times, during the last years—but I have never sold it, though it would bring thousands of pesos. It is my one memory of her... But I will give it to you freely—gladly—in exchange for my brother’s life.”

The dictator made a contemptuous gesture with his stubby hand. “Bah!” he exclaimed. “I don’t want precious stones, girl. What are riches to me? The National Treasury is at my command...”

Consuelo drew back her hand again, and cast down her eyes. “I am sorry, Excellency. It is all I have,” she murmured.

Then Ortiz suddenly rose to his feet, and rounded his huge desk, approaching the girl where she stood. “You forget, querida,” he said hoarsely, “you have one jewel far more radiant than any emerald. I could take it from you by force; but I don’t want it that way. You will give it to me freely—and in return I will spare your brother’s life. A just bargain...”

Now, at last, Consuelo realized what he was driving at. Her pale cheeks flushed scarlet. She gazed in terror at his swarthy, reptilian face, crowned by a bizarre topnot of fiery hair. She recoiled like a bird before a ravenous viper. “No,” she whispered. “Dear God, no—not that...”
THE DICTATOR AND THE ZOMBIE

His very nearness to her seemed to have inflamed Ortiz' passion to dangerous heights. His breath came noisily quickened. "You are too proud, señorita?" he snarled. "You think I am not good enough for you, with your pale skin, and your lofty background? Well then, your brother shall die as he deserves. And I shall revoke my merciful decision to let him die quickly before the firing squad. He shall be tethered like an animal in the open courtyard, in the raging sun without food or water, to be eaten by vultures, still living but too weak to fight them off... ."

At this threat, Consuelo stood as if frozen. For an instant she stared straight before her, unutterable things mirrored in her wide eyes. She seemed to be gathering all the resources of her being together, to make a single momentous decision. Finally she spoke, in low, even tones.

"But if I—consent—Felipe shall go free?" she asked. "You swear it... ?"

"I swear it," Ortiz assented thickly. "In an hour he will be brought to this room—and you shall leave the Presidential Mansion together in freedom."

For an instant, Consuelo's lips moved silently, as if she were repeating a hopeless prayer; and then, passively, mechanically, with eyes closed, she gave herself to the eager embrace of the President of Santa Rita... .

WHEN Ramon, the smirking secretary, was summoned to the presidential study again by the jangle of a call-bell, Ortiz had resumed his place at his desk. More than ever, the man was toad-like as he leaned on the polished wood, and his eyes still glinted with brutish lights; but they seemed no longer ravenous now so much as sated, glazed with a profound and beast-like fulfillment.

Consuelo cowered in a corner of the room, one hand at her breast holding her dress together where it was torn. Her pale hair was disheveled; from one corner of her soft mouth a line of crimson crossed her chin, welling from a wound where she had bitten her lip.

She had the wilted attitude of one who has suffered unspeakable violation; and yet in her eyes something of life and hope still gleamed—something that kindled and increased as she heard Ortiz give the order to have her brother brought into the room from his place of confinement.

While they waited, she tremulously tried to restore her appearance to normal. "Excellency," she pleaded, "you will not let him know—the price I paid for his release? Felipe is hot-blooded, impetuous. He might attempt—something, some foolish gesture. . . ."

The President glowered at her. "Your fears on that score, señorita, are needless," he rumbled. There was something mocking, saturnine, in his tone; but all Consuelo's attention was fixed on the door, and she failed to catch the twisted import of his words.

Finally, after an interval that seemed an eternity, the door opened; and Felipe de Chavez was led into the chamber. Consuelo, with a glad cry, advanced towards her brother; but halfway across the room she stopped short, sucking in her breath spasmodically. "Felipe," she choked. "Oh, God, Felipe—what have they done to you?"

When she had last seen her brother, he had been a straight young man, with expressive hands, a firm mouth and dark eyes lustrous as her own. Now it was a mere broken hulk of a human thing that confronted her. His hands had been cut off; his wrists were mere scarred stumps. His mouth was a gaping hole in his face; his tongue had been severed at the root, and his jaw so injured that his lips would never close again. His eyes were mere sightless sockets... .

Consuelo recovered control of her limbs, and came to Felipe's side, tenderly putting
her arms about him. "My brother," she moaned. "Mother of Heaven—and I thought I had saved you!"

Felipe did not respond to her caress; he stood there, a mindless thing; he was like a stunned, pitiful animal.

With bestial irony, General Ortiz spoke once more. "He cannot hear you, señorita," he said softly. "His ear-drums are pierced. He cannot write, he cannot talk, he cannot even hear—your brother will never again conspire with my enemies."

Consuelo wheeled to face him. In the space of an instant, an incredible change had come over her features. Now, she was no longer a pitiful, tender girl. Something had died in her. She was still beautiful—but now her beauty was a terrible thing, like the frozen perfection of the Gorgon Medusa, whose glance turned all beholders to stone.

"You cheated me," she said to Manuel Ortiz. Her tone was chill and unemotional as the voice of fate. "You made your bargain with me—after you had done this to my brother. But you will not go unpunished. You will pay, Excellency. You will pay—well."

For the first time, a shiver of uneasiness touched the President’s heart. He had inherited from the Negro element of his ancestry a leaning to superstition; and he could sense that something like an unholy miracle had occurred to transform the very soul of Consuelo de Chavez y Bucareli.

He tried to cover up his disquiet by contemptuous bluster. "Bah!" he said. "I didn't cheat, girl. I said I’d give him back to you alive—and alive he is. I didn’t promise anything more. And if I had cheated—what except empty words are your threats against the President of Santa Rita? What have I to fear from you?"

He rose to his feet, and pointed an ominous finger at her. "Now take your brother, and go—before I change my mind, and order you both shot as you deserve. And take this word of warning with you: I don't want to see or hear from you again. The guard before the Presidential Mansion will receive orders to shoot you down like a dog, if you forget yourself, and try to approach me for any reason. You’re to be shot on sight—do you understand?"

The girl nodded. "I understand, Excellency," she said, in the same toneless voice as before.

"All right," Ortiz barked. "The whole incident is closed—I wash my hands of you. Now, get out!"

Without a word, she turned, and took her brother by the arm. With a face like pale chiseled marble, she led the way out of the room; and Felipe followed passively under her guidance, a mutilated corpse that still had the power to move and nothing more.

THEY passed before the President’s private guard in the ante-chamber to his office; crossed the ornate lobby of the mansion where a double file of armed men stood constantly at attention; and then emerged into the blaze of tropical sunlight that flooded the public square, making their way between an impressive detachment of posted sentinels on the stair of the portico. Consuelo led her brother directly across the luxuriant if rather slovenly gardens of the plaza; paying no attention to the stares of the idlers who lolled in the shade of palms and rubber-trees; gazing neither to the right nor to the left. She led him into the cool interior of the cathedral that was opposite the Presidential Mansion; and here, in the dim, fragrant and quiet sanctuary, she asked for one Father Andreas, a priest to whom she and her brother had made confession since tiny childhood.

The kindly, white-haired old man went pale when he saw the living wreck that had been Felipe de Chavez. "How long, oh God, how long?" he whispered, between tight, bloodless lips. "When shall we see
the beast who is our tyrant struck down by the vengeance he has earned so many times?” He turned to Consuelo, and took her hand between his. “My poor, poor child! Come, let us kneel together before the shrine of the pitiful Virgin; prayer will ease the bitterness of your heart, if only a little. . . .”

The girl shook her head slowly. “I have not come to pray, Father,” she murmured. “I want to leave my brother in your care. I think he will not live long; but while he lingers, perhaps the sisters of the convent can ease his suffering: a little. I—I fear it is no longer in my power to help him . . . .”

“Of course, my child!” Father Andreas assured her. “I’ll see that Felipe receives all possible care—that goes without saying! But you must not leave without kneeling in prayer; you cannot continue to carry this poison in your heart. At least our sorrowful Lady will send you the comfort of tears, Consuelo. . . .”

But Consuelo turned away quietly. “I have no desire to weep, Father,” she said. “And as for prayer—I shall kneel down presently, but in a different shrine. . . .”

She went out of the church like one walking in a trance or a dream. Outside, she summoned one of the carriages that loitered for passengers about the public square, and directed the driver to her dwelling on the outskirts of the city.

The ancestral house of the Chavez family lay in the center of extensive grounds. These had gone to ruin during recent years: had reverted to a mere tangle of vines and trees, burgeoning in the equatorial sunlight. But the large, rambling house, though faded and worn, still kept an essential air of cool elegance.

All during the early part of the afternoon, Consuelo moved restlessly from one lofty room to another, face set, eyes distant, as if her thoughts were far away, in some undreamed-of realm. About four o’clock, she was in the drawing-room, and Lupe came in with afternoon coffee on a silver tray that was worn thin with much polishing.

Lupe was the one servant who remained to the household which had once boasted dozens of domestics: a scrawny Negro girl with enormous bulging eyes and a nervous smile. Consuelo did not want coffee or food of any sort, and she was going to send Lupe away again; but then she changed her mind.

“Stay a moment, Lupe,” she murmured. “I want to ask you something. When my brother and I were little children, your mother was our nursemaid. She used to tell us stories sometimes—tales of the magic and sorcery of her people. She told us of strange beings called zombies—people who had died, but who still moved about as if they were alive, and never lost the power of movement until their bodies fell apart in decay. Do you know anything about zombies, Lupe?”

The girl grinned nervously and rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes, señorita. The zombies are made from corpses by a doctor of Voodoo—a mamaloi or a papaloi. Their blood is drained, and their veins are filled with a secret elixir; and certain prayers are spoken to the Ancestral Gods. Then the corpses regain their power of movement, señorita, as you just said. Sometimes zombies are used to work in the fields, because they feel nothing and never tire. And sometimes a witch-doctor sends a zombie to kill an enemy; because even knives or bullets will not stop his movement. He must actually be cut to pieces before he will be quiet.”

Consuelo nodded slowly. “I remember all that from the stories of your mother. . . . Tell me, Lupe—do you believe such things are possible—or is it only a wild tale to frighten children. . . .?”

The Negress’ habitual smile faded; her face was like a mask of dark polished wood, a sculpture expressing all the age-
old dreams of sorcery and murky terror handed down by her race. "They are real, señorita," she said solemnly. "On this very island is a mamaloi who has made zombies. She lives many hours walk from here in the jungle on the mountainside. Once I wanted a charm—nothing wicked, señorita, nothing blasphemous, only a little trinket to bring me love. I went to the mamaloi, who is said to be very powerful—and there I saw—"

She paused and caught her breath, as if the very recollection were a shock. "Go on, Lupe," Consuelo prompted her, quietly. "Tell me."

"The mamaloi had a servant—who was a zombie. His face was half-gone, so that only the skull showed—but he moved at the command of the old woman. I did not stay, señorita—I forgot my charm, I turned and ran down the path as fast as I could run. . . ."

"Lupe," Consuelo said, "I want to see this mamaloi on the mountain. I want you to go with me, and show me the way to her hut."

For an instant, the smile came back to Lupe's face; but then it fled altogether, as she saw that her mistress was not jesting, but deadly serious. The servant-girl's next impulse was to protest vehemently; however, she was cowed and subdued by a quality of cold command in Consuelo's eyes—a strange power which had never been there before. Finally, the Negress quavered, "Yes, señorita—in the morning I will show you the way. It is many hours' walk. . . ."

But Consuelo shook her head. "I want to go now, Lupe—at once. We'll take a lantern, in case night should overtake us in the forest."

L UPE wailed like a frightened child at the thought of such an expedition, so close to the fall of darkness; but she had not the will to refuse her mistress' bidding. Presently, the two women set out, each carrying a lantern, and made their way across the rising fields of sugar cane in the golden light of late afternoon. Before them, the mountain backbone of Santa Rita loomed, dark and forbidding, a region of brooding peaks cloaked with tropical jungle.

They reached the edge of the forest, where the cultivated lands gave way to virgin growth, about the time of sunset. The heavens flamed green and gold over the shimmering dome of the distant sea; and the sun slid past the horizon like a heavy globe of blood merging with the waves. Almost at once, the sky faded and darkened; the brief equatorial dusk deepened into night, and the enormous stars blazed forth with remote and inhuman splendor.

Somewhere in the gloom under the trees, a night-bird called—fluted a single weird cry of three notes, and was still.

That forlorn sound was the final straw for Lupe: she collapsed on the ground, chattering and wailing in a fit of hysterics. She gibbered something about evil spirits and poisonous snakes: a horrible death from one agency or the other was inevitable, she moaned, if the señorita persisted in venturing along the jungle path now that night had fallen. Consuelo took pity on her then; she told the girl to return home, saying she herself would continue alone.

At that, Lupe was sufficiently relieved to recover some measure of coherency: she was able to describe the turnings of the path from that point until it reached the dwelling of the sorceress, high on the mountainside.

Consuelo lit her lantern: the crescent of flame shed a feeble circle of yellow light. She bade the trembling Negress farewell, and quietly went up the path into the enveloping gloom of the forest.

She felt the brush of the silent wings of immense bats, whirling close to her out of the darkness. Several times, scor-
pions and centipedes dropped on her from overhanging limbs: she was obliged to remain motionless while the poisonous creatures crawled away from her body of their own accord, not daring to brush them off lest they sting her. Once, a hanging vine obstructed the way: Consuelo put out her hand to pull it aside, and felt it writhing at her touch! not a plant, after all, as she had thought with only the dim lamp-light to see by, but a living snake. . . . From time to time, twin jewels glowed at her from the gloom, and she caught the ferile odor of some beast of prey, a jaguar or a fierce wild dog. . . .

She was aware of other presences, too, in that abominable steaming forest: things that made no sound, and were invisible: bodiless spirits of nameless evil, the demons that were evoked by the half-wild Negroes of the island in dread rites of superstitious worship. However, Consuelo de Chavez did not falter. Twenty-four hours earlier, this experience would have made her cringe in terror. Now, her lovely features remained calm and unmoved as the lineaments of a waxen effigy.

At last, she came to the final turning Lupe had described: she followed a narrow track that led from the main path into a deep ravine. On a kind of natural stone platform beside a chattering waterfall, a primitive grass hut was dimly visible in the light of a smouldering fire. Bent over the embers was a very old, withered Negress.

She was so old, Consuelo realized upon coming closer, that she was completely bald: the only hair on her head was a fringe of wiry bristles about her toothless mouth. This must be the mamaloi; there was no sign of the skull-faced servant who had terrified Lupe.

The old Negress’ bleared eyes showed nothing but blank suspicion when she looked up to face her visitor. And this expression did not change as Consuelo told her why she had come, and what she wanted. The señorita was mistaken, she whined; she was only a poor old woman who lived in the forest—she knew nothing of sorcery, or the arts of Voodoo. All talk of that kind, she insisted, was pure invention. . . .

But then, Consuelo showed the old hag the gleaming emerald ring she wore on her finger.

The beldame’s reaction was far different from that of the President of Santa Rita, when he had been confronted with the same jewel. Greed lit up her eyes, and she moistened her withered lips with her tongue. Such a ring, to her, meant riches almost beyond comprehension.

Without a word, she rose to her feet, beckoned her visitor to follow, and hobbled into the little grass hut. Consuelo approached the narrow doorway like a white wraith entering the portal of a sepulcher.

During the weird rites that took place by flickering lamp-light inside the hovel, the mamaloi found that she required a helper. She opened the lid of a coffin-like box, and rubbed some pungent-smelling ointment on the forehead of the motionless figure it contained. At once the figure rose up with movements that were almost lifelike: a huge Negro, hulking and powerful. The flesh was missing from one of his cheeks, so that his jaw-bone was exposed in a ghastly grin. At a command of his mistress, he began to light tier upon tier of greasy, pallid candles before a grotesque pagan altar in one corner of the room—the central object of which was a battered crucifix, hung in an inverted position. He obeyed the directions the old sorceress whined at him as if he were a living man; but his staring eyes were those of a corpse.

Had there been a spectator from the world of life to peer through the milky
orbs of that undead thing, what a grim and outlandish spectacle he would have witnessed!

Consuelo de Chavez was lying motionless on a kind of board trestle; she was naked, her exquisitely formed body free of any covering whatever. Her tender, virginal bosom did not rise nor fall a hair's breadth; and her eyes had revolved in their sockets so they were blank as sculpture. Her arms dangled at either side; and from a deep wound on each wrist, the blood flowed in diminishing streams, falling in a battered ewer that stood on the floor. There was another wound on the girl's throat, a knife-cut that had pierced the jugular vein; and fixed in this cut was a tiny metal funnel.

Patiently waiting at the side of the board trestle, watching the drizzle of blood from Consuelo's wrists thin to an intermittent trickle, stood the hairless mamalo, mumbling some strange incantation with toothless gums. In her clawlike hands, she held a huge flask of brown glass, which was filled with a dark liquid.

Finally, she brought the neck of the demijohn close to the rim of the funnel that was fixed in Consuelo's neck. The contents oozed out in a sluggish stream—a fluid heavy as cold molasses, but glinting poisonous green in the glare of candlelight.

THE domed and pillared mansion of the President of Santa Rita was fabulous, unreal in the morning sunlight. It was framed by palm-trees that shot naked slender trunks to giddy heights, and there burst into a luxuriance of green fans, waving against the bright enamel-blue of the tropical sky. The fountain in the plaza jetted showers of liquid diamond. As always, the town idlers had congregated about the public square, chattering, smoking, staring curiously at those who passed.

There were many eyes to watch Consuelo de Chavez y Bucareli as she made her way toward the Presidential Mansion, but few remarked the curious dragging quality of her footsteps, or the weird, expressionless fixity of her features. The general effect of her appearance was so exquisite that these details escaped unnoticed. She was dressed entirely in white linen, more sheer and costly than the finest silk; about her throat was a shawl of ivory lace; she moved before that setting of tropical brilliance like a cool and remote vision of loveliness.

She was halfway across the terrace fronting General Ortiz' residence, before the captain of the sentry noticed her. The man squinted, blinked, and squinted again, to be sure that his eyes were not deceiving him. Then he bawled, at the top of his voice, "Señorita! Back! You were warned not to approach this building! I have orders to shoot you on sight!"

Consuelo continued to advance as if she had neither heard his shout, nor seen his frantic gesture. Once more, the captain yelled his warning; and then, seeing that his words were still unheeded, ordered the six men under his command to take aim with their rifles. This officer, like most of those appointed by Manuel Ortiz, fulfilled every requirement of ruthlessness and brutality—and yet even he shrank from slaughtering a single defenseless girl in such a manner. However, he was well aware of the consequences of disobedience to President Ortiz; and in reluctant tones, he gave the command to fire.

The guns cracked sharply; and Consuelo staggered back under the impact of the fusillade, and then crumpled to the ground. The captain ran forward, pain and horror on his face. However, he had not reached the girl's side, before she began to move again. Her movements were not the convulsive jerks of a person caught in the final throes of death; instead she was rising from the ground with a slow, almost inhuman control of her limbs.
The captain of the sentry was unable to believe that of six rifle bullets fired at such close range, none had struck a fatal spot; yet such appeared to be the case. With a hand that trembled, he drew his service revolver, intending to finish the ghastly business with a final shot.

But he never fired. By this time, Consuelo was standing again; and he saw that a huge gaping hole had been torn in her breast. The aim of his men had not been at fault, after all; the charge from their guns must have literally blasted through her heart. Yet she had risen to her feet, despite the grisly wound; and now she was slowly advancing toward him, the sweet emptiness of her expression unshadowed by any awareness of pain or distress. And the ragged hole in her breast was not even bleeding, when it should have been gushing bright scarlet like a fountain. Only a slow trickle was oozing from the wound—and that trickle was not red, but viscid, iridescent green. . . .

"Madre de Dios!" The exclamation came from the captain's lips in a thick, terrified whisper. His fingers uncurled from his revolver, and the heavy weapon clattered on the pavement. He turned and ran, seized by an abject and uncontrollable panic; and his subordinates broke their formation and ran after him. They were soldiers picked for their courage under fire; but they did not consider it a part of their duty to combat the fiendish miracles of the Devil himself. . . .

Consuelo passed through the portal into the lavishly decorated lobby of the mansion. She found no one to halt her advance; the fleeing sentries had already warned the guardsmen usually on duty there that a living corpse was approaching—a relentless figure that had been rendered proof against bullets by some infernal art. She turned and went slowly down the corridor that led to the President's office.

Entering the small ante-room, Consuelo was confronted by the wretched little secretary, Ramon, and also by an armed bodyguard who was posted at all times beside the single heavy door which gave access to the executive study. At the sight of her, Ramon gave a high-pitched squeal of mortal terror, and cowered down

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as if he would hide under his desk. The soldier, taken utterly by surprise, but sensing the presence of some ghastly menace, raised his heavy pistol and fired point-blank at the white-clad figure who had come into the room.

The single ball was enough to make Consuelo stagger; but she did not fall. She extended her left hand as if to steady herself; the guard fired again wildly; and three of the girl's delicate waxen fingers were blasted away. Instead of gushing blood, the stumps oozed green fluid that formed in great drops like honey before falling. And still she advanced, slow, inexorable, her lovely face without the slightest expression.

The bodyguard did not fire a third time. He pressed himself back against the wall, as if he were trying to flatten himself to a shadow; and with brutal features grotesquely transformed by fear, inched away to one side.

However, Consuelo paid no attention to him. Her right hand closed about the polished knob of the door; she softly turned the latch; and the heavy panel began to open slowly before her . . .

Upon hearing the shots outside his office, the President of Santa Rita had quickly opened the drawer of his desk, and closed his fingers about the grip of an ugly black automatic. He was not seriously alarmed; on one or two previous occasions, some fool had tried to force his way to the executive presence over the refusal of Ramon; and the bodyguard had been obliged to cool his ardor with a bullet. When the door-knob began to turn, Ortiz took it for granted that it was only the secretary coming in, to report some incident of this sort . . .

Nevertheless, he was too wary and cunning by nature to be caught napping; he flicked down the safety catch on his weapon, and kept his gaze intently upon the slowly opening panel of the door.

Ortiz did not move or make a sound when he saw Consuelo de Chavez. She entered the room quietly, and closed the door after her. With even footsteps, that dragged with a faint, unnatural lethargy, she approached the desk where the President sat.

The man was literally paralyzed with horror. The wounds on Consuelo's breast and her left hand, with their slow exudate of green slime, were more ghastly than any conceivable welter of blood; yet somehow it was not so much these injuries that chilled his heart, as the sheer breathing loveliness of her face. If her expression had been vengeful or vindictive, he would have been less terrified; it was the very lack of expression on those chiseled features that aroused his greatest dread. Consuelo de Chavez was undoubtedly moving as if she were alive; and yet her waxen countenance, her bloodless lips, her vacant eyes were those of a dead woman.

The Negro strain that had contributed to Manuel Ortiz' grotesque appearance, had also bestowed on him a heritage of racial memories, brain-figments of spirit lore and demonology engendered through the centuries in the murky rain-forests of central Africa. He recalled the stories of his childhood, the folk-tales and superstitions about dead things called back to life through infernal powers. A single word formed itself involuntarily upon his gross lips; he uttered it in a hoarse whisper: "Zombie . . ."

THE physical act of pronouncing those dread syllables had the effect of breaking the paralysis that clutched him. Hysterically, his finger tightened on the trigger of the black automatic in his hand; he pointed the muzzle directly at the white face of Consuelo.

The gun emptied itself with a continuous chattering roar; and then her features were suddenly blotted out, transformed to a battered grey-green pulp. She
recollected as if from a violent shove; however she did not fall down—and after only an instant's pause, she continued her advance.

One eye was gone, but the other still gazed with terrible vacant intentness from the ruin of her face.

She was still some twelve feet away from the President's desk when her hand disappeared for a moment under a fold of her dress; she drew forth a gleaming dagger. The weapon was small; but the needle-sharp point had been smeared with a brown sticky paste. Ortiz realized that the knife was poisoned without a doubt: a single scratch from its blade would cause swift and horrible death, like that ensuing upon the bite of an adder.

Consuelo did not quicken her approach. Perhaps Ortiz might still have escaped, if he had leaped to his feet and fled from the room before she could come near enough to strike. However, he did not move. Once again, the paralysis of fear had clamped his muscles in vise-like rigidity; he was utterly helpless.

The President of Santa Rita sat there, at his immense and impressive desk, waiting . . .

Half an hour later, the trembling Ramon, backed by a squad of soldiers, slowly pushed open the doors to the presidential chambers and entered. Silently he gazed down at the stricken form that still twitched in agony on the floor. General Ortiz was not yet dead, but he no longer resembled a human being. His face was a curious greenish tinge, his eyes bulged from their sockets, and his gaping mouth could no longer contain his swollen tongue. From his breast protruded a tiny jeweled dagger. Ramon gagged, and wheeling, ran from the room. He slammed shut the door behind him.
Pray that she stays with

The whole town trembled with terror, for the Beast of the River had come—just as the old legends had said—to claim their loveliest maidens. Even Dennis Avery was forced to believe, for with his own eyes he had seen the unspeakable bestiality and lust shining in the faces of those lovely young girls as they ran with eager arms outstretched to meet grim death!
CHAPTER ONE

The Thing the River Spawned

From the roof of the six-storied Angel Hotel, the Devil River was a lazy caterpillar crawling through the town. Its legs were the four or five bridges that crossed the stream at three-block intervals. Its curving head and tail disappeared eastward and westward into the broken mesquite and sagebrush countryside.

From this roof of the town's most imposing structure, a careful observer might have noted that all the handsome shops and impressive homes were on his side. Across the river were only the small, shabby stores and disreputable huts of colored servants, Mexican sheepherders and shearsers, and the "poor whites." The only respectable structure on the south side of the river was the splendid new Municipal Swimming Pool, which sat directly opposite the hotel and, like it, near the edge of the river.

All this, the rooftop observer could have seen and understood. But, unless he were psychic, he could not have realized that the whole town was quivering in a backwash of hysterical fear.

There were, to be sure, physical evidences of disorder: Wreckage was strewn along the opposite bank; of hovels and chicken coops and wagons; things that had meant home and a meager living for the people on the south side. But the observer would have had to go down to
the street and give ear to the murmuring of hate, to have understood the tense unrest—and fear.

The substantial buildings on the north side had sustained small loss from the recent flood. But dark prophecies of disasters yet to come were muttered at night in the devastated Mexican quarter. For the black devil that had inhabited the river—El Diablo Negro del Rio—was angry because the wealthy townsmen of the north bank had built a dam to make themselves a country-club lake for boating, fishing, and duck-hunting.

Only yesterday, Garcia Lopez had seen the hideous, blazing-eyed monster—half man, half fish—skulking in the shadowed water beneath the Main Street bridge. And so had Maria Fernandez, and others. They muttered fearfully and crossed themselves with shaking fingers. And they kept their daughters close, for from their forefathers they knew that the Black Demon, when angered, would surely bring destruction—to the other side, they hoped.

On Main Street bridge, strolled Dennis Avery, bronzed swimming instructor and manager of the new pool, with Maris Oliver—an anomaly to the stubborn social pattern of the town, for Dennis had grown up in one of the shacks on the south, while the exquisitely blonde Maris had been pampered in one of the shining mansions on the opposite side.

They leaned upon the low parapet and gazed down upon Devil River, still sulken and filled with flotsam. Suddenly something in the river below caught Maris's attention.

"Look!" In her voice was whispered terror and awe.

The boy's eyes followed her pointing finger. A chill ran through him. But he suppressed the cry that rose in his lips.

"No!" His voice was a strained whisper. "It's only a shadow!" But he realized, too late, that he had denied without having anything to deny, and that his voice had cracked on a note of desperation. For he too had seen.

"Look!" Just that one word again from Maris. This time her trembling finger pointed to a girl on the south bank, where a small, terraced park led down from the new swimming pool. "Darlene Ellison!"

Darlene, the lovely sixteen-year-old daughter of Steve Ellison, young president of the First National Bank, was doing an incredible thing. Clothed in nothing but a wisp of bathing suit, she approached the water's treacherous edge like an eager wanton approaching her lover. Every movement of her body, from her youthful breasts to the coquettishly advancing feet, expressed the extremity of her desire. Even to the two on the bridge above, the amorous yearning on the pale, young face, crowned with its challenging torch of red hair, was unmistakable. Her rapt gaze was fastened on something near the point where "the shadow" had disappeared beneath the bridge.

Without a word, Dennis Avery started running across to the south end of the bridge. He had not taken three leaps before Maris' scream stopped him. Darlene Ellison, with a passionate cry, had leaped into the bosom of the tumbling river.

The first victim was lured to the filthy, irresistible embrace of the black river-devil!

As Dennis Avery ran to the end of the bridge, down and around to where the girl had stood, he stripped off his clothes, tossing them aside. A slim bronzed god in blue trunks, he knifed into the rushing water. Maris ran close behind, crying out for him to be careful. Like a beautiful sleek porpoise in the breakers, he dived again and again into the dark current, until even his mus-
cles of steel refused to go on. Still there was no sight of the girl. She had disappeared as if by magic.

Running back up to the level of the slow, sleepy street, they stopped Pedro Santomar, the only person in sight. Avery snatched the boy’s dilapidated bicycle and started back to the north side. Somebody had to raise the alarm—and break the news to Steve Ellison.

Maris, there with the ragged Pedro, looked about her dazedly, her brain deadened with horror and a strange fear. Suddenly her eyes were caught by a figure, a block or two southward, sauntering in her direction. Here was the very man they needed.

John Bates was the town’s river-walker. For more years than Maris could remember, he had retrieved everything lost in the river—from the puffed bodies of the unlovely drowned, to carelessly dropped watches or bracelets. He would put on his old diving suit, walk into the river, and come out again to collect his five or ten dollars. Sometimes, some generous soul gave him twenty-five or even fifty. The rest of the time, he eked out a living for himself and his crippled wife, with any odd job he could get. John, of course, lived on the shabby side of the stream.

John Bates saw the crowd that was beginning to gather—instinctively drawn by tragedy—and he hastened his steps. He joined the jabbering group just as Steve Ellison’s long black sedan zoomed up. The handsome Steve, white-faced and tragic-eyed, jumped from the car.

“There’s John!” he shouted to Dennis, who was still in the car. “Take him over to get his diving suit. I’m going down to where”—And he was already dashing down the embankment toward the place where his daughter had taken her fatal plunge.

“Steve Ellison!” The authority in Bates’s voice halted the young bank president like a jerked rein, and turned his face back to the man who spoke. “I ain’t goin’ down into the river.”

Ellison sprang back up the bank. “You’ve got to!”

The two men measured each other. John Bates, thick-set, heavy-featured, unkempt. Steve Ellison, trim, fine-countenanced, well-groomed.

Ellison spoke again. “You’ve got to go down, John. I’ll pay you—”

“How much?” The question shot off the end of Ellison’s offer. It was the first time anyone had ever known Bates to mention money.

“Whatever you want—four, five hundred dollars.”

Savagely Bates spat into the hot dust. “Wonder you hadn’t said six bits. Old John Bates’s life ain’t worth much, you think.”

Ellison saw he had taken the wrong track. “John, for God’s sake! Have pity. That’s my daughter”—The man broke down.

For a moment compassion twisted Bates’s face. “I know,” he said slowly. “But there’s no use—the way things are now.”

“But surely, John,” Ellison pleaded, “you don’t believe any of that rot about a river monster.”

Bates’s eyes swiveled past the clump of praying, moaning darkies, past the shivering, grey-faced, shabby whites, and stopped upon the disordered crowd of terrified Mexicans, crossing themselves and hysterically fumbling their rosaries. “The ancestors of these people,” he said harshly, “knewed this river generations before your smart-alec fathers come here and took it away from them, I wouldn’t say it’s a devil, or anything like they say. But how do you know they’s not a monster, or something, spawned and grewed in them strange hills out yonder, come like the Mexes say to lure away the daughters of them that caused that dam to be built?”
Every day your smart men discover new plants, and animals, and things, but they're always cowards to admit a new one, until it's jammed down their throats. You might as well come to it—they's something in that river. And he can't be stopped."

Prosaic, hard-headed John Bates had said what all were thinking. The daughters of those who had caused the dam to be built. Steve Ellison had been the treasurer of that Diablo Dam Committee. And his daughter had already gone down to the embrace of the river-devil.

There were others on the committee. Jim Tandy, who had no daughter. William P. Haney, whose lovely daughter was now a young matron and a mother herself.

But the thing that filled Dennis Avery's mind was that the chairman of the committee had been Horace P. Oliver, whose daughter was the girl Dennis loved—Maris!

THAT terror had no more than slashed at Avery momentarily before he knew how absurd it was. The death plunge of the young, innocent Darlene Ellison had been a queer, inexplicable thing. No use denying that, but the thought struck the boy that it might have been the result of a sort of self-hypnosis produced by the romantic adolescent's hearing too much talk about the river monster, and his irresistible lure for girls. The idea that a river-monster—even if there was such a thing—could choose his victims with human discrimination was ridiculous.

Soon, most of the crowd of the merely curious melted away. Then an afternoon of nightmares began. First, under Bates's direction, they got out boats and dragged the river, again and again, from the point of the girl's disappearance to many yards down the stream. But they found nothing. The best of the divers from the Boy Scouts took up the search. Dennis shuttled between the pool and the river, trying to keep a life-guard's eye on everyone. Every few minutes, some wild-eyed person would come crying that he had glimpsed El Diablo Negro. But there was, of course, no evidence.

As the afternoon wore late, the young pool-manager had to spend more and more time at the pool, for he sensed that trouble was brewing there. Subtle, intangible, but as real as an electric current.

The pool was unusually crowded, mostly with girls. And these girls, whom Dennis had known since kindergarten, were different today. Their usual innocent young laughter had changed to the obscene titter of wantons. With shameless indelicacy, these childhood friends exposed their bodies, advertised desire in every posture. A strange, unnatural sex-hysteria seemed to possess them. It disturbed Dennis, but there seemed nothing he could do about it.

When his assistant came on about dusk, he seized the opportunity to escape for a moment. At the scene of the search, he found out that Ellison had offered John Bates $5,000 to bring back the body of his daughter, and Bates had gone home to get his outfit. The Scout Master was checking his boys in for the night. Two were still out. Suddenly, one little black-headed boy popped up near the bank, floundered ashore, screaming out in wild terror: "The River-devil! I saw it!"

The Scout Master put his arms around the hysterical child, and steadied him. "Now, Jimmie, pull yourself together. You didn't see—"

And then the other missing boy came up, started for the shore, floundered, fell. Someone dragged him in. The grisly sight of him told the whole, unbelievable story.

As if moved by compulsion, the crowd moved into a tight circle around the boy as he lay in the kneeling Scout Master's arms. Eyes concentrated on the horror they wished to deny. All gazed, terror bound.
The boy’s head flopped grotesquely, hanging but by a slight bond of flesh. Blood gushed from the stump of his neck. He had stumbled from the river only as a chicken flounces from the headsman’s axe!

The onlookers’ tear-filled eyes drew nearer, narrowed to unbelieving points. The bleeding flesh of the stump was dentated, toothed! Nothing could have done that but the fierce, inhumanly powerful jaws of the devil-monster who lay in wait there in the stream at their feet.

*El Diablo Negro* had answered his doubters.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Satan’s Black Star—**

UNTIL now, Dennis had resented John Bates’ reluctance to use his equipment and his experience to bring back to her half-crazed parents the body of Steve Ellison’s drowned child. But now nobody could deny there was danger—grim and grisly—in the river. And anyone going down was gambling his life away, with the odds all against him.

Before the mutilated boy could be carried away, Bates came rattling up in his old Ford truck, his old-fashioned equipment piled in it. It didn’t take his shrewd eyes long to search out the dead boy, and to interpret the sight. Solemnly he walked over to where Steve Ellison, worn and grey-faced, awaited him. “I’m sorry, Steve,” he said, “but the deal’s off.”

Ellison grasped his arm. “You can’t back out! I’ll make it ten thousand!”

“Ten thousand?” At the mention of money, the pity went from Bates’s voice. “You offer that for your girl’s dead body, but you think in your snobbish mind that it’s too much for *my* life.” And there were those in the crowd who questioned with John Bates why he should trade his life for cold dollars.

Suddenly a voice, sonorous, compelling, broke over the tense scene. “Verily, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has fallen upon you!” Upon the top step of the rock stairs that led from the river level to the bridge, stood a gaunt figure. A cheap grey suit hung on his gaunt frame, but his face was the face of a prophet. His long, silvery hair stood out in the dusk like a holy nimbus. Parson Jonas Booker, Tabernacle preacher.

Too many years they had listened to his rantings. Grunts of impatience with the old fanatic arose. Conversations broke out again. But the old man kept on. “Verily, the wicked shall die. If you wish to rid yourselves of the visitation of the devil, clean up your city. The dens of iniquity, the night-clubs, the—”

As if conjured by this exorcism, a long, sleek, red roadster slid over the bridge and came to a stop just behind him. The old parson whirled, pointed at the occupants of the car, screamed out in a frenzy of righteousness: “There! There is the fount and source of your destruction! Stone the wicked from your—”

Jed Ransom got out of the car, shoved Parson Booker aside, indulgently, as he would have a drunk in his own night-club, and went down to offer sympathy to Steve Ellison. Jed, big, burly, crude, but good-hearted, was proprietor of *The Devil’s Star*, an ornate, wide-open night-club up the river, just outside the city limits. His sign, a huge, black, five-star, the legendary mark of the river-devil, glistened high above the night-club roof. And stranger still, a black-five-pointed star marked his forehead, exactly between his deep-set, searching black eyes. Some said that Jed, to satisfy some hidden melodramatic urge, had had it tattooed there; the old-timers declared he had come into the world with it, in a shanty on the south bank. He was one who had managed to move across the river.

The steps and the slope from the bridge down to the river level were like a scene
from a badly-directed play with too many characters. Parson Jones’ exhortation continued, unheed. The parents of the mutilated boy had just arrived, and their lamentations keened out above everything. Steve Ellison was grasping Jed Ransom’s huge hand in relief. He knew that, if anyone could touch Bates, it would be this man who had grown up, like him, in poverty. “Please, Jed, speak to John. You’ve got to—”

Something hushed him. A sort of prescience, for the excited babbling up the river couldn’t have been loud enough to be singled out from the medley of noises around. A babbling that rose higher, came nearer. A knot of people, running, stumbling, growing as it approached. Steve Ellison strained his ears. He thought he understood what they were saying, but he was afraid to believe.

He never moved out of his tracks, but listened as everyone else was now listening. And soon their cries rose loud and clear: “Darlene—we have found her!”

With a shout of incredulous joy, Ellison flew up the embankment. And then he saw her. The man shriveled, wilted to the ground, grovelled. He uttered not a sound, but his hands clutched at his vitals as if holding within him agony too great to bear. Then, slowly, in the vast silence that fell over the throng, he raised his eyes.

It was his daughter. Alive, yes. She stood alone, swaying vaguely. Her face was the face of an idiot, mind destroyed by too great a knowledge of evil. Her body, to which only a wisp of her bathing suit clung, was torn, ravaged. In the hollow between the ruptured, bleeding breasts, an unmistakable brand stood out, starkly. The black star of the river-devil!

THAT night, Dennis Avery tossed and tumbled, but for once he was not worrying because the river divided him and Maris. For once, the town was unified against a common threat, a menace to all.

Time and again, Dennis thought over the gruesome events of the day, trying to make them an intelligible pattern. Nothing about the past twelve hours seemed to make sense. Stripped of its hysteria, the day had brought only three tangible things—Darlene Ellison’s plunge into the river and her return, and the Scout’s grisly mutilation.

There was little about these things to create the cold fear that gnawed him. The girl could have simply tired of the pool and decided, foolishly, to take a dip in the still-unsettled river. She could have been battered by a floating log, and her mental condition caused by terror and exposure. The boy could have thrust his head into some darksome crevice in his search, and a jagged stone could have caved in, catching him like a steel trap.

But why had the girl come from up-stream?

If she had been fighting, alone, against the river, she would have drifted down with the current. But couldn’t she have fought her way out and, in a hysteria of terror, run crazily up-stream until someone discovered her? Wearily, he shook his head. He didn’t know.

He kept thinking of the girls at the pool that day. Could he, stirred by excitement, have imagined their wanton behavior? They, of course, had been nervous and their laughter and talk would naturally have been higher-keyed than usual. He was ashamed of his thoughts.

The first thing the next morning, Avery decided to talk with John Bates. He felt that he could do with a good dose of hard common-sense. John’s wife, with her sweet, wan smile, greeted him from her wheelchair. John took Dennis out to the back porch. “Don’t want to worry her,” he explained gently.

When the boy questioned the river-walker about the possibility of a despoiler in the river, Bates answered, “Well, I
didn’t stretch it when I said there could be. What we humans actually know is mighty puny compared to what we don’t know. Anything is possible. But it’s also possible for all those queer happenings of yesterday to have a natural explanation."

"I have already thought of explanations for the most of it," Dennis put in.

"Yeah, Denny, I reckon I jest got excited and spoke out of turn," John agreed.

The ringing of the telephone interrupted. It was Dennis’ mother, saying that the boy who opened the pool that morning thought Dennis ought to come on down. He had an unusual run of customers—girls. And they were acting "funny," a little hard to manage.

Dennis hurried off, the heavy responsibility settling upon him. Because it was faster, he went north to the river street. As he hurried along the rough, unsidewalked street, he thought of recommending to the City Council closing the pool for a few days. But he was shocked to find himself thinking that those girls could be in no danger, no matter how "funny" they acted. There ran in his head the words of Rosalia Martinez, the girl who helped his mother with the housework. Her little brown face quivering with a sort of unclean excitement, she had said that all the girls would seek the love of the river-devil, but the monster of the black star would have only those of his own choosing.

According to that silly superstition, one of the chosen was William P. Haney’s daughter, Joyce, now wife of Sonny Drake. On his way over, Dennis had seen her on a morning stroll with her baby. To an intelligent person, the whole thing was—

The wail of a baby cut into Dennis’ clouded thoughts. It seemed to come from somewhere closer to the river. He halted, listened, and sprang toward the sound. Then, disgustedly, he resumed his way. Couldn’t a baby even have a good squall-

ing spell without his getting excited? He’d just go on to the pool and tend to his own business. That was—

But that child was uttering the loneliest wails ever heard. Dennis sprang down the embankment. And there, under a tree, was a baby carriage. Fear began to prick at him—for he recognized that deserted carriage and the child in it. The Drake baby—William P. Haney’s grandchild!

Avery’s eyes scanned the ground about, picked up the trail of neat walking shoes—leading toward the river! Desperately fighting against the thoughts that arose in him, he followed the trail down the gentle slope. It couldn’t be! And yet—

There on the bank lay a little heap of clothes. The navy walking shoes, the blue sports dress, the filmy hose that he had seen Joyce wearing only an hour ago, and—dainty, silken lingerie!

There was no sign of struggle. No other footprints. Nobody had forced her. The girl had voluntarily disrobed and walked into the sullen river—William P. Haney’s lovely young daughter! Down into the embrace of the black monster of the Devil River!

CHAPTER THREE

The Demon Drowses

BEFORE an hour had passed, a group of serious men had gathered at the city auditorium—the council and any others who had cared to come. Horace P. Oliver, Maris’s father, was there, staring coldly at Dennis Avery. Jed Ransom, his flashing black eyes challenging the suspicious, hostile glances cast at the black star that marked his forehead. John Bates. Parson Booker. . . .

The discussion lacked vigor and decision because everyone was embarrassed to say aloud what he felt in his heart. It was too fantastic. You couldn’t rise up
in this modern auditorium and say to a group of common-sense, intelligent business-men that there was a hell-born monster in the river irresistibly luring the town’s loveliest girls to unholy assignation. You simply had to say vaguely that the river, since the flood, seemed to hold some unusual danger. After all, outside of superstitions and hysterical rumors, there had been no evidence of a river monster.

John Bates was once more in the limelight. Without consulting him, the men quickly made up a pledge-purse that rose to $50,000. “And now,” the city manager said, walking over to present the pledge to Bates, “we’ll wait until John returns with a report before we go into further action.”

For a moment Bates made no response. Then, “You fellows take too much for granted. That’s a lot of money, but still not enough. I love life as well as you do. And I think my wife would rather have me alive than to have your fifty thousand.”

After the hubbub died, the meeting finally ended in the organizing of searching crews, armed with guns and fishing spears, for the various parts of the river. All diving was forbidden. One detail, of course, was left within the city limits.

Dennis stayed at the pool, phoning Maris every hour or so and begging her not to leave her apartment at the top of the Angel Hotel. Later in the afternoon, when everything seemed to be running smoother, he rode out to join one of the crews. He found the fellows tired and disgusted, and he himself had to admit they may have as well been trailing a fabulous sea-serpent.

About dusk, they dragged back to town to be met with the news—no less gruesome for being expected—that Joyce Drake had returned. Body torn and despoiled, she poured out from loose, bruised lips, meaningless gibberish between idiotic giggles. And the black star of the demon was stamped deep into her pale breast.

Sick at heart, Avery started to the pool to see how his assistant was getting on. Just before he got there, he heard a great babbling and cackling of feminine voices. He broke into a run and arrived just in time to see a bevy of girls, in the scantiest of bathing suits, rushing out the gates, around the high wire enclosure, and down to the river below.

Their faces were unfit for man to look upon. The countenances of those young, delicately-reared girls expressed all the lewd knowledge and desire accumulated in the world since Lilith. Avery called to them, caught at them. They broke away and plunged into the ugly, debris-filled river.

Down under they dived, and were washed down stream a few yards and then back upon the bank. Rejected by the river, they wailed and writhed in shameless abandon. They threw themselves time and again into the sullen water, crying out their unsatisfied want.

The filthy lure of the black demon of the river was absolute, but he would have none but the elect!

When help, summoned by Avery’s calls, had subdued the girls and they had been taken to their homes, the young manager went back to the pool, called out the few little boys still splashing about there, closed the doors, and sadly posted a sign: “Closed until further notice.” He didn’t even seek permission of the city manager. It just had to be.

He walked briskly across the bridge to the Angel Hotel, and asked to see Mr. Oliver. Refused, he took the elevator to the top floor, watched his chances, and walked into the Oliver living room on the heels of a porter. Fortunately, Mr. Oliver was there alone.

“Mr. Oliver,” Avery said, “I’ve come
to beg you to get Maris out of town. You see what happened to the Ellison girl, to Joyce Haney. You saw those girls this afternoon and—"

"You filthy-minded young pup, how dare you—""

After numerous pleas to the man to listen to reason, Avery had to leave. He'd done no good, only succeeded in antagonizing Maris's father still more. He went straight home, determined to eat his supper and go back across the bridge to a place from which he could watch the hotel and the river all night. Even now, after all that had happened, it seemed absurd, but it was the only way he could be satisfied.

But before he finished eating, Maris called. "Darling," she said, "I heard father talking to you this afternoon, and I'm heart-broken about it. Meet me, I want to talk to you about it."

"No," Dennis answered vehemently, "you mustn't leave the hotel. Don't even leave your floor."

"But, darling, our regular place is in sight of the hotel. There can't be any danger that way. I just want to tell you that no matter what father says—""

Dennis, heart-sick and worried, could not resist that. So in a few minutes, she was in his arms in the shadow of the great tamarisk at the first slant of the gentle embankment. When it was time for her to go, he declared he was going with her. But she insisted that it would only make trouble.

There couldn't possibly be any danger. There was just the broken, short block between the river and the hotel, lighted well all the way. Bitter against her father for forcing them to clandestine meetings, he watched her, as he had so many times, past the little bakery, past the shoe-repair shop, and the gaping door of the hotel's all-night garage. The next door would be her own.

But suddenly she was no longer there on the street. As if by magic, she had disappeared. Stunned, he stood in his tracks for a paralyzing second. Then he started to run.

On a hand-truck outside the railed-in office, the one night attendant slept peacefully. Dennis didn't disturb him, for his burning eyes had found what he was looking for. Maris' footprints! The tracks of her little shoes, damp from the embankment grass, led straight across the concrete floor to the back door.

As he cleared that floor in three jumps, he wildly prayed one prayer. But a glance at the soft dirt of the alley told him that his prayer had not been answered. A groan of agony escaped his lips. Maris's tracks turned to the right, down the alley. She had circled back—back to the river!

With terror clawing at his vitals, he dashed down the alley. In a moment, he was at the top of the embankment, and what he saw there almost blasted his reason. Cries of animal rage splitting his throat, he stumbled down to that ghastly tableau.

There was no moon, but in the murky light of the stars, two figures stood out. A slim girl eagerly racing toward a huge, black, grotesque shape.

Before Avery could get halfway down, long, tentacle-like arms reached out and received the ardent girl into their embrace. Then, together, they went down into Devil River!

At last he had seen the black demon of the river. He knew now that the lascivious creature was no wraith of excited imaginations. He was real. And Maris, the girl Dennis loved, had left her sweet-heart's arms to steal off, willingly, eagerly, to a hellish assignation!

ALL the time Dennis was diving into that dirty sullen stream, searching the muddy bottom and the craggy sides, he realized how impotent he was against the power of the devil himself. When his
muscles refused to obey another command to dive, he dragged himself up the bank to the hotel. With no thought of tact, he gave the alarm.

When Oliver came rushing down, Avery thought for a moment that the man was going to kill him with the pistol he flourished so wildly. And Dennis knew that Maris's father could not have hated him worse than he despised himself. If it hadn't been for him, Maris would not now be a victim of the river-monster. She would have been safe in her room atop the hotel. Or would she? Could any girl resist the lure of the black demon?

They made a weird group there on the bank of the river—the wealthy North-siders and those from "across the river" bound together by terror. The wind was rising. Clouds were scudding across the sky, dimming the stars. The huddle of terrified humanity was lighted vaguely by flashlight and torches.

The Mexicans crossed themselves, the Negroes grovelled in beseeching prayer, the others mixed curses and supplication.

John Bates and Horace Oliver dominated the scene. Maris's domineering father was forcing the river-walker to a deal. His ranches and sheep were probably worth two millions, but they would not be so easily turned into cash assets. However, he and his friends, and the men whose daughters had gone into the embrace of this river demon, had met Bates's astounding demand—a quarter of a million dollars!

Bates, pale as death, made no pretense—his motive was mercenary. "Nothing less would do me any good. If I come back, I want to move my wife over on millionaire row. If I don't, my wife will need the money. So sign those papers, now. I don't want any slip-ups. If I come back with evidence that I have destroyed the Thing, I get my two hundred and fifty grand. If I don't get back—if I'm killed—my wife gets one hundred thousand. But Horace Oliver, what if, before I can get back, your daughter comes up like—like the others? Won't you try to void this?"

Vengeance blazed in Oliver's eyes. "No, I swear it! I want the destruction of that Thing! For God's sake, hurry!"

John Bates slipped on his diver's helmet, had it locked to his metal suit, adjusted his portable oxygen tank, and stepped off into the river. As always, when the river-walker went down, it was agreed that everyone should stay out of the river. No one should disturb the water and make his task harder.

Sunk in complete helplessness, Dennis Avery stared at the whorl that Bates had made in the water and knew in his heart only one wish—that Maris should not come back—alive.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil's Servant

IT WAS impossible to know how long it would be before those waiting in such horrible suspense could hear the result of Bates's trip to the river bottom. He himself had said that it might take days, that he might have to explore the stream-bed for miles in either direction—that he might not come back. So the huddled group of humanity dispersed to seek some way to make the passing time bearable.

But Dennis felt that he could never leave this spot until he heard something. Distractedly, probably through habit, he crossed back over the bridge and found himself wandering about the locked, deserted pool. Then he went down to the river and stood looking into it.

Suddenly, he was swept with the feeling that the key to the grisly mystery of the river bottom lay almost at his feet. That the river-demon—and Maris!—were almost within reach. After all, just a few steps to the left, both the Ellison and the
Haney girl had been lured into the river. A few steps to the right, the hysterical girls from the pool had flung themselves wildly into the water as if seeking the bosom of a lover. Maris and the demon had walked in directly across. And John Bates, who knew the river bottom better than its banks, had, without saying why, begun his search at this spot.

With no memory of willing it, Dennis suddenly realized that he had stripped off his clothes, ready to dive. Suddenly a movement of the water, a soft little eddy right at his feet, caught his glance. His heart raced. Could he be right? Was he close?

His brown, lean body arced smoothly into the water, making no sound. He turned back and felt along the jagged, overhanging bank, until his lungs were ready to burst. Disappointed, he drove himself upward, touching, in passing, the stub of the huge pipe that, after swimming-hours every Sunday night, drained the pool. It was not until he was out on top again that he realized that, directly underneath the drainage pipe, there had been a suspicion of a drift—inward.

Knowing that he was probably letting desire father a thought, he got his breath and went down again, ducked under the stub of pipe, and felt for the river-wall. And there was an inward eddy! His hands found a hole. He thrust his arms in, the top half of his body. He couldn't touch the end of it! It was a passage!

Violently trembling with excitement, and realizing that he would need every bit of strength he possessed, he went back to the surface, crawled out on the bank, and restrained his impatience while he rested for several minutes. Then down again, knowing that he was going back into that under-water passage until he found out something definite—if it cost him his life.

He squirmed through the opening into the hellish, liquid blackness. A root caught at him. Slimy things touched his body. God! What a fool he'd been! To waste his last effort like this! He probably was in some natural trough in the river-bank. And when he should discover himself in a cul-de-sac, it would be physically impossible to turn back. To die for nothing while Maris—

The passage turned sharply upward, and his head was out of water! He no longer had to crawl! A few more steps and the water receded until he was walking in sticky clay.

Everything was heavy, dead black. The passage was still so narrow that it barely cleared his shoulders, but he could almost stand. His heart beat in such violent excitement that it seemed to pound into the close, smothering blackness like the throb of a powerful engine. Forgetting discretion, he hurried his steps. The next thing he knew, he was sprawling, the breath almost whooshed out of him, tripped by what could have been a slimy root—or a rubbery tentacle.

He was up again, heedlessly going on. And he knew that a few feet ahead of him, the blackness was giving away. There was light somewhere near. What if he were not on the right track? What if he were not in time? What if Maris had already—?

Dull black thunder churned his brain before he realized that he had been struck on the head. With something so plastic—and strong—that it might have been the deadly slam of a shark's tail—or a blow from the amphibious black demon of Devil River.

That dull compelling thunder rolled sickeningly through his whole body, blotted him out, made him nothing. . . .

THE first impact upon his returning consciousness was made through his sense of smell. The air he breathed was rank with fish-like odors and, yes, the odor of man. Somewhere near must be
the man-beast who lived in the river. But Dennis’s burning eyes would not open.

He could feel the slippery mud beneath him, could hear the drip, drip of water somewhere. He knew that he was in a dank, cavernous place. Could this be the lair where that grisly demon dragged his victims? Could Maris be—?

With agonizing effort, he forced his heavy, throbbing eyelids up. Though he was no longer in darkness, the light was dim. But he could see enough to know that he was in the place he had sought— and he was helpless. His hands were painfully bound behind his back, and his ankles were tied with something that looked like black rubber hose.

Though he could not have been surprised by anything, the weirdness of the scene overwhelmed him. The place was small, irregular, cellar-like. Everything was a glistening, oozy monotone. Black walls, muddy black floor, and, deep in the shadows, a soggy black hummock. All this was but a background for the black Thing that sprawled on the hummock.

Huge, grotesque, neither man nor fish but a hideous amphibian that weirdly resembled both, it lay on its bloated belly, inert and lumpish, as if spent or cloyed with desire fulfilled. Its lidless eyes blazed like live coals. It moved not at all except for almost imperceptible pulsations of the slick, spongy-looking black body. Although the Thing looked awkward and torpid, the cavernous, spike-toothed maw and huge, long arms with clawed hands evidenced the latent power in it. And Avery already knew too well its bestial cunning.

But where was Maris? Had the Thing already satisfied himself with her, and sent her back, mind broken and body despoiled, to those who loved her?

He had to try doggedly several times before he could make his deadened muscles obey and turn his throbbing head to survey the whole of the small mud cellar. To the left, nothing but a black wall. To the right, another hummock, this one covered with dingy brown tarpaulin. And on that, spread a white blur. The blur stirred, writhed as if in pain.

It was Maris!

Dennis Avery had gone through hell to find the girl he loved. And now he had found her. But to what avail? Bitterness bit more deeply into his heart. The hideous irony of the situation weighed unbearably upon him. For he was helpless.

He strained his eyes into the dim corner, trying to see into how much abuse Maris had fallen. In his utter hopelessness, he could not have told whether or not he wished her foul Gethsemane were over. He only knew that he groaned when he saw that her dripping white dress was still intact—groaned from the awful fear that, when that black, unhuman Thing, driven by the passions of both man and beast, should come out of its stupor, Dennis would have to witness a scene that would uproot the reason of any man.

The minutes crawled by. Dennis jerked and pulled at his bonds, but his effort only made his wrists and ankles swell and the flesh bulge more painfully around the little black hose that bound him.

There was no other movement in the dank cellar except Maris’s uneasy stirring. Cautiously, Dennis began to roll toward the crude bed where the girl lay.

He was so frantic that he hardly wondered over the weird objects that came into view with his change of position. A huge, black, dismembered head with staring, fishy eyes. Great gobbets of black flesh that must have been the body once belonging to that head. Surely two monsters had fought over their lovely victim, and this one had been ripped to pieces by the one that now drowsed in victory.

But it could not matter to Avery, who was struggling only to be once more near
the girl he loved. He wanted once more to touch his lips to her silken cheek. Before his world came to an end, he wanted to—

Suddenly there broke out from somewhere behind Dennis, a snapping noise, a thudding and bumping, and a low muttered curse. A man’s curse! Awkwardly, Dennis flopped back toward the sound, and lay in a heap, staring. In the mud wall, a small square door had opened. A man was crouching low to enter. The crouched figure came through, straighten ed. And a great sob of joy tore from Dennis’s throat. For he was looking into the face of a friend! John Bates!

Dennis shouted with gratitude, unshamed tears streaming down his cheeks. Then, suddenly thinking of that river demon in whose inert, blubbery body lay cruelty and strength enough to finish them all with one slam of a mighty arm, Dennis cut off his shout. “Look out!” he whispered, pointing.

The next few minutes were like an agonizing descent into hell as Dennis’ reeling brain searched for a meaning for the nightmare turn of events. For John Bates answered Avery’s warning only with a sneering laugh. Then he swaggered over and patted the sleeping Thing gently on the head! As if Bates were the master, or creator, and that huge monstrosity a creature of his.

A babble of questions and pleadings poured from Dennis. Without a word, Bates pulled a dirty handkerchief from his pocket, gagged Dennis, and with his foot shoved him back out of the way. Then carefully, from his shirt pocket, he removed a small phial, and went to bend over Maris, one knee resting on the dingy tarpaulin beside her.

In despair and bewilderment, the helpless Dennis watched. The flint-eyed man opened the phial, pulled back Maris’s lower lip and tipped three drops of liquid into her mouth. As he waited for the effects, he addressed himself to the helpless young man there on the floor. “This is a wonderful concoction. Learned about it from an old Mexican madre. It’s handy sometimes to know the vermin of humanity. This is the same stuff that I introduced into your pool, through a small tube inserted into the pipes after they left the filter tanks. It is a love potion that affects only women. The madre wasn’t sure how it’d work out in the pool, but it couldn’t have been better. In a moment, Maris will be awake, hungry for love. She will go willingly to my river demon!”

So John Bates was not the master but the servant of the black demon!

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Rings Down the Curtain

IN INDESCRIBABLE anguish, Dennis waited out the minutes with Bates. He turned over toward the door through which Bates had entered and made a discovery which did not surprise him much. The door, daubed with mud for camouflage, opened into the small pit, directly under the engine room of the pool, where were the filtration tanks, the chlorine machine, and the drainage outlet.

This small, seldom-used pit served, by means of a trap-door, to make free for examination the elbow of the huge drainage pipe. John Bates, this man whom they considered a respectable and humble citizen, had tunneled just below the pipe, from the river to this place and had hollowed out here a small cellar, using at nights the whole of the pool engine-room for his comfort, and his nefarious poisoning of the water.

The trapdoor was open and Dennis could see what had made the thudding when Bates came in, and brought on his curses. Bates evidently had come down hurriedly and had upset into the pit two
or three wrenches and one of the cans of granulated chlorine used for sterilizing the dressing rooms. They lay in the pit just outside this dim inner cellar. And the safety-valve of the chlorine tank, a hose with tight clamp on the end, dangled through the trap.

Maris had ceased her uneasy moaning and twisting. She now seemed relaxed and breathing easily. Even in the dim light, Dennis could see the pink rising in her skin. Suddenly she stretched languidly, opened her eyes, and gazed into the face of John Bates who leaned over her. With a little sigh, she raised her arms, locked them around his neck, and pulled his grimy face down to her. Her eager red lips met his in a passionate kiss.

Trembling from head to foot with desire, the man nevertheless released her and pulled her arms from around him. The reason of his self-denial was not slow to appear. He must serve the Master—the black demon of the river.

Bates urged the girl to rise, led her over where the blubbery, black Thing still drowsed. The man whispered something in the girl’s ear. She threw herself passionately upon the mud couch and entwined her arms around the huge black neck of the monster. Dennis struggled toward them, a scream slashing at his gag. The river-monster’s head waggled grotesquely up and down, his loose black lips writhed loosely, nuzzling at her white breast.

And then, once more, the mad world was whirled upside down. Bates, his cruel mocking gaze pinned upon the anguished Dennis, whipped a knife from his pocket, raised it above the sluggish black beast, and drove it downward. With a great whoosh of air, the Thing shriveled to nothing—deflated! It had been nothing but a black balloon, cleverly made in that grotesque shape!

Bates’s wild, cruel laughter pounded against the sides of the little mud cellar.

EVEN as bewilderment almost overcame him, Avery felt shame that he had let such a thing fool him. But it had seemed so real. Even now, the huge, ugly, betoothed head seemed in the dimness the maw of a dying river dragon.

Bates finally stifled his laughter and began to drag from the dark corner those huge pieces of black flesh which Dennis had seen there. The man, pleased with himself, seemed to want to talk. “Twenty years it took to perfect this scheme. Last summer when I fished down on the coast I caught this giant devil-fish, the largest ever seen around there. That completed my plan. I bought a 200-pound tarpon. All this I cut in chunks, and dyed black. I’ll take these and go up with them to collect my quarter-million.”

And Avery knew that the hideous blackened head of the devil-fish—a species little known among these inland people—and those chunks of black flesh, cut into pieces that might be mutilated arms and legs of the supposed monster, would deceive the hysterical people, just as Bates boasted.

“I’ll build me a house over on the North Side, I’ll buy controlling stock in their damn bank and make ’em swallow a few things that have choked me too long.” He chuckled evilly at the deflated monster. “I thought of everything. The beartrap to snap off the Boy Scout’s head. Roping Maris Oliver and pulling her through the garage and down to the river. And now, surely the brave John, who has lived so long with a crippled wife, has a pleasure awaiting him before he goes up to collect his reward.”

He stepped over to Maris, who had never moved from where she lay with her face against the loose mouth of the deflated demon. At Bates’ touch, she came to him, pressing her young body against him, eagerly. He led her back to the tarpaulin-covered mud couch and sprawled beside her.
John Bates seemed to be oblivious of everything but Maris. Her white blouse was now stripped from her shoulders, and the fiend had his muddy face buried in her bosom.

DENNIS could not bear to see Maris passionately responding to every caress of the vile, seeking hands of John Bates. He could not save her now. He wasn't even trying for that. But he edged ever closer to that can with its caustic contents until at last he was beside it. Rolling up into a ball, to steady the can with his shoulder and knee, he gripped the cap between his teeth and tried to unscrew it. No need to record the agony of those precious seconds when it gave not a bit, nor the slow drag after it began to move. Enough to say that at last it was off!

Dennis glanced to see if Bates had discovered what he was doing. But the fiend was still absorbed. His face was the face of a crazed beast. The girl’s clothes were in rags about her now, and the man was smoothing his ugly hands down her beautiful tapering thighs, as if he were entranced at the sight of smooth, sound legs.

Dennis tipped the can into the puddle of water. Then he lay on his back over it, thrusting his wrists in as deeply as he could. In a second, the strong solution began eating at the flesh. With difficulty, he held back the growing agony.

And then the bonds loosened, melting away before the onslaught of that caustic liquid! Conquering the trembling that seized him, he attacked the bands at his ankles.

Bates had his arms close around the girl. Their lips were welded in a never-ending kiss. God! he was—

The ankle bonds were off. Bates, somehow sensing danger, turned and charged. Dennis was just stumbling to his feet, the bonds still flopping loosely about his ankles. Then, stiff and awkward, he was down, the heavier man on top. A dirty thumb stabbed at Dennis’ eye. The boy rolled over, caught Bates with a knee, unbalancing him. Taking advantage, he kicked Bates straight in the stomach, at the same time using him for a spring board for the jump to the chlorine hose.

Bates was now charging from the corner where the young man’s kick had driven him.

Dennis never hesitated a moment. Better they all die. He snapped the clamp from the hose, stuck it full in the face of the charging Bates. Realizing what was happening, Bates grabbed for the hose, feeling his own senses reeling with the gas. The man’s arms were like steel. The hose waved in the air, spreading the deadly gas. Dennis plunged desperately, caught it again and doggedly held it straight in the face of the man who must die first.

Bates retreated, crouched against the wall. Everything was swimming before Avery’s eyes, his legs were heavy, his hands would hardly move. Bates was crying out, sinking to the floor.

It was like walking in a horrible dream—those two steps to Maris. And like an eon-long nightmare were those four stumbling steps across the slick, muddy floor to the trap-door. And like nothing outside of hell was the lifting of the door, the pushing Maris up to the concrete floor above, and climbing out himself.

One more job must be done before Dennis’s tortured senses and unwieldy muscles could give up. He pulled up the chlorine hose, dragged the clamp off, dropped it back into John Bates’s mud cellar, and tipped the trap-door shut.

No longer could his will hold him. He fell to the floor, and gave himself up to recovering from the gas. He didn’t know it, but his arm was thrown protectingly across the girl he loved—and had saved.
I AM THE MADMAN!
by WYNDHAM BROOKS

I cannot escape the knowledge that with my own hands I killed Lauren, my wife's brother. And it is slowly driving me insane, that damnable memory—for I can never go to Laura while her brother's ghastly dead face lies between us!

I SAT staring at the woman who was slowly driving me insane. I sat on the edge of the bed in my wife's boudoir and let my harassed eyes peek between the bars of my fingers. A hollow groan escaped my trembling lips.

"Laura, I can't stand it any longer. This isn't just a breakdown; I'm going crazy—I think I'm crazy now." That much I could tell her. I had said it often before. But the rest, the reason....

"Now, Paul, you're talking like a silly. Doctor Sinclair says he is really accom-
plishing wonders. Please don’t worry!"

"Yeah," I jeered, "all his bilge about mental barriers. Self-imposed psychological impedimenta to my work. If he only knew!"

"But that’s it—like a gallant ninny you subconsciously determined that you must become rich, and famous all at once to justify yourself for—"

"For marrying money. I guess I said something like that once, but that’s not it. I suppose I’m modern enough to know that it’s being done—to live off a rich wife. But that’s not it; it’s—Lauren."

"Lauren!" It came in a shocked gasp.

"How could—" But somehow I turned it aside. I couldn’t tell her that the thing driving me to sanity’s rim was her dead brother. Haunting me, because I had killed him.

She came close and sank down beside me, and the perfume from her heart-stopping beauty swept over me in a warm tide. The light dimmed at her touch and she murmured to me of hope and courage, of the future, and of her own understanding. That, her understanding even in the face of what must have been maddening enigma, had been the one thing to hold me together even this long.

After her brother’s tragic death in a midnight darkened bog, we had sought mutual solace in each other as soon as a decent interval of mourning would allow. Big, laughing Lauren would have wanted it that way, we thought.

So we had married, planning that in the following calm I could establish myself and make a beginning on my writing career. But on that day of our wedding, even before the ceremony, the curse had come upon me, hanging like a giant menacing cloud about my head.

Big Lauren and little Laura, the dearest of all earth to me. . . .

She took me in her arms and held me like a little boy, rocking gently back and forth and crooning her love. She was fully clothed. I had never entered my wife’s room other than as a brother might that of a sister. But—she seemed to understand.

I felt the hands of a giant bitterness within, beating at the barriers of this thing between us.

"Laura," I sobbed, "you understand it’s not—not you?" Her arms about me tightened and the moistness of her tears bathed my cheek.

My love for her was an overpowering thing, heady as old brandy and stormy as winter seas. How she must suffer with me—or because of me, not understanding this awful affront to our love.

I took her suddenly, almost viciously in my arms and our lips crushed in a wild abandon of love. And then I surged to my feet, hands hiding my eyes from the fearful spectre rising before them, mocking, grimacing, forbidding.

How could I make love to Laura when the instant our lips met the face of her dead brother—whom I had killed—drifted between us, staring into my heart?

She never saw it, of course, for it was within my own skull, a mental damnation for the thing I had done—must have done. A mental reminder that I did not deserve this girl’s favors, that I must not blacken myself that much more, by becoming a blackguard, an ingrate, a hypocrite.

I staggered toward the door, hands still over eyes, and behind me Laura let escape only one bewildered, mortally injured sob. Then, tenderly, she said: "Don’t forget your medicine, dear. And don’t worry—"

LET my feet wander down the thickly carpeted stairs, down through the sumptuous living room, through the portrait-hung hall into the kitchen. All these things, this richness and luxury, murder had brought me.

I seemed to be wading through a thick, slimy fog. I was scarcely aware of Doctor Sinclair at the open refrigerator, nor of
Uncle Roth whose sombre eyes were studying a chicken wing with melancholy interest. I was elsewhere, committing murder. . . .

No, I didn't remember it in so many concrete memories. It was more an after-realization, a piecing together of indisputable evidences, plus the whisperings of my subconscious. My subconscious knew, for it had done it.

Doubtless, I thought, I was bearing the seeds of madness even at that time. And my mind—unknowingly—had been presented with a decision to make; whether to exist in drudgery, to slave daytimes and putter at a futile career nights, or to acquire money. . . .

I didn't think those things consciously. But subconsciously I must have. Marriage to Laura wouldn't mean money, unless—unless her brother were dead so that she would inherit the fortune which his industry and honest ability had built up. He had taken the few remaining fragments in the name of the old Matthews family and rebuilt it to its former glory. Before an ingrate chopped him down.

Or rather, before an ingrate knocked in his head, stilled his great mind, and shoved him into Sutter's Swamp in the up-state wilds. That night I must have sleep-walked, guided only by the viciousness of my subconscious. In mocking iteration the accusing words were ever in my mind, whispering to me, as though the murderer deep inside were determined to jibe at me with his accomplishment:

"You crept along the cliff path, and there was a brick in your hand. You found him on the cliff, framed against the luminance of a moon-washed sky. He was deep in thought. The brick came up, down, and he and the brick slipped off the cliff into the bottomless depths of Sutter's Swamp. . . ."

We had organized a searching party next morning, and had found where he stood, had seen the mute signs of a falling body slipping off the lip of the cliff. Accidental death.

And of late now, that sinister, gloating voice within had been adding another paragraph, a horrible suggestion that sent me cold with terror: "You're not through yet. You haven't got money—you're only married to it!"

The eyes of the two older men studied me solemnly as I entered and reached in the medicine cabinet. Doctor Sinclair made clucking sounds of sympathy as I downed the ugly draft that he had prescribed.

The old doctor spent much of his time within our household these days, for—not discounting his apparently sincere concern for my ill health—he had few other patients. The fees from my treatments were without a doubt a Godsend to him.

The arrangements of the will had allowed us ample means for running expenses, and for such additional expenses as sickness and the keep of Laura's Uncle Roth. The old fellow, I took it, had a slim nest-egg of his own, enough to leave him free to pursue his social welfare work.

By arrangements, I mean the rider in the will which delayed final settlement upon Laura for a year. Lauren had thought enough of his sister to provide for her against the immediate assault of a pack of glamour-boy fortune hunters, who would mostly be scared out by such a proviso.

The will had read something like this when Lawyer Mason opened it to our eyes:

". . . in its entirety to my sister, Laura Matthews, to be held except for the house on Beacon Street and certain moneys for expenses hereafter named for the period of one year in the trust of the executor of
this document my attorney, L. D. Mason.  
"In case of the Legatee's death, and that of a husband, if any, before settlement is made, the following named charities. . . ."

But Uncle Roth hadn't seemed to mind being left out. All he asked of life was a roof over his head and a few hours a day to write dull tomes on the "Mental and Psychological Aspects of Delinquency." And perhaps for an occasional excursion into the back alleys of the city so that he might return morbid and depressed, deploring the miseries of the world.

His tall, gaunt figure drew to its full height as he studied me gloomily. His hands were sandpapering each other.

"Now, for bed, eh, my boy? Lots of sound sleep—that's what we need. Windows wide, mind free. . . ." It was probably a lecture he delivered periodically at the Y. My scowl stopped the flow of his words.

"Not yet. I'm going for a walk in the grounds," I said.

Their eyes met again, the doctor's brown ones and Uncle Roth's ascetic blue ones, and I wondered why they seemed alarmed.

"Oh, dash it all," Dr. Sinclair reproved, "why don't you go straight off to bed? It's so late. . . ." I shook my head. I couldn't have explained it if I had wanted to bother, but as at other times I felt an untraceable yearning to move about, to seek the coolness of the outdoors and night air. At least I thought that was it.

"Well, if you must go out, walk to the car with me. I'm going now myself. But you won't wander away—off the grounds, will you?"

I remember very well seeing him into his car, and grunting a curt good evening. I also remember a turn through the shrubbery of the grounds. I seem to recall gazing wistfully through a rift in the hedge at the bright spatterwork of the city's lights below. But that's all I remember.

I AWOKE numb of body and spirit, and with the sense that it was very late in the day. As on another occasion or two I was peculiarly depressed and energized, and seemed to be haunted by fragmentary memories of unnamable faces and untraceable routes. I seemed to have traveled, or rather dreamed of traveling, immeasurable distances, where I couldn't say.

And my body felt somehow vile and degraded, as though I had approached foul places and sated fouler appetites in my slumber. That was it: I felt sated of every earthly appetite. I was also violently ill.

Through the windows I saw Simons puttering with the sprinklers about the lawns, a task his gardening routine never reached until sometime in the afternoon.

With my head whirling in that peculiar nausea I lumbered downstairs and found Laura, together with the two older men, in the living room.

I complained to them pettishly about letting me sleep all day, but their eyes failed to meet mine. "You were out so late—" Laura began, but the old doctor flicked her a glance and the words trickled off and she stood for a minute only staring, and her eyes were those of a person seeing utter abomination.

She arose then with the promise to speak to the cook about something for me to eat. I caught, as she left, a meaning gesture from her hand and the doctor scooped up a newspaper and followed with elaborate casualness. It left his hand to settle in the sullen embers of the fireplace where wisps of smoke threatened its consumption. For some time now I had been forbidden access to newspapers, the excuse being that I must keep my strained mind free of worldly cares and business worries.

But I hadn't liked their demeanor, that subtle impression of conspiracy, and as the door snapped behind them I dived for
the fireplace and retrieved the charred sheets. Uncle Roth sputtered in futile protest as I patted out the sheets on my knees.

Apparently there was nothing there of interest, just the usual stuff, international situations and violent deaths. My eyes focused on one headline:

LOVE-POTION MURDERS CONTINUE IN TERRIFIED BAY DISTRICT

Uncle’s quick, asthmatic inhalation came close to my ear. “Don’t think anything—don’t worry. It’s just some ruthless fiend, and the police are certain they have some clues . . .” I scarcely listened, only shaking my head at the horror of it. But something drew my eyes down to the smaller type, and I read:

Who is the unthinkable fiend-slayer who, not content with garnering the pitiful wares of unfortunate girls who have nothing but the most ancient of all commodities to barter, must poison them first with the vilest of all love-potions, so that before they die his lusts may reap the perverted joys of the last few minutes of their agonized death-throes?

“Is this what you meant?” I asked, pointing.

He nodded gloomily. “Alas, we are doing what we can, we with hearts large enough to encompass the misfortunes of others less fortunate than ourselves. This now is the third. What type of monster can he be, how vicious his unstifled depravity and lust!” He shook his head. “But you mustn’t let it worry you, my boy.”

He wandered like a downcast spectre from the room while his last words rang in my ears and I began piecing it together. Some fiend at large . . . last night and two other nights . . . unsated lusts. . . .

Then I stood up, hands crushing the sides of my head, and screamed.

I was still screaming when Laura rushed white-faced into the room. I knew that she had been seeing the papers, but yet I held the damning thing behind me as I backed away from her.

She saw it in my hands, and knew.

It didn’t take the accusation and the appalled horror of her gaze to crystallize my own thoughts; I had already reached a hellish conclusion. Had I been wandering abroad of nights, a skulking, mindless slayer as on the night when Lauren died, quenching the pangs of my unfulfilled love in ways too hideous to mention?

I think she tried to speak while that tableau held, but my continued screams drowned her words, and at last she turned toward the stairs and mounted as though her shoulders bore the weight of a thousand iniquities. She was sobbing.

I have no idea how long I sat slumped into the chair, mind blasted beyond any semblance of thought. My subconscious fiend had struck again!

I recall that I went out into the kitchen finally and gulped down draft after draft of medicine with I suppose some vague idea of either killing or curing.

I went up to my room and the first thing I saw inside the door was the dull metallic sheen of the ring lying on my dresser. Beside it was a note penned in light, graceful strokes:

Dearest Paul:

When you have opened the ring and examined the little white pellet within, its use will be apparent to you. I am doing this with the thought that perhaps you desire a blessed relief; and with the knowledge that it is unfair to the sacredness of our love to go on living, profaning it this way. But you must—darling, you must—take me with you when you go. Please, God, this is the only way—
It was signed Laura...

I can remember when four o'clock came, for it was at that hour that the headache struck.

I was sitting below, in the living room, staring with blind eyes at the ring on my finger, wondering when it was best for us to use it. For, of course, Laura must go with me; she had asked to, and life for her would be hellish with the memory that her husband had been a lust-slaver and a suicide.

The headache struck first with the blinding blow of a sledge, and then seemed to slack off, like a storm grumbling in ascent to its demoniacal fury. By five I was groaning, by six crying out with agony.

So, I thought, this is it; this is the way the final assault of madness comes, with headache.

I was foundering far beyond all ability to think. The world was a giant gnashing of bone against bone. The headache was like having a giant splinter driven through the skull, protruding front and back. Or again, it seemed that my brain lay open, sizzling and red, to the beat of hell-fires.

AT SEVEN I began screaming again.

And then Laura came to the head of the stairs.

Perhaps earlier her only thought had been to keep away from me, to leave me to the hell of my fiendish mind. But now through the pain and the loathing I could see compassion. After all, she would be thinking, he is mad; he is a mindless thing, suffering.

I moved up toward her. I must have had some faint idea of going to her, to seek the comfort of her nearness. For I loved her—I swear I loved her.

I was afraid to go too close to her; I didn’t want her to be frightened and leave me. I found her eyes and said: “I can’t stand it any longer, Laura. I’m going to end it now. Thank you for showing me the way.”

She backed up against the door to her room, her hands clawing at her bosom, her gaze riveted in frightful fascination upon my face. “Paul—I... I don’t understand... .”

“Oh yes you do,” I breathed, somehow angered. “You understand all right, because you gave it to me.” I caught at her arm suddenly. “And don’t try to pretend you don’t!”

The feel of her flesh shrinking beneath my hand seemed suddenly to fling molten metal through my veins. “God, you’re lovely—it’s nice that you’re going with me.”

At that moment, I know, the flywheels of my mind shattered completely off their bearings to batter against my skull in final chaos. But the swift thoughts that followed seemed logical—ah, so logical.

“Or, are you trying to back out on me?” I shouted. “Well, there’s no turning back now. You and your money and your devilish beauty have done this to me. Your blinding, devilish beauty—it’s my right to take you with me... .” I was pushing her through the door into her room. The dead-white blob of her face was shaking numbly from side to side, but no word escaped her parted lips.

“You’ve been gloating—I know. Flaunting your body at me, knowing that I couldn’t accept. Well, you’ll be fooled this time, my dear. You’ll die with me, my wife more than only in name... .” I gave sudden leave to my eager hands and they rushed to grim, gleeful violation. Her dress left her with one long ugly tear, and she stood straight and still in the trim perfection of scant silken wisps.

I was bending over her where I had flung her to the bed, and my writhing lips were imbued with a life of their own. “Where is he now?” I gloated, “Why doesn’t your brother forbid me again... ?”

Her eyes were closed, but finally her
lips moved, and her words contained a universe of desolation. "Only kill me afterwards... that's all I ask, now... just kill me."

My hands were gaunt white seekers across the bare nubility of her bosom. At sight of her firm, virginal breasts my words slithered to the drool of mindless passion. Surely, the world and all must have shuddered to a standstill and turned away its eyes from this final, this ultimate profanation, and then—the door shattered open and I was smothered beneath a tide of hurrying bodies.

"**KILL him!**" a voice screamed. "**Kill him before he gets to her again!**" Uncle Roth began beating at my face with his inadequate hands, and Doctor Sinclair suddenly had his hands full to keep every one in order. Simons the gardener had burst in with them, and his hands clutched a short, vicious shot-gun. He was trying to line a bead on my body, but I was shielded by the infuriated figure of Laura's uncle.

The gardener's mind had evidently gone berserk at the swift horror of it all, and I caught the glint of the gun as it rose and pivoted. "**No!**" the doctor screamed. "**Not her, you fool—keep your head!**" But Simons' dull mind seemed not to comprehend and the room reverberated with the deafening roar that answered the twist of his finger.

The doctor's hand had snaked out just in time, and I lay studying the black hole that had appeared in the ceiling. I was beyond wonder or care, detached even from the pain of the fists hammering my face to pulp. Finally Doctor Sinclair tore the old man away.

I noted with that same isolation of spirit old Simons' bulging, gloating eyes as they feasted on the sight of Laura's nude, sprawled body before they tore away and met those of old Roth, even gloomier now, and more discouraged with the ways of the world. Small wonder...

Laura dressed and went with us to the police station. I suppose she was so dazed of spirit that her only reaction was to follow blindly with the others. I cannot think that she could have retained any glimmering instinct of loyalty, how could she?

"**Go ahead, take me there,**" I said, not caring. "**I suppose I owe it to the police to explain the love-potion murders. Those, and the murder of Laura's brother.**" I nodded to their horrified gasps, and the surge of answering pain reminded me that the headache was still bludgeoning my brain.

"**You didn't know? Yes, I killed Lauren.**"

"**This,**" Uncle Roth complained, "is all the result of miscegenation. The upper castes must never, never marry below their levels. Help them—pity them, certainly, but... this awful disgrace to our fine old family...**"

"**Shut up,**" Doctor Sinclair snarled. "**Haven't we enough troubles without your maunderys?**" I laughed, agreeing with him that this was a hell of a time for social philosophies. But I didn't care about anything—I still had the ring. I would use it after writing out the confessions.

Laura called the lawyer, Mason, to meet us at the station.

We all gathered around the desk of a bewildered police captain. He seemed at first to think that he had, not one, but several madmen to deal with. His eyes were intelligent and thoughtful as he listened.

"**I'm the love-potion murderer,**" I said. I felt a slight warning touch on my arm, and looked up astonished into the eyes of Laura. She raced them quickly past my gaze, but she whispered: "**Don't talk—let the lawyer handle it. There's something I don't understand; it doesn't make sense...**"
LAWYER MASON handled it, all right. After mere minutes I was peering down at the fresh ink of my signature to very formal, carefully typed dynamite.

Then, as unobtrusively as possible, I slipped the ring from my finger and pressed the side of it. Laura’s scream interrupted and my fingers fumbled and I botched the job. “That ring,” she screamed, “it’s poison—he said so.”

They tore it loose from my hands and two blue uniforms moved to my side while the captain studied the ring. He and Doctor Sinclair peered at the little white cube snuggling within and then the ring began passing from hand to curious hand.

Something had gone wrong—I couldn’t figure it out. Why had Laura given me the ring and then withdrawn the blessing of its use? “You sold me out,” I said dully.

“You still think that—that I gave it to you? Oh, but I didn’t—I couldn’t, even after...”

But then, who had? Who could have wanted to help me—and then I remembered all the contents of that lying note. Some one had done it, not to help me, but to force my death and Laura’s! Darkly I studied the faces about me.

Doctor Sinclair seemed suddenly propelled forward by some idea and he peered closely into my eyes. I had seen him fumble in his medical kit, but I wasn’t prepared. The sharp sting of a hypodermic came in my arm and I leaped at the old doctor in blind rage.

The burly policeman jerked me easily back. “Don’t you see it?” I screamed. “He just now drugged me, just as he has been right along—sending me mad so I would do all these things!”

The doctor’s face went white. “For what purpose?” he questioned softly. “No, it isn’t I. But this thing goes deeper than the surface. At this very minute he’s drugged higher than a kite—look at his pin-point pupils—and that hypo may bring him out.” The captain was studying him with bead reflection.

“I suppose I’m still guilty of the actual murders, but,” I insisted, “he drove me to it with his damned drugs.” The captain’s glance silenced me.

“Have any of you ever heard of the McGrew Foundation?” We all looked dumb. “The one clue that we had to the murder of the girls was this—that in each case their pitiful little savings had been willed to a McGrew Foundation, purporting to assist in keeping other girls’ feet on more wholesome pathways.”

Some thought was shouting at me for recognition. I looked at Mason, the lawyer. “McGrew,” I whispered, “wasn’t that.... Yes!—that was the charity that Lauren’s will mentioned in case of—in case of both Laura’s and my death!” The lawyer nodded wildly.

The Captain’s eyes went large and then narrowed to mere glints. All through he had retained the appearance of really deep thought, and I had suspected him of being up to something. But now he arose with a curt gesture for his men to bring me and we all went back through the corridors of barred doors. Now, I thought, they lock me up.

We came before one of the doors at which we paused. A guard’s jingling keys swung open the door. But, curiously, I wasn’t pushed forward.

For a moment the captain stared thoughtfully into the well of darkness beyond. Then he called, “You inside—come out,” and a large figure with rumpled hair staggered into the wash of light from overhead bulbs. To us the captain asked: “Do you know this man?”

Laura gasped and fell forward toward the figure. “Lauren—Lauren! You’re not dead!”

The captain’s smile had something of grimness behind it, and his eyes were watchful. “That’s enough, I guess.” Such
a tide of relief swept over me that I was left dazed. Then I found Lauren’s hand and wrung it.

“He doesn’t know you,” the captain said. “He was found wandering with his skull badly battered. His mind is still a blank, so we had no identification, but the doctors say that his memory may return under proper stimulus.”

The man who was Lauren Matthews was studying us with intense concentration. My own interest in him at first kept me from seeing a peculiar reaction upon some of the others, but then I saw the captain watching, and I watched, too.

The gardener, Simons, had backed against a farther wall, and his dull, brutish eyes were fixed in terror upon someone in the group. “No,” he whispered. “No . . . I didn’t know . . . I thought he went under . . . .”

Then I knew: Simons was looking at the murderer.

The captain murmured very softly to me: “Yes, it could be—it just barely could be. Hypnosis—mental suggestion, if well enough understood by the murderer, combined with drugs to weaken your thought processes, could be used upon you to make you think you remembered committing the murder, which in reality some one else did—or thought he did.” His eyes flicked to Simons. “It would all be perfect, from what I gather of the family’s affairs.

“If you were driven crazy,” he continued, “and tempted into killing your wife and yourself, the brother’s will would have been effective through its time provision, and the property would have gone to the McGrew Foundation, which was earning other money through the vicious murders of the girls.”

The murderer was attempting an appearance of casualness, unconcern for the accusation in Simons’ eyes, while the Captain talked. “No doubt you left the house on those nights with the drug seething in your veins, and when you passed out you were merely taken care of by the murderer while he committed the crimes, thus leaving you without alibi or memory.”

My own mind, contrary to having been affected by Doctor Sinclair’s injection, seemed to be working with lightning rapidity.

“The only bungle,” I said, “was at the end. I was interrupted too soon—before the madness had completed the task of killing Laura and me. And his only chance from then on was to play the game through.

“All we need,” I concluded, “is identification of the man behind the McGrew Foundation.”

“I can answer that!” It was a new voice, new, and yet wonderfully familiar. Then, for the first time, I saw fear upon the face of the murderer. “Hearing your voices—I remember it all now.” Lauren’s hand was rising. “I had become interested in philanthropic works, and included that proviso in my will at the suggestion of—that man.” Lauren’s arm was up, pointing.

Uncle Roth smiled slowly while his cadaverous hands twisted together. “You have it all correct, of course. I didn’t dream that Simons had failed in the task I assigned him for his share in the, ah—rewards, and that the one man who could identify me was still alive. I would have collected through a go-between. Well, I’m not sorry—let the dead bury the dead! After a lifetime spent for the welfare of others didn’t the world owe me something?”

His hands left off twisting and arose. “I guess that’s all you need me for. . . .” The captain leaped forward belllowing. We had forgotten about the ring.

He was too late.
THE TSAR is dead! Long live the Tsar!” So shouted the people of Moscow in 1537 as, gathered about the Kremlin, they mourned the passing of Ivan III. Then, with their next breath, they welcomed to the throne of Russia the ascending infant, Ivan IV.

The partially paralyzed Tsaritsa Helena Glinskaya dragged herself from the death bed of her husband and forced a brave smile to her face. Taking the hand of her three-year-old son, she led the new ruler out onto a palace balcony.

The crowds cheered. In that day, in the minds of the people, there was a close relationship between the royal family and religion. The Tsar ruled by divine right. The Tsar was worshipped as the hereditary appointee of God. The Tsar’s power was absolute and he could do no wrong.

The child prince—he who was later to become known as “Ivan the Terrible”—greeted the acclamations of his subjects with a surly frown. He’d been playing with a puppy. The animal was still clutched whimpering under his arm. This public appearance interrupted his play and annoyed him.

Suddenly, instead of returning the
crowd's salute as he'd been coached to do, he lifted the puppy high over the balcony's parapet and hurled it down at the upturned faces beneath him.

The cheers ceased. The crowd was silent. There were no openly rebuking voices because the people knew that whatever the Tsar chose to do it was their lot to tolerate; dissension would be severely punished.

"Black times ahead!" one bold peasant whispered to another as the gathering broke up. "An insult—throwing a dog...."

"Blacker times!" was the reply. "He wasn't thinking of insults. I've heard...."

And then was imparted gossip which had leaked from the palace. As everybody knew, the late Tsar, Ivan III, in his last years had become a speechless, dissipated dolt, dying of a general debility resulting from his debaucheries. And now, sired by such a father, Ivan IV was already showing evidence of a dark-tainted nature.

"Instead of playing with his toys," the peasant went on, casting a cautious eye about him to make sure he wasn't overheard, "they say he sits all day catching flies and pulling their wings off. His mother gave him a kitten and he smothered it. Once he bit the leg of a boyarin attending him!"

The boyarins were blooded priests who acted as courtiers. One of these, Andrew Shousky, served as regent of Russia until young Ivan should attain his maturity.

But the young Tsar was impatient for full power and eager to rid himself of his priest-counsellor. At the age of ten, presented with a pony by a favor-seeking noble, Ivan blindfolded the animal and forced it to gallop riderless off a cliff, killing it.

"Shousky's a traitor!" cried the young Tsar, running to his mother directly afterwards. "He thought I was in the saddle and he tried to murder me! Shousky wants the throne for himself! Shousky killed my pony!"

But the Tsaritsa Helena understood her son well and knew better than to believe his accusations over the denial of the boyarin regent. Nothing came of the incident and Ivan, thwarted and angered, fell to more sinister plotting.

Three years later the Tsaritsa Helena was poisoned, mysteriously—perhaps by her son's own hand. But Ivan produced false evidence pointing guilt at Andrew Shousky. With his mother out of the way, and there being no one who dared contradict the Tsar's "holy" testimony, the regent was deposed, thrown to wild dogs, and torn limb from limb!

Ivan's first action on obtaining autocratic control of the country was to procure for himself a wife. With death as punishment for disobedience, he commanded the nobles of the land to send their most beautiful virgin daughters to the nearest provincial capital. At these scattered points Ivan appointed special officers to pick out the handsomest and forward them to Moscow. Here the Tsar himself made final choice.

The lot fell to Anastasia Romanova, proud daughter of an ancient Ukrainian house. The girl paled at the news. Her father approached her, his face grave, a silver dagger extended in his hand.

"I'd rather see you dead—even by your own hand!" he told her. "Take this. You will need it.... Ivan is mad! They say he thinks he's Caesar and dresses in a Roman toga. But he's more cruel than Caesar or Caligula or Nero...."

But Anastasia Romanova, drawing herself up, refused the weapon her father offered her. In her eyes was the light of religious zealotry.

"Ivan has chosen me," she answered, "and he is the Tsar! His word is the word of one mightier than all men. It is my destiny that he is to be my husband
and that our son shall be the future ruler of Russia!"

In February, 1547, Ivan and Anastasia were married. Four months later, still on their wedding tour, they reached the resort city of Ostrov. Here the lottery bride witnessed the first of the mass tortures later to characterize her husband's reign.

A deputation of seventy men approached Ivan, begging his royal consideration, complaining of ill treatment they were experiencing at the hands of the Governor of Pskov.

"How dare you interrupt the Tsar's love-making with paltry matters of state!" Ivan snorted. And then, with no further provocation, he roared: "Seize these men! Strip them! Singe their heads and beards! Boil them to death—in brandy!"

Her frantic protestations unheard, Anastasia watched aghast as the Tsar's orders were summarily carried out. And afterwards she wondered at a strange twist she discovered in her husband's personality—one later to assume monstrous proportions—which combined asceticism with sadism, cruelty with maniacal religious feeling.

For immediately his victims were dead, the Tsar rushed to the nearest church and worshipped long and fervently. This was the beginning: during the course of his life Ivan was to attend hundreds of such murders and then make as many feverish avowals of faith.

But for the time being, at any rate, his blood career was shortly checked. Returning to Moscow, the Tsar was seized and held captive by the boyars, the priest-wardens of his childhood.

"Ivan is insane!" the boyars told the Tsaritsa Anastasia. "If we allow him to rule and wreak his unnatural wrath upon the people there will be revolution. It is for the good of Russia that we take over the reins of government. It is God's will! You must help us!"

Anastasia listened to the council of the church fathers and agreed with them in part. She consented to share the executive responsibilities of rule with the friars Sylvester and Adashev, and under their triumvirate guidance the country prospered. But of one thing the Tsaritsa was not convinced: that Ivan, though too mad to reign and too mad to be allowed his freedom, was not too mad to be her husband—to be the father of the next Tsar!

"This, too, is God's will," the Tsaritsa answered the demurring boyars. "Though his mind may be weak, Ivan's blood is sacred and the sovereignty of his progeny God-constituted. I am his wife. It is my duty to bear him a son—to be the mother of the next Tsar of Russia!"

And so, despite the ghastly repugnancy of the task, Anastasia nightly visited her monster husband in the Kremlin dungeon. Never a creature of beauty, confinement turned Ivan into a grotesque caricature of his former self. He ate prodigiously; he grew absurdly bloated and fat. Warped of body from birth, lassitude and inactivity now exaggerated these deformities. He became filthy of person; he refused to clothe himself in anything but rags.

Still the beautiful Anastasia continued to go to his bed and at last a child was born. It was a boy—Anastasia was overjoyed. But a week after birth the child died and the Tsaritsa had to resume her loathsome practises.

And then another son arrived. A fine baby, it was christened Dimitri.

"Let me see him," Ivan begged Anastasia. "My son! The offspring of my flesh!"

The appeal seemed to the Tsaritsa genuinely paternal. She took the child to its father's cell.

For a moment Ivan the Terrible fondled his son gently, smiling down at the little bundle placed in his arms and mur-
muring endearing names. Then, suddenly, the smile left his face and his arms tightened.

“So this is the new Tsar!” he screamed, raising the bundle over his head. “No! No! I am the Tsar—the one and only Tsar! nothing called Tsar but me shall live!”

Before the awe-stricken Anastasia could lift a hand, the monster hurled the infant to the dungeon’s stone floor, smashing out its brains.

After that the boyarins figured the Tsaritsa was through with Ivan but they reckoned not with the encompassing nature of the zeal that possessed her. Her desire to leave an heir to the Russian crown was almost as profound as the madness which gripped her husband.

Now, not only was she wife to an ordinary killer but to the murderer of her own child. Stoically, she endured even this, finally giving birth to a son that lived, and he, Theodore, though mildly feebleminded, was destined eventually to succeed Ivan to the throne.

But before this was accomplished, in July, 1560, the Tsaritsa Anastasia died. Poison was rumored. Certain crafty adherents to Ivan’s cause took advantage of the talk, whispering that the boyarins Sylvester and Adashev, ambitious for full control, murdered Anastasia. Provincial nobles, loyal to a false concept of the Tsar and unaware of the true state of affairs at court, entered Moscow, destroyed Sylvester and Adashev, and released Ivan.

Angry and snarling, the Tsar, his freedom attained, was like a swollen river bursting its dam. He entered upon a four year series of tortures and killings, his victims picked for the most part from among the boyarins. Devising a new barbarity which the Inquisitors of Spain would have envied, he invited the priests to banquets and allowed them to choose a wine of their liking. Later, this liquid heated to the point of scalding, he forced gallons of it down their throats until their stomachs burst.

Aside from murdering for the sheer sake of murder, Ivan killed now for fear of treachery. He was beginning to have fear hallucinations, suspecting duplicity of every servant of the Kremlin and every citizen of Moscow. In December, 1564, he sacked his own palace, loaded the royal treasures on sledges, and—with no one pursuing—fled.

An ancestral castle at Alexandrovskaya Sloboda became his new residence and here the Terrible enlisted a bodyguard of six thousand. These, the opritshniky, escaped criminals and the worst scum and rabble obtainable in Russia, were encamped outside the castle walls and allowed to rape and pillage throughout the countryside.

SOMETIMES the Tsar joined with the men in their sports, promoting those who successfully kidnapped and brought to his bed the fairest damsels the territory yielded. When finished with such girls, Ivan turned them over to his lieutenants. If the girls survived Ivan’s brutality they were occasionally allowed to return bleeding and screaming to their homes.

But more often, out of pure sadistic pleasure, the Tsar killed them. One he hanged over her father’s threshold. Another, dead, naked, and mutilated, he carried home and laid out on her husband’s dining room table.

Such orgies of blood and lust the Terrible alternated with periods of fasting and prayer. Once he went to the extreme of renaming his castle a monastery, equipping his cut-throat guard with cowls to cover their armor, and designating himself as abbot.

With the passing of the years Ivan married and remarried, each wife lasting but a few months. With each death he proclaimed the cause poisoning at some
imagined traitor's hand, using the occasion as excuse for fresh murder and pillage. In January, 1569, following the death of his seventh bride, the Terrible grimly declared his intention to exterminate all of Russia.

With his oprishniky at his back, and for no reason but the reason of a maniac, Ivan marched against and razed the villages of Klin, Tver, and Torshok. The populace cringed, lamented, and begged for mercy before him—but he went on. Reaching the city of Novgorod, he invaded the churches and monasteries, chained the members of the lower clergy, and put to death with clubs what abbots and higher monks he could find.

Then, leaving his guard behind him, alone and unattended, he entered the Cathedral of Sainte Sophia and announced that he wished to attend divine services. The archbishop, his voice trembling, started the reading of a mass but before he got very far, the Terrible began cursing and swearing.

"You're a wolf, robber, traitor to the crown of the Tsar, and a desiprer of the people!" Ivan yelled at the archbishop.

This outburst was a signal for the entrance of the oprishniky. They seized the archbishop and confiscated the cathedral coffers. Then the ruffians rounded up the richest merchants and the officials of the city, together with their wives and children, and staged mass tortures of a character unequalled in history.

Eighteen gibbets were erected and scores of enormous cauldrons placed over fires. Hundreds were hanged, hundreds boiled. And others, wounded, were piled on sledges and dragged down to the River Volkho. There, body after body was hurled into the water and the oprishniky, manning boats, rowed around and struck with oars those who did not sink immediately. The massacre lasted for six days and six nights, after which Ivan entered Moscow in what his disordered brain called triumph.

And here he died, hated and despised—but not until 1584. The last years of his life were spent in wretchedness and intense suffering, the ravages of his dissipations and the diseases thereby contracted having at last caught up with him.

He was only forty-seven and his limbs were rotting and his flesh falling from him. The odor emanating from his putrefying carcass was so horrible that none could be found to attend him. On a wintry March day he died alone—alone but for the discomfiting company of his conscience.

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PROLOGUE

The Beginnings of Horror

THE THUNDER of the guns to the north was continuous, but the ground-shaking detonations held no terror for Pierre Bourgat. He hardly heard them as his deft fingers plied the scalpel in swift, sure strokes. Then, the emergency amputation finished, he cast a quick, appreciative glance at the pretty nurse who served as his anaesthetician—and caught a glimpse of the adoration that shone from her dark eyes.

The roaring guns and the stream of wounded soldiers that flooded through the operating room were evidence that France was being invaded, but the war meant very little to Dr. Pierre. The Germans were sweeping down from the north, but the French legions would soon stem the tide and drive it back. It would be but a matter of days. Only a matter of days—

Pierre's glance turned to his assistant once more, and a tender half-smile flitted over his lips as he waited for the next groaning patient to be brought to his operating table. August 15th, 1914, was going to be the red-letter day of his life, the day when he and Andrea Docheais became
man and wife—and now the fifteenth was only a matter of a few days.

He was indeed a lucky man, he congratulated himself as he turned without hesitation to undertake an operation that would have given pause to almost any other surgeon in Europe. Andrea was sufficient good fortune for any man, Pierre reflected, but, besides, he had wealth and prestige; had the satisfaction of knowing that this private hospital which he and his older brother, Dr. Rene, maintained on the edge of Peronne had earned a reputation that was rapidly spreading throughout Europe.

Yes, he was fortunate—very, very fortunate....

The delicate task before him occupied him so completely that he hardly heard the uproar in the street. Subconsciously he noted that the sound of firing was much closer, that the clatter of heavy shoes on the stone-paved street had increased to a pounding—the frantic pounding of swiftly running men. Shouts and yells impinged detachedly on his consciousness, the thudding of heavy blows and the shattering tinkle of glass—and then the quiet hospital became a bedlam.

Shots rang through the corridors, were echoed by screams and groans. The pounding footsteps came nearer, surged up to the operating room door. Through the doorway burst Rene, his face blanched, his eyes aflame with indignation—and after him came unleashed hell!

For a moment half a dozen desperate poilus barred the way. Steel grated harshly against steel, and then the gleaming bayonets were dyed red as the defenders went down before a rush of blond giants. Prussians, Pierre noted; picked troops of splendid stature. Into the operating room after them strode a glowing, red-faced officer.

“You—you are responsible!” he roared at Dr. Rene. “You gave shelter to the snipers who fired on my men!”

“They were no snipers,” Rene denied. “They were harmless—”

But the roar of the officer’s pistol cut him short. Rene staggered backward and clutched at his chest. Blood trickled between his fingers and he dropped to his knees—and another bullet smashed into his chest and hurled him against the wall. Blood welled from his lips as he struggled to rise.

PIERRE watched that brutal murder like a man in a trance, transfixed by horror; but as the deadly Luger roared the third time something snapped in his brain and he leaped forward. Hardly knowing what he did, he hurled himself straight at the officer, stabbed at him with the scalpel his fingers still clutched.

“No—oh, no, Pierre!” Andrea screamed, as she sprang between them and tried to stay his hand.

She was too late. The keen scalpel sliced through the Prussian’s coat and sank deep into his left shoulder before Pierre was overwhelmed and beaten to the floor by those blond giants who towered over his diminutive five-feet-six. Down he went under a rain of savage blows, pounded mercilessly—until the officer’s rasping voice saved him. Dazed and bloody-faced, he was dragged to his feet—to stare into the triumphantly gloating, demoniacal eyes of an inhuman devil!

With hell-spawned understanding those eyes flashed from Pierre to Andrea—and monstrous purpose dawned in them.

“So—you are handy with your knives, are you, doctor?” he muttered softly, as his men staunched the blood flowing from his wound. “Then you will be interested to watch our own accomplishments.”

Swift orders snapped at his men; orders that were obeyed with alacrity. One of them seized Andrea and held her arms pinned behind her, while others ripped off her uniform and tore the silken underthings from her body, stripped her until
she was stark naked before them. Helpless, his arms gripped by two burly soldiers and the point of a bayonet jabbing into his back, Pierre struggled futilely while he watched them paw her obscenely. Wild curses babbled from his lips as he saw her turned loose among them, saw her dart frantically from corner to corner, a helpless rabbit surrounded by slavering wolves—until one of them caught her by the hair and pinned his struggling prize beneath him on the floor.

Time became an endless, searing agony for Pierre Bourgat as he witnessed the ghastly ordeal of her profanation—a coma of horror that snapped abruptly when he suddenly realized the full extent of that snarling devil's bestial intention. They had stretched Andrea on the operating table, had spread-eagled her so that she could barely move—and they were cutting into her lovely white body with the scalpel!

Like huge monsters they hovered over her, stabbing into her soft flesh, slicing beneath the swelling mound of her breast—

Pierre Bourgat went completely mad at that moment. Like a savage jungle creature suddenly released from a trap, he wrenched himself free of his captors and leaped toward the table. With berserk fury he flung himself at those barbarous devils, beat at them with his fists, tore at them with his clawing fingers—but they only laughed at him!

A ponderous fist sent him reeling across the room. Giant Prussians a foot taller than he surrounded him on every side, met his frenzied rushes with a shower of blows that buffeted him helplessly. They were too big for him! Too big! Too strong!

_Mon Dieu!_ Why had he not grown! Why had he not been given size, been given strength, for this moment of his Calvary?

His soul-searing agony broke from his drooling lips in a mad howl as he cata-
pulted himself at the officer—but before he could reach his mark a rifle-butt smashed down on his skull with bone-shattering force.

CHAPTER ONE

Land of Lost Men

MOOSEHEAD LAKE! A curious tremor coursed through young Graham Haskell the moment he heard that name. Alarm not for himself but for one of those girls—for _the_ girl—who wanted to be flown there. This was doubly curious; for, around the Haverhill airport, it was accepted as fact that Haskell did not know the meaning of fear—and that his heart interests were tied up completely in the cabin plane that was his constant companion.

Not that Graham Haskell did not have more than his share of female adulation. He did—plenty more. Many a feminine heart had skipped a beat when the sandy-haired young giant, who looked even taller than his six-feet-four in his flying togs, strode across the field. But the only time that Haskell was interested in skipped beats was when they were in his motor.

That was before he had met Dora Moore; but when he looked into the dark eyes that turned to him from her anxious, trusting face a strange necromancy was worked within him. In those dark depths he saw again the wild, bleak regions of northern Maine; saw the jagged wilderness winter-locked, a harsh, cruel region that had swallowed up five men and a plane and consumed them so utterly that not a trace of them ever was found.

This was not winter. Now it was early Fall—but he visualized that far-reaching wilderness in the settling dusk, and it was like a crouching beast waiting to snatch its prey; waiting to snatch this helpless girl who had come to him out of nowhere....
Two hours before he met Dora Moore, Graham Haskell had taken off in his plane with a single passenger, his uncle Willis, who looked upon all flying contraptions with decided misgivings. It had required considerable urging to induce Willis Haskell to make that flight, but it was of paramount importance that Graham get him up in the air—for Willis Haskell was a hard-headed business man as well as administrator of his nephew’s estate. In order to sell him a bill of goods, he had to be shown—and Graham intended to show him.

For two hours the plane soared and dived, streaked away for miles on the straight-away and then idled and hung inert when the motor went dead. A score of times the elder Haskell had his heart in his mouth, but the confident grin never left his nephew’s face.

“Don’t worry,” he chuckled whenever the old man seemed on the verge of apoplexy. “Nothing will happen to us. My invention is foolproof. It makes flying a plane safer than driving an automobile. It will save hundreds of lives. Fred Nelson says it will become standard equipment on every plane that is built a year after we start manufacturing. It’s absolutely revolutionary.”

“And so you want me to release a hundred thousand dollars of your estate so that you can build a factory and start manufacturing these contraptions?” Willis Haskell mopped his brow as the plane began to descend and straightened out for the airport. “That ought to keep you on the ground, anyway. Running a factory won’t give you much time for risking your neck in the sky—and that’s enough reason for letting you go ahead. Okay, Graham, get me back onto the good old earth and I’ll start getting your money together for you tomorrow.”

That was easier than he had thought it would be, Graham chuckled, as he levelled off and glided to a perfect landing. His brain was seething with ambitious plans for his new enterprise—and then he met Dora Moore.

She was waiting for him outside the airport manager’s office as he and Willis Haskell started to leave the field. Not only Dora Moore—there were others. Another girl and a middle-aged man and Fred Nelson, the airport manager; but Graham saw only Dora Moore. She was pretty, he recognized immediately. Perhaps experts would not call her beautiful, but there was a quality about her well-featured face that spoke his own language. A sincerity, a cleanliness, that was like the open sky which had become his chosen element. That was it—she was fresh and clean, her perfectly formed body lithe and supple, aglow with health.

“THESE people just arrived,” Nelson was explaining to the Haskells. “They drove up from Boston, but they have been having trouble with their car and now it has quit altogether. They want to reach Maine tonight—going to a place about twenty-five miles east of Moosehead Lake—and they want a plane to take them there. I told them that you would not be interested in taking such a job, Graham.”

“Moosehead Lake?” Willis Haskell seized upon the name immediately. “Isn’t that where Wallace Taylor was lost last winter? He was headed in that direction. The papers said that country is a wilderness—”

But it was then that Dora Moore’s dark eyes met Graham Haskell’s.

“Mr. Nelson has explained that you are not a commercial flyer, Mr. Haskell, but this is more than an ordinary commercial trip,” she appealed. “We are nurses, Miss Canby and I. We are hurrying to a private sanitarium near Moosehead Lake, day and night nurses for an emergency case. It is a life and death matter—”

A life and death matter... Her words rang in his ears and stirred an echoing
memory. Last winter it had been a death matter.

Graham had known Wally Taylor very well. He remembered the day when Wally’s plane took off from that field with four sportsmen bound for a Maine hunting lodge—and had vanished from the face of the earth. Graham had been one of more than a score of flyers who had combed that northern wilderness for days, searching for the lost plane—but never so much as a trace of it had been found. The final verdict had been that the plane must have blown out to sea and been lost. But Graham knew that Wally Taylor was far too good a pilot to have been blown more than two hundred miles off his course.

“It is almost dark now,” Fred Nelson’s objection cut through his thoughts. “It will be pitch-black before you could reach the Moosehead Lake country, and there are no landing facilities in that wilderness.”

“There is a field and lights at Amasquam,” the driver of the disabled car volunteered—and at that moment Fred Nelson’s assistant called from the door of the field office to announce that he had contacted the Amasquam Sanitarium by short-wave radio.

Nelson took his place before the instrument panel.

“Wait until morning?” a protesting voice from the air came in quick response to his suggestion of delay. “By morning my patient will be dead! I need help now—immediately. If you can’t provide a plane for my nurses have them drive to the nearest neighboring airport. Death does not wait for daylight!”

The driver turned toward the door with a shrug as soon as the strident voice clipped off, and the two girls started to follow—and Graham Haskell went with them. Old Willis protested strenuously, and Fred Nelson added pessimistic warnings—but their voices were not as compelling as the picture of Dora Moore flying through the night into the Maine wilderness with a pilot who might not know his business. If she was going there, Graham decided flatly, he was going with her.

Five minutes later the plane was ready and they took off. Only the nurses went with him. The driver stayed behind to look after the car. Only Graham and Dora Moore and Helen Canby—but so far as he was concerned the Canby girl hardly existed. She seemed to be pleasant enough, he admitted. A large, buxom, red-cheeked young woman who had all the earmarks of her profession. She became silent as soon as the plane left the ground.

It was from Dora Moore that he learned that they had been hurriedly recruited in Boston; from Dora that he heard bits of her life—of the recent death of her mother that had left her alone in the world, of her struggle to pay off her debts, and her gratification at having secured this case. But even as he listened to the pleasant sound of her voice he was visualizing the terrain beneath them as he had seen it last; visualizing the barren, winter-locked wilderness that had opened its frozen maw to swallow up five men. And again the strange premonition that had fastened upon him the moment he heard that Dora Moore was bound for the Moosehead Lake district stole over him chillingly.

Resolutely he shrugged that off. The night was dark but clear. His navigating instruments would take him unerringly to Amasquam, where the lighted field would be awaiting him. There was no danger, nothing to fear. Now the valley in which the sanitarium was located was no more than ten minutes away; five minutes—and then he caught the brilliance of the field’s floodlights. Carefully he circled above the long field and then coasted down for what should be an easy landing.

A quarter way down the field his wheels touched the ground, bounced lightly—and
then the plane suddenly was halted so abruptly that the girls were pitched out of their seats. The field had seemed perfectly clear—but his alert ears caught the resounding *sigh* of a snapping wire. A snapping metal cable that had been stretched across his path!

Half-way over on its nose, the plane pitched forward as he fought the controls—and another cable caught and gripped the under-carriage, shocked the ship to a stop that somersaulted it over on its back!

Graham was hurled forward against the instrument board, was dumped over on his head. Blinding light burst before his eyes and blinked out into engulfing darkness, but as his senses faded a shrill scream knifed through his dimming consciousness—a scream that he recognized as Dora Moore’s even though he never had heard it before. That piercing summons rallied him, snapped him out of the stupor that gripped him.

Dazedly he got to his hands and knees and peered around the dark interior of the overturned plane. Helen Canby had managed to force the door open and was climbing out, but Dora Moore was not with her. Anxiously his eyes sought the girl, until her low moan showed him where she huddled against the crushed side wall. Quickly he hurried to her—and at that instant the bright field lights went out and impenetrable blackness wrapped about them.

Graham’s arm slipped under the girl and lifted her, held her close to him. She was breathing spasmodically, was stirring back to consciousness—but the soft burden in his arms sent a twinge of terror through him.

Something was wrong—hellishly wrong! The plane had been decoyed down onto that field and deliberately wrecked, and now, instead of coming to his assistance, the wreckers had extinguished the lights to contribute to his helplessness!

Slowly he edged his way to the door, carrying the girl with him, while his probing eyes strove to pierce the darkness. Gradually they became acclimated in some measure to the darkness; sufficient so that he could see to lift Dora out onto the ground and step back into the cabin to take a heavy wrench from the tool cabinet.

Barely had his hand touched it when he froze and his blood seemed to turn to ice. Through the black stillness rang a terrified scream, and suddenly the night palpitated with running footsteps!

Out of the plane he dived—in time to see the Canby girl go down; to make out two strange, goblin-like figures that seized her and faded with her into the darkness. That much he glimpsed in a flash, and then he was at Dora’s side; was battling with more of those misshapen shadows. Like a flail the wrench swung around his head until it found a mark and brought a yelp of pain. Then it rose and fell, thudded against flesh and bone, rang hollowly against an unlucky skull. Cries of agony rewarded him, and then the swift diminishing of retreating steps.

QUICKLY Graham stooped and lifted the girl. She was conscious but now half-petrified by fear. Half-carrying her, he urged her away from the ship, across the dark field and to the edge of the deeper blackness that was the surrounding forest. Among the trees they might find refuge, might find a hiding place until morning.

They reached the side of the clearing without interference, started into the Stygian thicket, when he dimly descried what looked like low buildings in the shelter of the overhanging trees. Old log cabins that seemed to be empty as he crept closer.

“This looks like an old, abandoned logging camp,” he whispered to the girl who clung to his arm. “If we can get into one of these—”

The hope died on his lips as he reached
the first of the cabins. Its windows were solidly boarded up and the door was fastened by a heavy padlock. Two more were like the first, but the one beyond them had an unboarded window at one end—a window that was heavily barred like a cell. That barred window intrigued him, inspired him to turn the narrow beam of his pocket-flash upon it—and in the next moment stupefying horror swooped down upon them!

Graham felt the girl’s fingers dig into his flesh as they closed like a vise on his arm; felt rather than heard her appalled gasp.

Beyond those bars was a face—a man’s face—the most immense face he had ever seen. The great head, half again as large as that of any normal man’s, seemed to fill the whole window—the head of a giant, with great round eyes peering from beneath shaggy brows. At first those eyes were vacuous, blankly staring—until the creature saw Dora.

Then mad passion kindled in them and the huge face became transformed, the twitching, slavering face of a lustful animal! Enormous hands came up and gripped the bars, tugged at them with savage frenzy. The cavernous mouth opened, and from the black throat belowed a howl that might have come from a jungle beast!

Haskell instinctively staggered away from that savage blast. Through it he heard Dora Moore’s startled scream, heard her frightened call of “Graham!” as her fingers were torn from his arm and she faded into the darkness. At the same instant the thicket became alive with scurrying movement. He whirled, but before he could raise his wrench, his arm was seized and twisted behind him. Hands grabbed his shoulders, clutched at his legs, tripped him and bore him backward.

In desperation he swung wildly with the fist that clutched the flashlight. It was gripped in mid-arc, but for a fraction of a second the light’s beam played full on the face of a back-twisted cripple—full on the tense face of Wally Taylor, the lost aviator!

Only for an instant. Then the club which Taylor wielded came down and a burst of excruciating agony seemed to split Graham Haskell’s skull wide open.

CHAPTER TWO

Spawn of the Monster

A SHARP sting near the elbow of his right arm and a dull pain that became sharper as it crept up to his shoulder brought Haskell back to consciousness, but instinctive caution warned him to delay opening his eyes. He seemed to be lying on a bed, evidently in a lighted room, and someone was bending over him. Fingers were probing the muscles of his arms, were gently passing over his naked chest with a touch that was almost caressing.

“An excellent physique!” he heard a voice that throbbed with satisfaction murmur just above him. “Fortunately he was not seriously injured. It would have been an unforgivable sacrilege to cripple such a perfect body! A perfect body and a clever brain—with that we can accomplish wonders; world-revolutionizing wonders!

“If only we can retain the brain,” the voice faded until it was little more than a whisper. “If only he does not go mad or become an imbecile—but this time I am sure that we can preserve his sanity. With his physique we cannot fail.”

If only he does not go mad or become an imbecile! The softly spoken words drove into Graham’s brain and brought out a cold sweat on his limbs. Had his skull been broken by Taylor’s downswinging club? Had his brain been injured? Was he hovering on the verge of insanity—or was this nothing more than
a fearsome nightmare that would vanish when he opened his eyes?

Cold terror seemed to freeze his muscles, to hold him immobile; but he fought free of it. Resolutely he batted open his eyes—and then he was certain that what he saw must be the creatures of nothing but a fantastic nightmare-world!

Standing at the side of the hospital bed on which he lay was a white-uniformed man who appeared to be a doctor—a man whose nearly bald head and face were hideously disfigured. The top of his skull and the entire right side of his forehead down to his eye had been crushed in. Skillful surgery had reconstructed it but had been unable to restore the shattered bones and the skull’s original contour. As a result the face was lopsided, the bald skull a horrible mass of livid scars and queasy-looking depressions.

At the end of the bed sat a broken-backed cripple who regarded him with chill, unblinking eyes; eyes that gave no slightest sign of recognition, although now Graham identified Wally Taylor without question. Taylor’s face, also, was scarred, but there was no mistaking his long, hawk-featured countenance. Without a word he rose and shuffled out of the room when he saw that Graham was conscious.

“Ah, you are awake,” the physician noted quickly. “Just relax yourself. Just be at ease and you will be all right. Your injuries are not serious. All you need is rest.”

The little chamber in which he lay seemed to be a hospital room, Graham took quick inventory. He wore nothing but pajama trousers, but he could see his clothing hanging in a closet. His head was bandaged and felt queer, felt dull and swollen, but otherwise he seemed to be all right. This hospital room must be in the Amasquam sanitarium—where his plane had been deliberately wrecked, he reconstructed quickly.

“I’m all right,” he cut short the doctor’s warnings, as he propped himself upright, “but how about my passengers? How about Miss Moore and Miss Canby?”

“They are quite unharmed,” the gargoyle-headed physician assured him soothingly. “They were shaken up and slightly unnerved by their experience, that is all.”

Graham sat bolt upright. He made as if to get out of bed until the doctor raised protesting hands and pressed him back onto the pillow.

“No—not yet. It is dangerous,” he warned.

Graham had felt weak, but now his senses were clearing and his strength was beginning to return. With normalcy his suspicions flared and his anger mounted.

“There’s a whole lot I don’t understand—and don’t like—about this place, doctor—if that’s what you are,” he snapped. “My plane was deliberately wrecked—”

“You may call me Dr. Pierre. Just remain quiet, and I will tell you anything you wish to know,” the physician urged. “About your plane—that was an accident—an unfortunate accident.” He shook his head regretfully. “Some workmen from the village were using electric power from our main building. They had it wired across the field and left the wires hanging there instead of taking them down in the evening. You ran into them.”

“And the men who attacked us and seized first Miss Canby and then Miss Moore—I suppose they were accidents, too?” Graham flung at him.

“We have some unfortunate patients here at Amasquam, Mr. Haskell,” Dr. Pierre answered after a moment’s hesitation. “Mental cases which ordinarily might be confined behind bars. We try to treat them more humanely, allow them more freedom. In the excitement of your smash-up they got out of hand; they
thought they were rescuing you and your passengers.”

Rescue—with a club that had almost brained him! This Dr. Pierre was a liar and Graham meant to tell him so—but before the denouncing words could leave his lips they were checked by a terrified scream. Dora Moore’s scream! And it seemed to be just beyond the door through which Wally Taylor had passed!

The physician tried to stop him, tried to hold him back on the bed—but Graham threw him to one side as he leaped up and ran to the door. The girl was still screaming, her cries coming half-strangled, when he yanked the door open and sprang out into what proved to be a short corridor. For a moment it seemed to be empty—and then he spied a white-clad foot and leg projecting around a turn at the farther end of the hallway; a leg that beat futilely against the floor struggling for a purchase.

Dora!

Graham Haskell reached the turn in a dozen running strides and almost stumbled over the amazing set-to that confronted him. Dora was lying on the floor, helpless in the hands of a great, hulking brute who kneft on the floor beside her. With one hand he clutched her hair and held her head back against the floor. The other hand tore at the white uniform she wore and was stripping it from her body, while uncanny gurgles of obscene delight drooled from his lips!

Crimson rage surged into Graham’s brain as he swung a pile-driving punch at that devil’s head—but midway to its mark he almost stopped it. The ponderous attacker turned toward him—and he saw that it was a child! A child who must have weighed all of three hundred pounds—but a child nevertheless; an unmistakable youngster with the gangling build of an eight-year-old and the body of a giant!

Fear leaped into the creature’s eyes and he started to cry even before Graham’s fist landed against his jaw and knocked him off his captive. But that blow, solid enough to have dropped a full-grown man, did not end the struggle. The incredible creature was on his feet in a moment, came charging back, his big hands flailing blindly while his bellows of childish rage rang through the hall.

An eight-year-old bigger than an ordinary man! Horror tugged at Graham as he tried to beat the creature off; as he set himself and drove in a solid one-two, again and then again, before at last the bawling monstrosity gasped and dropped in a heap.

“Oh, Graham—thank God you came!” the girl sobbed half-hysterically as she clung to him and cowered against his bare chest.

“Hold it, Dora!” he snapped, trying hard to edge his words with commanding severity. “Tell me quickly—what is wrong? Isn’t the job what you expected? What is this creature that attacked you?”

He succeeded. His calm, commanding voice sobered her and restored some of her self-control.

“I don’t know what is wrong—but I am terrified,” she admitted. “The attendants here are all cripples. The patients are even worse—awful creatures like that one; all half-wits or raving maniacs. All children who must be suffering from some terrible glandular disorder. Tending them is like—like being a nurse in some fantastic giant fairyland! There is even a baby—a six-months-old baby that weighs more than fifty pounds. Yesterday morning I had to feed it—”

“Yesterday morning?” Graham repeated blankly, “We only cracked up here last night.”

Her eyes turned to his anxiously, and the concern he saw mirrored on her face set his pulses throbbing, but she shook her head.

“Not last night—that was two nights ago,” she told him. “If you don’t know
that, they must have kept you asleep—must have kept you drugged. They would not let me see you—"

HER words clipped off abruptly when she felt him swaying and saw that he reached out a hand to the wall for support. Weakness was creeping over him, overpowering him—and not until then did they see that Dr. Pierre was standing in a shadowy corner of the corridor, watching them; for how long they had no idea. Now he came forward solicitously and took Graham by the arm, helped her to lead him back to his room and put him to bed.

"That was foolish, dangerous; it has weakened you—but I do not blame you," he reproved. "You care a great deal for each other, do you not?"

His dark eyes flashed from one to the other, studied them shrewdly, and was quick to note the heightening of Dora's color. Graham noted that, too—and wished she had not given that telltale indication. Suddenly he knew that the love which had been miraculously born to them must be hidden and denied. The gleam of crafty understanding, of evil satisfaction, in Dr. Pierre's eyes had betrayed him—had betrayed that he intended to pervert that sacred love to some hellish purpose of his own!

"Yes—your silence is more eloquent than any possible words." Dr. Pierre nodded complacently, while a smile that was meant to be sympathetic flitted over his lips. "That is good—very good. We are always glad to encourage love here at Amasquam—"

Graham tried to speak, but he could hardly move his lips. A great weariness weighted him down and seemed to numb every muscle of his body. Dr. Pierre saw his condition and stepped to a wall closet at one side of the room, unlocked it and took out a hypodermic needle which he loaded from a shallow bowl.

Dora watched him with round, terror-filled eyes. Vainly she tried to stop him when he stepped toward the bed, but he brushed her aside roughly—and the needle point jabbed deep into Graham's arm near the elbow.

Again a dull pain spread out from the needle wound, but this time a numbness followed it. His eyes grew heavy, started to close. The lights in the room began to dim, and the figures at his bedside receded farther and farther into the distance. Desperately he fought to retain consciousness, but his struggle was unavailing. Darkness closed in upon him and his senses faded—with Dr. Pierre's exultant eyes boring into him like gimlets and with Dora Moore's horrified scream ringing in his ears. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Mate for Gargantua

THAT despairing scream was still keening in Graham Haskell's brain when he opened his eyes and found the room in darkness. Dora's scream and another that must be Helen Canby's—and almost drowning them out came a mighty roar that was like the bedlam of a zoo when the animals pace their cages and fill the air with their enraged cries.

Listening to that howling pandemonium, he could fairly see the helpless girls tossed to a pack of savage beasts!

That scream might be Dora's death-cry—and he was lying there impotently listening to it! Cold sweat beaded his forehead and the backs of his hands—until sudden inspiration brought release. Desperately he heaved himself upright—and he could move! The overpowering inertia had left him; had left only a strange stiffness in every muscle, a painful rheumatic ache in every joint of his body.

He paid little attention to that as he
leaped out of bed and ran to the door, but when he grasped the knob it would not turn. The door was locked! A strong door that did not give in the slightest degree when he gripped the knob with both hands and pulled with all his strength.

That door had been built to withstand just such an assault; to keep a prisoner securely locked inside the room. But there must be another way out. The windows! He ran to one of them and raised the lower sash. There were no bars, nothing to keep him inside—until he looked down.

It was dark outside, but the stars shed sufficient light to reveal what awaited him. His room was on the third floor of the building, and below was a sheer drop to the ground. A sheer drop to a bed of jagged rocks that extended for nearly twenty feet beyond the wall. He was perfectly free to leap from that window—to certain death on those unescapable rock teeth!

That way also was closed—and as he stared down at the grim rock trap the uproar from outside increased until it seemed to fill the night. Wild animal cries, howls of bestial rage, a great pounding and thudding rose from the surrounding darkness. From those cabins he and Dora had started to investigate? That was the answer! The inmates of those heavily padlocked shacks were roused to a frenzy—and now the girls’ screams had stopped entirely.

Dank horror-fingers inched down Graham’s bare back as he speculated on what that silence, in the midst of this bestial clamor, might mean. He must get down there somehow, must reach Dora no matter how he did it. The window was the only way—but he could ease his drop to the deadly rocks somewhat by making a rope that would lower him from the window!

Swiftly he set to work, tearing the sheets into widths as narrow as he dared, ripping up his shirt and coat to gain a few more feet. Only his trousers he spared. They might help to shield his legs when he made the desperate drop—but he had no more than stepped into them and tightened his belt around his waist when there was a sound at the door.

The key turned almost noiselessly in the lock!

Like a crouching animal he tensed, ready to hurl himself at the doctor or whoever came through the portal—but the door did not open. For what seemed ages he poised on bent legs. Then he catfooted across the room, turned the knob quickly and yanked the door open. The corridor was dimly lighted, but he was just in time to catch a glimpse of a figure that scurried to the staircase and dived into the darkness below.

The crooked-backed figure of Wally Taylor!

Graham did not stop to consider why the pilot had unlocked the door—and then run away. Springing into the corridor, he ran to the head of the stairs, but by the time he reached the steps Taylor had vanished. Cautiously he descended to the second floor. That corridor also was empty—but now the howling clamor was louder; seemed to come from somewhere within the building—somewhere close at hand.

The horrific symphony had changed somewhat. From outside came the same howling tumult, but close at hand he caught the rattle of heavy bars, the throaty rumbling and plaintive whining of an animal impatiently awaiting the food it knows will soon be forthcoming.

A bestial sound—and yet one that was uncannily human!

His hair stood on end as that unholy noise became louder. There were more than a dozen doors on that second floor, but when Graham reached the one at the end of the left wing he knew that he was
close to his goal. Cautiously he grasped the knob and turned it. The door opened! Opened on a crack, to reveal a duplex room beyond—a room that echoed with the whimpering and panting of a creature maddened with lust!

Beyond that door was a balcony that was in darkness, a balcony that ran along one end of the deep room. Graham carefully drew the door wider and crept through the opening; crept to the edge of the balcony—and stared down at a scene that threatened to pop the eyes out of his head!

The room into which he looked had once been a comfortable living room, a large, trophy-hung living room with a stone fireplace at one end where hunters had been wont to gather after a day in the wilderness. Now it was stripped of almost all its furniture, and its windows were heavily shuttered. At one side was a small anteroom that looked as if it might once have been a pantry, but now it was transformed into a cell—a cell with a heavy, iron-barred door shutting it off from the main room.

Beyond that door crouched the gigantic monster Graham had glimpsed momentarily behind the bars of the log cabin window!

Now he was able to get a more complete view of the creature—and what he saw appalled him. The fellow was on his knees—and yet he filled the doorway completely; even bent forward to peer through the bars! Standing erect he would be at least ten feet tall and fully three feet wide across the shoulders! A gargantuan creature whose hairy, muscular body was covered only by a ragged pair of knee-length trousers.

Pressed close to the bars, his eyes were great, round wells of frenzied desire as he stared at a performance well calculated to set any normal male afire with passionate desire.

Standing on a thick bear rug in front of the crackling log fire that cast a ruddy radiance around the room was Helen Canby. She had stripped off her clothing and tossed it to one side. Now, stark naked, her full-breasted, wide-hipped body was alluringly limned in the glow of the flames as she stretched her elbows behind her shoulders and writhed and twisted in utter sensual abandon!

Like a pagan goddess she postured there, her shapely limbs swaying, the muscles rippling smoothly beneath her skin—while the leaping flames seemed to be encouraging her as they painted her every line, her every intimate curve, with daring highlights and seductive shadows.

Graham Haskell stared—and the lure of her statuesque nudity reached out and gripped him; held him motionless, while his pulses pounded and wild desire-fabrications surged into his brain.

As she revolved so that she faced the cage, Helen Canby smiled, the age-old smile of the enchantress—and the half-mad creature behind the bars shook them until it seemed that he must bend and snap them in his great fists. Not until then did Graham throw off the spell she had cast upon him—not until he saw the raging desire that blazed in that huge creature's eyes.

The girl was mad to tempt the creature so brazenly; utterly mad to place reliance in mere steel bars to keep that monster away from her. But no, she was not mad—not in that way; a glimpse of her leer, tantalizing face told him what had happened. Helen Canby did not know what she was doing. She was drugged, was completely under the influence of aphrodisiacs that had numbed her brain and unleashed within her body all the unholy fires of seething lust!

GRAHAM'S hands balled into hard fists and his jaws clenched as he started to rise, started toward the balcony stairway—but he was too late. Before he
had taken two steps he heard a metallic click—and saw the barred door swiftly rising, disappearing into its top casing. The huge monster was free!

With a howl that sent shivers down Graham’s spine he stalked toward her, his great arms outspread—and the girl went straight into them! Hungriely he seized her and lifted her off her feet, cradled her in his arms like a doll and laved her nakedness with his eager, slobbering caresses.

Horrified by that exhibition of insensate passion, Graham crouched at the edge of the balcony steps. That carnal orgy could only result in Helen Canby’s death—but how could he hope to save her? In the hands of that ravenous monster he would be helpless, a child to be smashed into unconsciousness with one blow of those huge fists. To try to interfere would be to invite certain death—but...

The decision was not left in his hands. Suddenly the uproar outside increased, the howling trumpeted louder, a sonorous accompaniment for a terrific pounding and the crashing of rending timbers. In from somewhere beneath the balcony on which Graham stood, lumbered two more incredible behemoths, one of them even larger than the fellow who held Helen Canby. Like him, they wore only the tatters of trousers, incongruous apparel for barbaric creatures who looked as if they had stepped out of the pages of prehistoric ages.

Straight across the long room they arrowed, their blazing eyes fixed on the nude body of the woman. With a roar of savage rage her captor turned to meet them, tried to pin her beneath his left arm while he met their onslaught with his right.

That ill-advised covetousness defeated him. From two sides they closed in on him, their fists smashing into his face, beating him back, while they snatched the coveted prize from him. Dazed by their blows, he reeled back until he was almost in the fire—but the sight of that delectable nakedness in their hands fanned his rage to a frenzy.

Head-down, he charged into them—and the next moment all three were locked in a primeval battle. All four; for Helen Canby was in the center of that mad struggle. Punching, butting, rending, tearing, gouging and biting, they tore into one another with unreasoning ferocity; and now their snarls were punctuated by the girl’s agonized shrieks.

They fought one another like wild beasts—but, like starving animals, each tried to snatch the prize for himself. In a few moments Helen’s body was torn and bleeding, her flesh ripped from her bones, her limbs torn from her sockets, as those giants tugged and pulled at her. Her piercing death-cry shrilled into Graham’s ears as he stared down in utter horror at that ghastly dismembering of a living woman!

Not until they were bathed from head to foot in her blood, not until her mangled corpse was a broken, twisted abomination in the middle of the floor, did they realize that the prize for which they had fought had escaped them. Blankly they stared at the grisly remains and eyed one another with dawning comprehension.

The woman was gone. . . . Vacuously they gazed around the room as if to find her hiding somewhere from them—and suddenly Graham was aware that one of them was staring up at the balcony, straight up at him.

For a moment the giant gaped incredulously. Then his eyes kindled and his face lit up. Telepathically his mates seemed to catch his excitement. Their eyes followed his—and with one accord they started forward, headed toward the balcony stairs.

That was the moment when enervating terror stabbed through Graham Haskell
and almost knocked his knees from under him. Not terror for himself. In that moment he heard a horrified gasp at his back—and turned to stare open-mouthed at the frightened face of Dora Moore!

"Oh, God in heaven—what did they do to her?" she half-whispered. "She knew—Helen knew what to expect. She wouldn’t tell me. She didn’t want to frighten me—but she knew. She fought Dr. Pierre when he came to take her away. We both fought him—but he dragged her away and locked me in my room. And this is what he did to her! Oh, Graham—"

But Graham hardly heard the hysterical sobs that convulsed her. His whirling brain was working at top speed, desperately casting about for a way to save her from the same unthinkable fate that had been Helen Canby’s. The hulking monsters were at the foot of the steps, were starting up; it was too late to attempt to flee by the door at the rear of the balcony. Hopeless to try to meet them with bare fists.

Frantically he looked around for a weapon. There were a few pieces of furniture on the balcony; a small table and some chairs, several jardinières. They would have to do. Swiftly he grabbed a heavy jardiniere, filled with dirt and the dried stalk of a dead plant, and hurled it down the steps, straight at the head of the foremost giant.

The fellow let out a howl of agony and toppled backward. Before his mates could recover the ground he had lost the table came hurtling down upon them, to sweep them back to the lower floor. But now they charged up with their arms held over their heads. A second jardiniere bounced off a huge shoulder harmlessly and crashed to pieces on the floor. They were almost up to the top step when Graham grabbed a stout wooden chair by its back.

No use to throw this weapon; it would not stop them. Holding the legs in front of him like four lances, he raced to the steps and catapulted himself downward, full-tilt into them.

"Run, Dora—run!" he shouted a plea to the girl who had refused to take advantage of the momentary reprieve his battle had gained for her.

If only she would run! But she was standing there at the head of the stairs as if she were petrified, staring down at him with horror-brimming eyes—and the hulking monsters were closing in on him, reaching out to seize him and tear him into bloody fragments!

CHAPTER FOUR

Master of Monsters

Hope died in Graham Haskell as those great paws closed on his shoulder and he was yanked off his feet. Desperately he flung his fists at the monsters, but he could scarcely reach their faces and his blows were puny things against such hulking targets. Cruelly they buffeted him, and then a huge fist drove against his head, to send him staggering backward like a drunken man—into a streak of fire that cut across his bare back from his neck to his hip!

A streak of fire that exploded with the crack of a pistol!

Knocked to the floor by that searing agony, he groveled on his hands and knees as the pistol report cracked above him again—and was echoed by a howl of agony from one of the giants. Could that mean a rescuer? Incredulously he lifted his head—and saw grim, tight-lipped Dr. Pierre nearly twenty feet away. In his hands the physician gripped a long, thick blacksnake whip that leaped out and wrapped itself around those giants like a living thing.

In abject terror they backed away from it, cowering and whimpering, while he
pursued them relentlessly, flogging them unmercifully. Back toward a door under the balcony they dashed, and the bleak-faced physician pressed close after them. He paid no attention to Graham, seemed not to know that he was in the room—which gave Haskell his opportunity.

The moment he was out of Dr. Pierre's range of vision he sprang to his feet and leaped up the balcony steps three at a time. With one arm around Dora's waist, he swept her to the door at the rear and through it to the corridor beyond. The hallway was still silent; ominously silent, as if hidden watchers were waiting to leap out upon them. For a moment Graham hesitated.

"How can we get out of this place?" he turned to the girl. "Where is the nearest door?"

"At the back of the house—down those stairs," Dora whispered. "But it's no use, Graham. They are too many for us. The doors are all watched. We'll never be able to get past them."

"Watched by whom?"

"The cripples—Dr. Pierre's attendants."

"How about them—can't we raise them against him?" Graham seized upon any hope of escape. "One of them—Wally Taylor—unlocked my door and released me—"

"Someone unlocked my door, too!" Dora turned startled eyes to his. "But it's no use," the hope that had suddenly flared in them faded. "Those poor cripples are in mortal fear of him. They are his abject slaves. This afternoon I learned why. They all suffer from some frightful malady—some terrible disease he must have given them. He keeps them doped, and while they are under the influence of the drugs they are all right—but as soon as it wears off they foam at the mouth and go into convulsions. That's the way he punishes them—by withholding their injections for hours. They must hate him—but they won't dare help us; they can't—"

"What is it, Graham?" she suddenly turned to him in quick alarm. "You are so pale. Oh, I know!" A horrified gasp escaped from her lips before she could check it. "You are weakening!"

Her arms went around him, tried to support him—but Graham knew that it would take more than her strength to keep him on his feet much longer. Exhaustion was stealing through him. His limbs were growing heavy and his senses were dulling—but he couldn't succumb now! He must stay on his feet—must cling to consciousness until he got her out of this hell-house and on the road to safety.

The road to safety. . . . But where was that? Even if they succeeded in getting out of the building, how could they hope to escape through miles of almost uninhabited wilderness? The plane was a hopeless wreck—

The plane! That gave him his inspiration. His own plane was useless—but others should be able to find this house of horror. There was a short-wave radio transmitting set in this sanitarium of lust. If he could locate it and contact Haverhill, Fred Nelson would speed rescue to them!

WITH Dora close behind him, he hurried downstairs to the main floor. Dr. Pierre's office was located at the rear of the building—and next to it was a little cubicle in which the radio equipment was housed. Miraculously they reached it without interference. Graham's nerves were tingling as he pressed the button and switched the set on. While Dora stood with her back against the closed door he announced the station's identity and called for Haverhill.

Again and again. Endlessly he repeated the call number of Fred Nelson's station, while his straining ears expected at
any moment to hear the pounding of footsteps that would herald the coming of Dr. Pierre and his cripples. What was the matter? Nelson always kept an assistant at or near the radio set. Someone ought to hear that persistent call. Someone—

Graham’s heart sank as another possibility occurred to him. Perhaps the Haverhill airport was stripped of its personnel. Perhaps Nelson had gone out with the other pilots to look for the Haskell plane as he had done when Wally Taylor was lost. Perhaps they were scouring the wilderness from the air, searching for a hideaway that Dr. Pierre had cleverly camouflaged into invisibility. . . .

But at that moment a voice answered out of the ether—the voice of Fred Nelson himself.

“This is Haskell—at Amasquam,” Graham staccatoed his message. “We fell into a trap up here, Fred—a horrible murder trap. One of the girls is dead, but I have the other with me. We have managed to get away from the devilish doctor who runs the place, and as soon as I sign off we are escaping—out into the wilderness somewhere. Come and get us. We won’t go far. We’ll stay nearby so that—”

The crash of shattering glass and the roar of a shot put an end to that call. Transfixed, Graham sat with the mouthpiece in his hand while his eyes flashed to the window at the side of the cubbyhole. The pane had been smashed into fragments, and the bullet that had come through it had wrecked the radio’s panel, had put the set out of commission. Now, framed in the jagged shards of glass, the scarred, faintly sneering face of Wally Taylor stared in at them—while the muzzle of his gun held them both in its threatening arc.

“Sit right where you are,” he warned Graham. “Don’t try to make a play—unless you want me to let the girl have it.”

“You dirty rat!” Graham spat—and at the same instant he swept up several tools from a shelf beside the radio and hurled them at the window.

With the same motion he leaped to his feet and flung himself to the door to protect Dora. Taylor’s gun roared and a bullet sank into the wall several feet from the girl’s head, but as he backed away from the broken window the pilot clapped his hand to his lips.

Now the shrill note of a high-pitched whistle cut through the night, and almost at once it was echoed by shouts and the sound of running feet. Graham yanked open the door—but one glance told him that it was too late; Taylor had effectively circumvented their escape. Cripples were closing in and blocking their way on every side, half a dozen of them—and behind them came Dr. Pierre, his blacksnake whip in one hand and a leveled automatic in the other.

The realization of his helplessness seemed to rob Graham of the last of his ebbing strength. Overpowering weakness rushed over him, and he felt himself falling—felt Dora trying to hold him up as he slumped against her. But he had put the call through! He had reached Fred Nelson, and now rescue would be speeding on its way to them!

Elation rioted through him even as the cripples seized him and took him out of Dora’s arms. Helpless to raise a hand in her behalf, he saw them grab her and drag her away. Then they lifted him and carried him upstairs to the bedroom he had left a little while before, put him back in bed and left him alone with Dr. Pierre.

AGAIN the physician unlocked the wall closet and took out the hypodermic syringe. Again he filled it from the shallow container and jabbed the point into Graham’s arm. This time, when the injection was completed, he sat down beside
the bed and regarded his captive-patient with eyes that blazed with an unholy zeal.

"I must thank you for your timely interference, Haskell," he spoke softly, but his tense voice quivered with suppressed excitement. "If you had not been there, those brainless fools would have seized her and destroyed her. The other girl was all right for them; I did not have much hope, but I was willing to risk her in one more trial—but Miss Moore is different. She must not be wasted. You love her, and I am reserving her for you."

"You are reserving her for me!" Graham managed to flare. "Who in hell do you think you are? You may be master of the destinies of the poor cripples and half-wits in this hell-house, but what happened here tonight was murder—"

"What happened here tonight was an unavoidable accident," the physician's bland, untroubled voice stopped him. "I am master of the destinies of the unfortunate in this building. The cripples I brought back to life when they were nearly killed in accidents—Taylor's smashed-up plane, automobiles that were wrecked, hunting camps that were devastated by explosions. The broken victims from those unfortunate episodes owe their new lease on life to my skillful care."

"You trapped them—you lured them into devilishly planned 'accidents' and crippled them," Graham gritted bitterly, as he began to understand something of the man's cold-blooded fiendishness.

"They were sent to me to aid me in my work," Dr. Pierre answered imperturbably. "The others—the big men and the moronic children—I created them. They were a failure, all of them," he admitted, "but not altogether a failure. Each contributed something to the final success that will be mine. Now I am ready—now I will not fail! I am master of the destinies of everyone in this building, Haskell—and I will be master of the destinies of the entire world!"

Unable to keep his seat, he got up from the chair and paced the room like a caged animal, while his face glowed with the fanatical light of a crack-brained zealot.

"Too long the world has been at the mercy of the rapacious Prussians!" he proclaimed. "Their big men have trodden their smaller neighbors underfoot—have beaten them down and crushed them mercilessly. But that will be changed. We must fight fire with fire—big men with bigger men! I am going to create a race of conquerors, Haskell; a race of giants who will grind the Prussians into the dust—and you will help me. You will be the father of that super-race who will inherit the earth!"

The man was mad—utterly mad. Graham watched him and saw his face become transformed, saw his mania take complete possession of him. His brain had been terribly warped by his obsession—but it still was a clever brain, a frightfully dangerous brain to rule unchecked in this place where he was absolute master.

"FOR years I have worked on this problem," he confided. "I needed big men—only big men could hope to overcome the Prussians; and I discovered how to develop them. Those giants you saw downstairs—a few months ago they were ordinary men, not so large as you; but I inoculated them and fed them. I speeded up their growth and made them what they are today—wonderful physical specimens. But their brains eluded me. They are simpletons, brainless animals who have no reason, nothing but instincts. They can beget children, but their offspring are as brainless as themselves."

"And the women—what become of the women who bore those monstrosities?" Graham gasped, as shocking comprehension began to dawn upon him.
“They died—but that is of no consequence,” the mad doctor dismissed. “As soon as I am able to produce normal-brained offspring, the problem of procreation will solve itself and the race will become self-perpetuating. Brain preservation has been my most difficult problem, Haskell—but now I have mastered it. My last experiment was almost a success. The subject remained normal until he died; but I know what caused his death. That shall not happen again. With you there will be no slip-up.”

Like an inspired artist proudly regarding a masterpiece that was taking form under his skillful fingers, Dr. Pierre stood beside the bed and looked down at Haskell.

“With your physique I know that I cannot fail!” he exulted. “I will make you the biggest man the world has ever known, a fit progenitor for the mighty race that will spring from you! You have not realized it—but already you are much larger than when you came to me—and I have given you only the preliminary injections. Tonight we will switch to the primary formula.”

Unbelievingly Graham’s eyes turned to the foot of the bed—and what he saw filled his reeling brain with shuddering horror. His soles were within an inch of the bottom of the bed—a bed that was more than seven feet long! Now he understood that curious stiffness, that feeling of being stretched, that gripped his muscles. Now he understood why his joints ached so intolerably. He was suffering from growing pains!

“In three or four days you will be ready,” the mad-eyed physician assured him. “Three or four days—and my success will be complete!”

Cold sweat bathed Graham from head to foot as he heard that fiendish dictum. Three or four days and he would be a giant! And in three or four more days Dora Moore would be delivered to him like Helen Canby, her brain drugged by hellish aphrodisiacs, her glorious body an irresistible invitation to spawn the breed of monsters this madman demanded!

In three or four days he would condemn the sweet girl he loved to a death so horrible that the very thought of it made his tortured soul writhe in agony.

CHAPTER FIVE

Day of Decision

THE next three days were aeons of excruciating torment for Graham Haskell. Hourly he battled with his problem—and was no nearer to the solution than when he began. A score of times he was on the verge of hurling himself out onto the jagged rocks three stories below—but that was no solution to the ghastly enigma that confronted him. That would be a way out for him—but it would leave Dora at the mercy of Dr. Pierre; would leave her to be handed over to another of his diabolical man-made giants.

If only he could prevent the doctor from giving him those inoculations, perhaps he could check his unnatural growth, could postpone the hour of Dora’s doom.

. . . Grimly he determined to resist—but Dr. Pierre was prepared for that. Each time he came into the room his leveled automatic was held ready, his eyes alert for the first overt move.

“I do not want to kill you, Haskell,” he warned in a voice that was no more animated than if he were discussing the extermination of an experimental guinea pig, “but I will shoot you through the heart if you force me to fire. You will succeed only in inconveniencing me—and in providing a less worthy mate for Miss Moore.”

That cold-blooded threat bound Graham more securely than if he were weighed down with chains. Helplessly he submitted and watched barrel after bar-
rel of Dr. Pierre’s hellish serum drain through the hypodermic needle and into his veins—to play mad havoc with every cell of his body.

He could not avoid those inoculations—but he could refuse to eat. The fiendish master of Amasquam could not force food down his unwilling throat—and without food his body must cease its dismaying expansion. Resolutely he pledged himself to a hunger strike—but the first tray of food which he refused kindled a new torment within him.

Before then he had not realized that he was hungry. Now his appetite became prodigious. No matter how he struggled for self-control, his eyes swiveled back to that loaded tray, and the sight of the food drove him nearly frantic. His lips worked convulsively, his fingers itched to seize it, his legs almost carried him to it despite himself. For more than an hour he held out against the craving that made his whole body twitch and tremble. At last, in desperation, he seized the tray and ran to a window to throw it out.

But at the window-ledge he stopped and caught himself. A twinge of chilling horror at what he had almost done crept through him—and he seized the concentrated food with both hands, wolfed it down as if he had not eaten for months!

“That is wiser,” Dr. Pierre approved, as he replenished the supply. “The injections I am giving you whet your appetite to the point where you would starve to death if you had sufficient strength to refuse food for an appreciable length of time.”

Just that—but the calmly spoken words echoed in Graham’s brain and told him how complete was the doctor’s hold over him; how cunningly the madman had blocked every hope of escape. He had no choice but to consume the food with which the fiend gorged him; no choice but to grow bigger and stronger, to turn himself into a veritable monster—for his own destruction and the horrible doom of the girl he loved!

Daily—hourly—he grew; and hourly the dread fear that he would lose his mind

“I Talked with God”

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It’s fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City. I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I’m gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I’m talking about—it’s a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 20, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it’s true, or I wouldn’t tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.
hung over him like a Damoclean sword. Once his mentality slipped he would be like those inhuman beasts who had dismembered Helen Canby. Dora’s one slim hope lay in his retaining his sanity—his sanity and his strength.... Yes, his increasing strength was the one possible weakness in Dr. Pierre’s diabolical scheming.

After that Graham abandoned all attempts at resistance. Instead, he submitted docilely to the inoculations and greedily consumed everything that was given him. With mounting horror he watched his body grow—and concentrated more frantically on desperate plans to circumvent the madman.

WHERE were the rescue planes Fred Nelson must have sped north to find him? Hourly he stared out of the windows and strained his ears for the sound of approaching flyers. But the sky was empty and the wilderness was silent. Something must have gone wrong. In some incomprehensible way Dr. Pierre must have been able to thwart attempts to locate his hideaway.

Finally, on the third afternoon, Graham’s hopes rose to fever-pitch—and then plummeted to the depths of despair.

Suddenly he leaped up from his bed and ran to the window. That was the sound of an airplane somewhere overhead! He could not see the ship, but the steady drone was coming nearer and nearer—until it faded and died away! For hours he waited tensely, but nothing happened—and at last he knew that the high hope had dissipated; the flyer had passed Amasquam without stopping, probably without even seeing it....

Night fell, and Graham still slumped in dejection, when the door of his room was unlocked and Dr. Pierre entered. This time the physician brought Wally Taylor with him. While he remained at a wary distance and kept the automatic leveled, Taylor went to the wall cabinet and prepared the hypodermic injection. Taylor, his eyes avoiding Graham’s, it was who jabbed the needle home and administered the inoculation.

The moment they had gone Graham knew that the fiery concoction racing through his veins was not the usual serum. It made his nerves tingle, accelerated the beat of his heart; it made him warm and stirred strange sensual desires within him—carnal desires that heightened his senses and inflamed his mind.

That inoculation had been a sex stimulant—and the time of his supreme ordeal was close at hand!

Desperately he fought to remain calm, to still his pounding blood and drive out of his mind the erotic envisionings that surged into it. Like a man on the brink of a crumbling precipice, he struggled to retain his self-control—while his ears strained for the summons he knew must come at any moment.

And then a stream of living fire geysered through him!

Dora’s scream—that was it! A scream of pain that rang in his brain and stabbed into his heart. Before he reached the door he knew that it would be unlocked. Before he reached the hallway he knew that the tortured cries were coming from that duplex room on the building’s main floor. The stage was set for his supreme test, and he strode to it with white-knuckled fists and tightly clenched lips—frantically striving to close his ears to the whispers of anticipation that set his imagination on fire!

The moment he yanked open the balcony door he saw Dora—and his heart leaped into his mouth. She was in front of the blazing fireplace, but not like Helen Canby. Instead of standing on the bearskin rug, she was hanging from the ceiling, suspended by her thumbs, her toes nearly a foot above the floor!

She was dressed in some sort of black
gown; a daringly low-cut creation of flimsy, semi-transparent material that accentuated and displayed every line of her lovely figure—and added to the lure of her pink flesh the subtle, pulse-quickening thrill produced by partial covering. That much he glimpsed as he sprang down the steps and ran to her.

Wide, tormented eyes turned toward him, and a low moan greeted him—and then Dora was in his arms, held up so that the strain was taken off her cruelly stretched thumbs while he fumbled with the knots that held her. She was in his arms—and the delirious fragrance of her body was in his nostrils, was stealing up into his brain! Her face was close against his naked chest, her warm lips pressed to his shoulder, while her hot, panting breath beat upon his tingling skin!

ONE of her hands he managed to free—and instantly her arm slipped around him, her fingers gripped him so avidly that her nails dug deep into his flesh. A glance into her upturned eyes told him that she was completely out of her mind, a sex-maddened animal who had no control over what she was doing.

"Dora, darling—please help me fight!" he panted a desperate plea. "Help me—"

But her glowing, tempting eyes hushed his protest, her amorous lips sought his with hungry abandon. She was drugged, a victim of some hellish aphrodisiac, he told himself again and again—but that did not matter. She was warm and soft in his arms, throbbing with life, quivering with desire. Pressed close against him, her exquisite body was a glorious, overpowering temptation that swept everything else from his mind.

He wanted her—wanted her with every fiber of his being, every cell of his trembling body! He wanted her—and he could have her!

(Continued on page 108)
Unhindered his hands gripped the soft dress and pushed it down from her shoulders, tore at it with feverish eagerness as the sight of her naked flesh unleashed a fresh torrent of passion within him. The flimsy material tore apart as he tugged at it. In shreds he ripped it from her—until she was stark naked in his arms, naked and palpitating with frenzied passion as she pressed herself upon him, snuggled close and lay back in his arms until he swept her up and showered her from head to foot with mad kisses.

Everything was forgotten in that feverish moment except the soft loveliness he cradled in his arms. Every scruple, every fear was swept away in the surging flood of white-hot desire—until suddenly Graham’s gaze, turning from a couch near the fireplace, fastened momentarily upon a pair of eyes that watched him from a narrow, cleverly concealed slit in the wall.

Only for a fraction of a second. Then he turned away as if he had not seen—but an electric charge had galvanized him, had shocked him back to realization of what he was doing. Dr. Pierre was behind that wall; was watching with eager eyes to see the consummation of his hellish plans!

Suddenly he tensed and stared down at the nude body in his arms. His lips curled back from his teeth and his eyes glared with wild frenzy. Slowly, slyly, his hand slipped up over Dora’s breast to her shoulder, her neck—and his fingers tightened around her throat; tightened like a vise as he broke the grip of her clutching hands and forced her to the floor and cut off her wind.

That was the only way he could hope to cope with her untrammeled passion, the only way he could save her from herself. For an instant, as she stared up into his face, sanity seemed to flash back into her eyes. She screamed in terror and went limp beneath him—just as Dr. Pierre came charging through the doorway beneath the balcony.

The physician’s horribly scarred face was crimson with rage, and the long black-snake whip licked out when he was halfway across the room. It cut a red slash across Graham’s back—but even as it landed he leaped from his couch and hurled himself at the doctor in a diving tackle that took him completely by surprise. And then he was swept off his feet; was held up, kicking and struggling, with one huge fist while the other smashed into his face.

Dr. Pierre screamed and his features became a bloody ruin when that vengeful fist landed. It drew back again for the knockout blow—but before it could land a second time a gun barked from the doorway beneath the balcony. A bullet scored a livid gash on Graham’s ribs as it passed—and imbedded itself in the doctor’s breast!

MOMENTARILY stunned, Graham stood there still holding the inert body. Then his brain clicked; and he sped across the room, through the door and into the smaller room beneath the balcony—to discover Wally Taylor backed against the wall with an automatic in his hand.

Graham reached him in one mighty stride, to knock the gun from his hand and hurl him to the floor. The moment the cripple scrambled to his feet, those big hands were ready, waiting for him—but Taylor’s eyes were wide with alarm.

Behind him a gun roared again. The bullet barely missed his head, drilled into the wall beside him. But now he was moving with split-second timing. Whirling around as he dived low, he leaped forward and hurled himself upon—Fred Nelson, the Haverhill airport manager!

“The bloody murderer! I’d have had him if you hadn’t done that. They kept me locked up so that I couldn’t get to you—”
"That's a lie, Nelson!" Wally Taylor gritted. "You had no intention of rescuing Haskell. You sent him up here to get rid of him, so that your pal, Dr. Pierre, would take care of him—and pay you for delivering another victim into this hell-hole!"

"He's insane, like all the rest in this madhouse," Nelson scoffed.

"No, that crash broke my back; it did not affect my mind," Taylor's bitter voice lashed out at him. "If I had gone mad, the way you hoped I would, you might have gotten away with this—but unfortunately for you I knew all about your contemptible deal with Pierre. I know that you stumbled onto this place when you were searching for me last winter. You took the doctor by surprise, when he was all agog about the new prisoners he had captured when my plane was lured down here and wrecked. You got the drop on him and kept it; you made him pay you heavy extortion money—but that wasn't enough. You made a devil's bargain with him to send other victims here—to deliver them at so much a head!" Wally Taylor went on inexorably. "You sent Haskell up here with the girls to sell him to Dr. Pierre like a guinea pig or a white mouse. But, unless I miss my guess, there was more to it than that. You never would have come here otherwise. You wanted to get rid of Haskell for some reason of your own—some reason of supreme importance to your miserable, money-grubbing soul—"

Those swift charges and countercharges had taken Graham Haskell completely by surprise, but now they began to strike panic in his brain.

Money... What was that Taylor had said about money?

Suddenly it dawned upon him that Fred Nelson knew every detail of the invention he intended to start manufacturing... Nelson had known that Willis Haskell was

(Continued on page 110)
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TEROR TALES

(Continued from page 109)

to give his decision after the demonstration flight—and had been fairly certain that Graham would be able to induce the old man to furnish the necessary backing... But if Graham had disappeared, if he was killed or vanished from the face of the earth, then Nelson would have been free to announce the invention as his own and start manufacturing it.

NELSON tried to shrug his shoulders contemptuously—but suddenly he threw himself to one side and snatched up the pistol that had been knocked from his hand.

It roared almost the moment his fingers touched it. The first bullet caught Graham in the shoulder; the second smashed into his chest—and then he reached the man who had sent him flying to his doom. His big hand closed on the gun and crushed it out of Nelson's fingers, dropped it unheedful to the floor.

Panic-stricken, Fred Nelson struggled desperately to break loose, but he was held in a vise of steel—held by an enraged giant who gave no thought to his own strength. Graham Haskell seized him and twisted him in his great hands, bent him until the sharp snapping of his spine put an end to his terrified howls...

Not until then did Graham's berserk rage cool, and with its fading came swift reaction. Suddenly the powerful limbs were tired, the big head too heavy to hold up. Overpowering weakness stole through him and he felt himself reeling, felt himself falling—until Wally Taylor caught him and held him upright.

"I did the best I could, Haskell," the crippled flyer apologized, as he drew a vial from his pocket and held it to Graham's lips. "I let those giants loose the other night, but—I only wanted them to start a riot so that you would have a chance to get into action. That was why I unlocked your room—that you would have a
chance to reach the radio and call for help.

“A plane was our only hope of getting out of this wilderness. Yours was hopelessly wrecked—but I counted on Nelson flying here to see that you were finished off if he heard that you were loose and trying to escape.

“Tonight I gave you only a half-strength dose in that hypodermic injection—and once the docs get to work on you you’ll be as good as ever!”

That seemed a far-fetched promise as the plane gained altitude and left the horrors of Amasquam behind, but Dr. Pierre was not the only medical genius who could perform near-miracles. The scientists were not able to shrink Graham Haskell all the way back to his former size. Today the president of the Haskell-Taylor Aeroplane Corporation is still a giant—a genial, laughing-eyed giant with an adoring wife and a normal-size youngster who fervently hopes that some day he will be as big as his dad!

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. . . Let us have some more inexplicable yarns—or else I must turn back to the old masters . . .

Yours for the unknowable!

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Arthur, you know what you want, and you shall have it. As for Hank Sperry, we are sorry to tell you that that good man and master artist passed away a year ago . . . We offer another letter, just to give you a sample of an editor’s problems.

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Supernatural tales leave me cold. I do not believe in the unearthly, and see no excuse for stories based on something unreal, impossible.

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