

APRIL

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By HENRY
KUTTNER

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Strange STORIES

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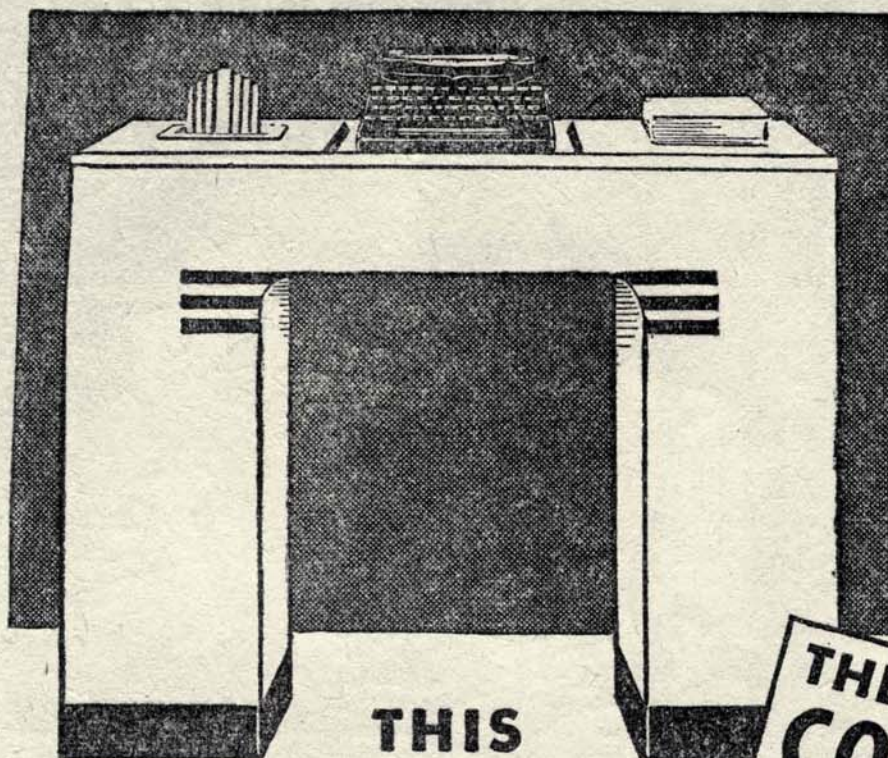
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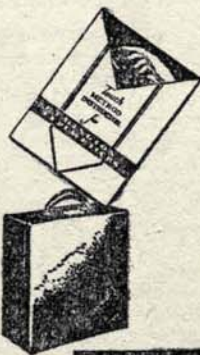
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Name.....

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ZOMBIES! Living dead men. Emaciated mortals without a soul—raised from graves by satanic power, and driven to toil by the will of a merciless tyrant—for greed and power.

Hokum, says science. Death will not sell its heritage even to the devil. Drugs, suspended animation, hypnotism—of such things are Zombies.

But have you ever seen a Zombie? Many men have. Such men do not scoff—they run; for they sense the ungodliness of Zombie eyes—the atmosphere of hell that permeates the presence of these things beyond the grave who neither talk nor eat, nor bleed when torn apart.

Corpses of Corruption

Haiti, Inner China—eye-witness accounts by those who do not want to talk, afraid of the demonic power which might reach out to fasten uncanny fangs on those who tell too much. Even starving rats and wolves of China shrink from these corpses of corruption; nor will the snakes of Haiti strike at these walking things which defy poison.

Haiti—1925. A United States Marine lost in the swamp, given up for dead by his comrades, forced to seek refuge with natives preparing for Black Magic. He would have become a human sacrifice to the Zombie god had he not at one time saved the life of a wounded native. And now this native pleads for the white marine—and he is allowed to see, but never tell—under penalty of what he knows would be worse than torture.

But he has now spoken to one he can trust. The Zombie god will understand, because this one in whom he has confided, does not scoff nor seek to punish by man-made laws.

Unholy Discord

The night is dark—the wet mist of an eerie fog rises like the breath of hell from the stinking swamp where reptiles crawl and wait to devour insects which venture into the night. Tom toms accompany a weird incantation of unholy discord as tiny lights appear on surrounding hillocks.

Then a stronger light looms up in the depths of the swamp—a fire before a crude altar ready for the kill. The smaller lights of single torches begin to move like fire-flies, slowly converging on the altar fire

until they are dimmed by the greater light and then go out.

The assembly is ready. The Master, a giant native clothed in filthy shroud, steps forward and stands before the altar. The black skin of his fiendish face smeared with rancid oil and blood, shines in the firelight—and his eyes gleam like pools of phosphorus.

The incantations grow louder, broken only by mumblings of a demonic ritual.

The Sacrifice

A scream! The sacrifice! A young virgin, her body writhing like a captured python as it is carried to the altar by two naked blacks, each holding a leg and an arm of the victim.

The sight of the altar and the fire is too much for the terrified girl. She swoons. Voices stop, but the tom toms pound with increased fury.

The great moment has arrived.

Gently the quivering body is laid upon the blood-stained altar. The Master steps forward—a knife flashes—and the body is still. The tom toms stop as though in silent respect for the departing soul of this child of sacrifice. No sounds save the crackling of the fire and the noise of insects.

The Master withdraws his knife and raises his hands above his head. Instantly voices mumble and the tom toms once more begin their dirge of death.

Sinister Operation

Down again comes the knife—this time slowly. The incantations continue. Then with the precision of a surgeon, the Master cuts into the breast of the girl. Slowly, carefully he removes the heart. He drops the knife and takes the bleeding heart in the hollow of both his hands and holds it before him.

All but the Master drop upon their faces in supplication. None sees what the Master does with the heart; for when the natives come to their feet again, the heart has disappeared. Somewhere in the folds of that filthy shroud rests the cherished organ of a girl who might have found love.

But the ceremony is not over although the swamp is now quiet. The body of the girl is quickly removed. Authorities must never find it. The Master steps away from

(Continued on page 10)

YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO WIN AN AUTOMOBILE



or \$1500.00 in Cash

Count the Beans

Like Puzzles? Here's A Good One

Can you count all the beans correctly in the Bean Jar pictured here? You probably think you have good eyesight. Here's a test. Can you make a perfect count of the Beans in the jar? Try it.



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Count the Beans and send in your solution on the Answer Coupon and for doing so you will receive at once, ABSOLUTELY FREE, a colored Map of the World, showing U. S., Europe and other countries, and get a wonderful opportunity to win an AUTOMOBILE or \$1,500.00 IN CASH.

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My Answer
(Number of Beans in Jar)

My Name

Street

City State

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WOODSTOCK
TYPEWRITERS

(Continued from page 8)

the fire—and the natives, not more than twenty of them, line up behind him. There is a job to be done before dawn disturbs the blackness of this night of hell.

A Marked Grave

ZOMBIE! Another Zombie for the Master. For days prior to this festival of evil, a grave has been marked—a grave where rests the body of a strong man who died in the prime of life. He must live again and this time work for the Master.

The unholy procession soon arrives at the designated grave. By this time the moon has risen. The Master halts. No words are spoken . . . only queer movements of fingers and lips. The Master steps back. The men come forward. Crude shovels appear. And soon the wooden box which houses the corpse pronounced dead by a white man's doctor, is opened.

Death looks up into the moonlight. It matters not if rigor mortis has stiffened the body or if putrefaction has brought a stench beyond white man's endurance—the corpse is lifted by strong arms and stood up on its feet in front of the Master.

The Master then grasps the hand of the corpse and holds the body upright before him. Then the followers fall prostrate and watch no more.

Only the Master speaks, but his words are a whisper. His other hand passes over the head and face of the man perhaps buried for weeks.

There is a sickening gurgle, stronger than the rattle of death. And this sound comes not from the Master, but from the thing before him.

A Zombie Is Born

The Master still holds the hand of the corpse; but not for long. The dead man is standing alone. His eyes open, but in those eyes are no longer a look of human intelligence . . . but a vacant stare of a soulless creature, without consciousness or the breath of God.

Another Zombie is born! A compact with hell—Death's bargain for the virgin sacrificed to the devil? Who knows.

"I don't believe it," says the skeptic. "It might have looked true, but the man wasn't dead. He had been drugged by the so-called Master, perhaps some strange drug known only to the witch-doctors of Haiti. This drug might have the power to suspend animation, stop the heart and lungs, sufficient to fool any doctor. Maybe the drug would soften the brain. And then when the Master dug him up days later, another drug was administered and the man came back to life—his mind a blank. An imbecile—not a Zombie."

Eye-Witness Account

To this can be added another eye-witness account concerning a huge native called

(Continued on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

John who was employed by a French planter. Says the Frenchman: "I saw John die of pneumonia. He was pronounced dead by the doctor—and before we could bury him, rigor mortis had set in and his body turned green. I saw him buried."

"Three weeks later, my son said he saw John working in a field back in the hills; but John seemed deaf and dumb."

"In order to quiet my son, I investigated. The man looked like John, even to the scar on his cheek and the pock mark on his nose. But John didn't know me. He seemed to look right through me with the expression of an imbecile. No, it couldn't be John. John was in his grave. Of course it was possible for two men to look alike even to similar scars—but this man didn't have John's expression."

"I dismissed the thought, but my son was not convinced. He had heard too much about Zombies. So I secured permission to open John's grave. We dug. The grave was empty!"

"But someone must have learned about my secret investigation, for when we went to claim John's body—he was missing. The native owner knew nothing about him. He said we must have been dreaming or seeing a ghost."

And the skeptic replies: "Of course, they were dreaming. Perhaps the grave was robbed by body snatchers who sold it to medical students for dissecting purposes."

A Strange Experience

But—how about the Japanese corporal who confidentially revealed his strange experience in Northern China, to an English friend, within the past year? Here is the story:

For many miles northwest of Peiping, a Japanese regiment had advanced, finally nearing the objective not far from Mongolia. But before they could reach this point, they had to pass through a small mountain village situated in a tiny valley. The road was narrow, bounded by two hills which commanded the road. On the cliff-like sides of these two hills were huge rocks, ideal for machine-gun nests which could mow down any soldiers entering the village.

There were several of these nests, and many Japanese soldiers had been killed. Finally the Japanese commander brought up his artillery and gave orders to blow those machine-gun nests to bits. They were demobilized. Any Chinese gunners in them were buried under a pile of rocks and debris. All but one. Heavy shells could not stop this gun which kept firing whenever any Japanese soldiers came into view.

Something had to be done to silence that gun. Finally, a Japanese corporal with one man, was ordered to climb the rear of the hill and try to sneak down on the Chinese gunner and destroy him.

The whole regiment waited. An hour passed. Then the corporal and his man were seen crawling on their bellies down from the top of the hill. They had to be careful. The slope was steep.

It was an intense moment. If the Chinese gunner saw them, he would be able to swing his gun around and exterminate them with ease.

But the gun kept shooting at the road below whenever a Japanese soldier appeared in the open. The Japanese purposely coaxed the fire so the gunner would not notice the men creeping down behind him.

Tense Moments

It was not until the corporal was fifty feet away that he could barely see the Chinese gunner protected under a heavy arch of rocks sitting at his gun which pointed through a small opening.

The corporal was afraid to hurl a hand grenade for fear that the explosion might loosen the dirt beneath his own body and he and his man would slide to death. And it would be difficult to throw a grenade in the small archway. Furthermore, the gunner was so protected that even a pistol shot would have to be too accurate. There wasn't enough of the body exposed to view. No—the only way was to knife him, or shoot him at close range.

Suddenly, as the corporal crawled closer, a small rock under him, gave way. It rolled down the slope and bounced on the archway.

The Japanese corporal's heart almost stopped from fear. If the gunner heard it and looked around, it would be sure death for the Japanese.

But the gunner didn't budge. He seemed to be glued to the spot, his eyes on the opening in front of him.

Forty feet . . . thirty feet . . . twenty . . . ten . . . They were upon him. Now to rush him. The corporal drew his gun, and the private grabbed his trench knife in readiness.

Both men jumped at the same time, and inches away the corporal shot the Chinese in the back while the private plunged a knife into the filthy neck. The gunner seemed to slump over his gun from the force of impact—and the two Japanese satisfied they had killed him, jumped to the top of the archway and shouted to their comrades.

A cry of victory went up from the troops below as they ran into the road in answer to the brave corporal.

But something was wrong. The gun supposed to be silenced, began firing again, and several Japanese soldiers dropped in the road below.

The corporal, infuriated, dropped behind the archway and this time hurled a hand grenade tearing head and arms from the Chinese gunner.

(Continued on page 127)



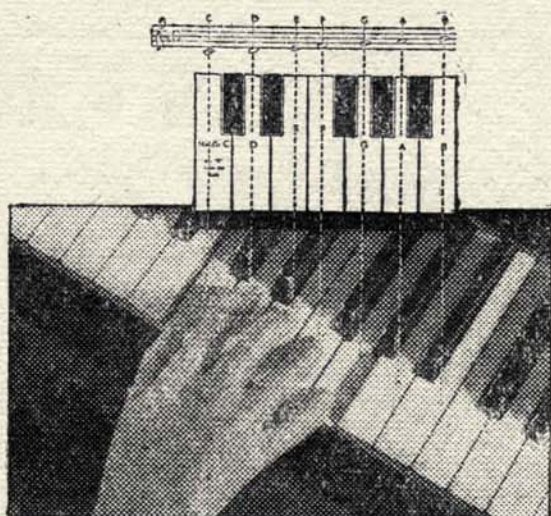
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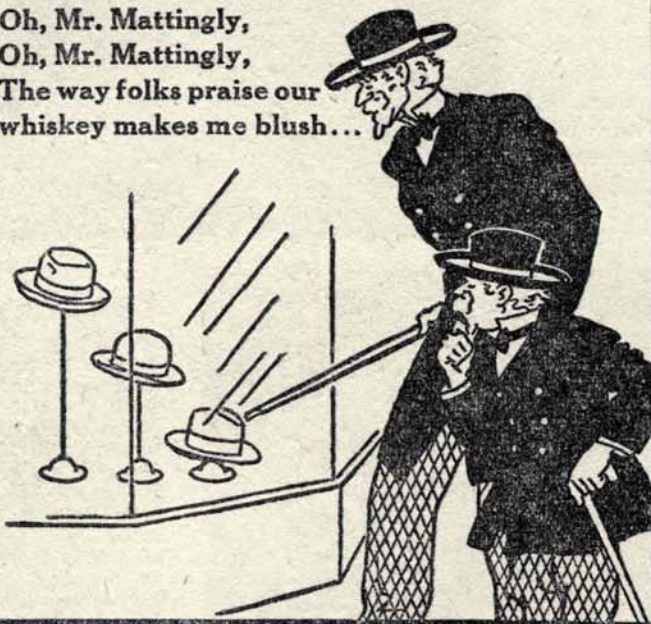
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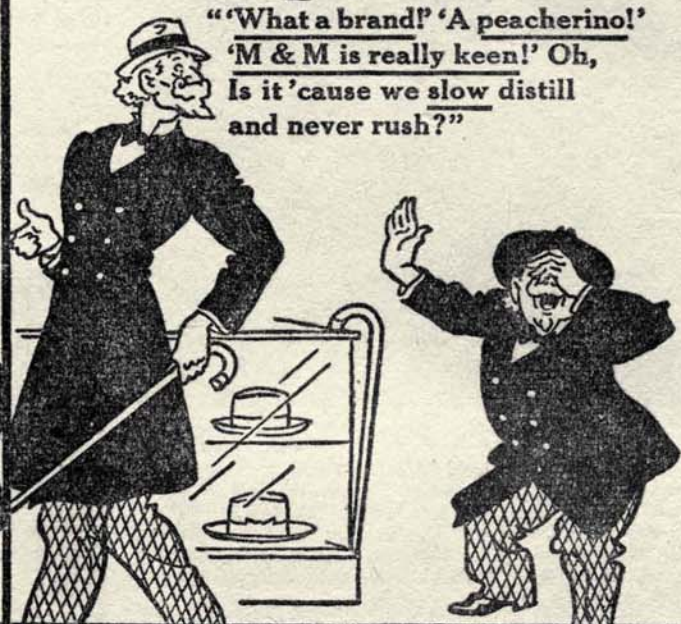
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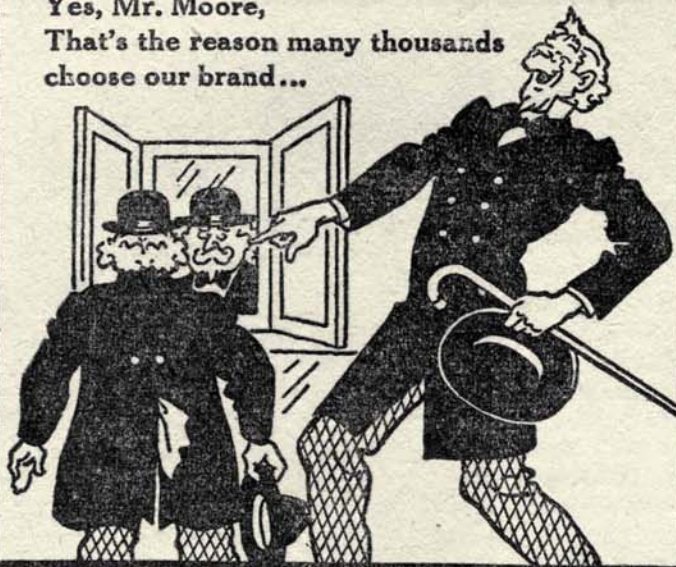
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Death Has Five Guesses

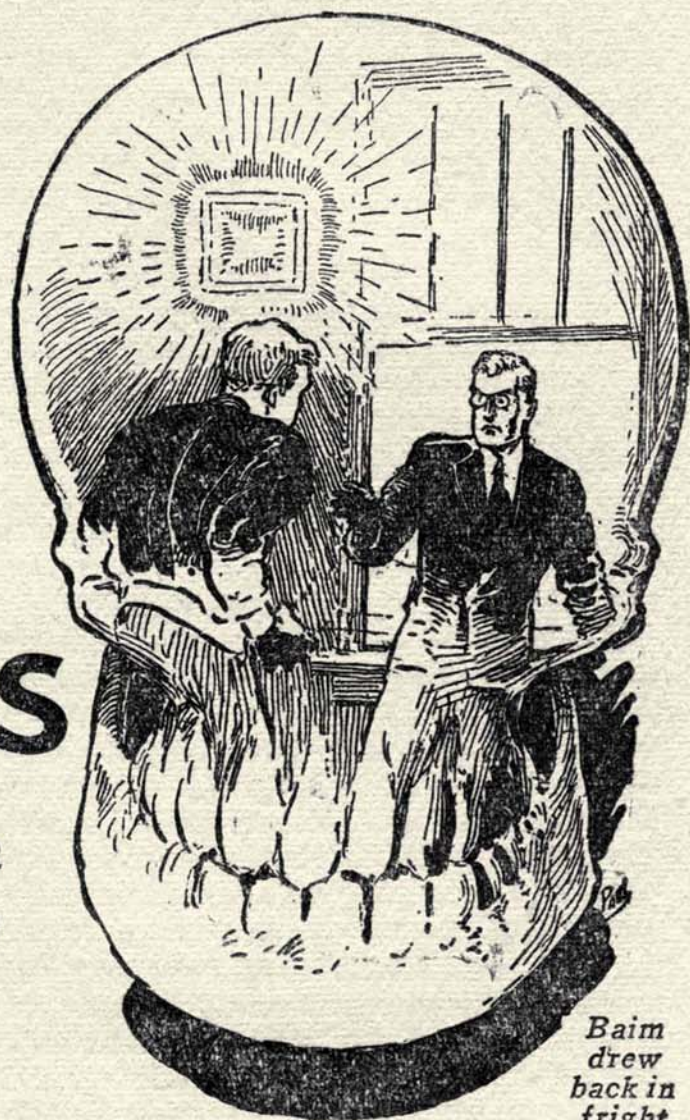
*What Frightening Force in
Clinton's Brain Wove the
Scarlet Pattern of His
Mysterious Fate?*

By ROBERT BLOCH

Author of "The Curse of the House," "Feast in the Abbey," etc.

THE real horror lay in the fact that Harry Clinton was just an ordinary college boy. He sported a disreputable suede jacket, the left under-arm well-worn from the rubbing of the textbooks he carried. He was given to whistling popular song hits, and he owned most of the latest "swing" phonograph recordings. He drove a nondescript car, and worried about the price of gasoline. He played basketball on the second team, he liked ketchup on his hamburgers, he—oh well, he was an ordinary college boy, just one of thousands. And yet he knew grinning Fear.

Harry Clinton had gone to West-



*Baim
drew
back in
fright*

ern Tech for two years when Professor Baim began his experiments. Like the other students in Psychology 4, Clinton participated in the initial trials. It was just a routine matter, nothing more.

Professor Baim was interested in the Rhine Experiments—the Duke University studies in extra-sensory perception. He summarized his intentions to the Psych. 4 class briefly, at the outset.

The Rhine Experiments were an effort to determine the laws of Chance and their relation to human guesses.

"You've heard of hunches, and intuition, and telepathy," Baim told his

class the first day. "Well, here's your chance to find out what it's all about. I have here a pack of twenty-five playing-cards. They are special cards—five suits of five each. There are five stars, five circles, five squares, five sets of wavy lines, and five crosses. They are single black line figures on a white background, and these five were more or less chosen for their simplicity and their symbolic association with ordinary conscious and subconscious images.

"Is that clear enough? Five sets of cards; square, circle, cross, star wavy lines. I'll pass these sets out and allow you to examine them."

He did so, and Harry Clinton looked at the little cards with the rest. Professor Baim continued:

"The basic idea in using these cards is simple. The operator holds one of them up to the subject, with only the back visible. The subject closes his eyes, allows his mind to become a blank. Then he calls out the name of the first of the five symbols to cross his consciousness. He may actually seem to see a square, or a circle, or a star, as the case may be. Perhaps the operator and the subject are seated back to back, so that there is no possibility of facial expression or eye reflection on the part of the operator informing the subject, or giving him a hint."

THE class exhibited tepid interest, Clinton included.

"According to the experiments, the score of correct guesses in most cases is five. This seems natural enough, because if you were to go through the deck of twenty-five and call out 'star' each time you'd have to be right five times, since there are five cards in each of the five suits.

"But—and this is a very large 'but'—in the course of these experiments it was discovered that some students were able to guess perhaps ten or twelve cards correctly. Upon repeating the tests over a period of days, many achieved scores of fifteen or even twenty. Certain people seemed peculiarly apt guessers. While the scores of others varied from high to low, there were some who *persist-*

ently turned in the same or nearly the same high score.

"This has led to the setting up of a theory of extra-sensory perception—an unknown quantity which may, or may not, account for certain people having the knacks in making hunches or foreseeing the future, or even for receiving telepathic communications."

Harry Clinton was thinking about betting on football games.

"Certain students submitted to months of testing. It was discovered, then, that odd effects on their scoring ability could be brought about by getting them drunk; or by testing them when they were fatigued, or excited, or stimulated. Some of them scored higher when told they were making progress; others dropped woefully.

"It was ascertained that guessing ability has nothing to do, apparently, with the actual intelligence of a person.

"But—and this is important—the variance of reaction under differentiated forms of stimuli implied that there was a definite power affected—Rhine has chosen to call this power the power of extra-sensory perception. I believe that Professor Rhine has shown the way to opening up new frontiers of the human mind. And with your permission, I should like to call upon a few volunteers today."

Clinton was one of the five chosen. He watched three others sit blindfolded in a chair while Professor Baim held up the cards one by one and waited for them to call out a symbol. He sorted the cards into piles of correct and incorrect guesses.

Clinton noticed that the first subject, a girl, guessed very swiftly. The second hesitated often. The third went quite fast for a space, slowed down, and regained speed toward the end.

Clinton sat in the chair, placed the warm blindfold over his eyes, and began guessing.

"Square — circle — circle — star — square — curly line — star — cross — cross — curly line — cross — no, that's a square — now a cross — circle —"

He felt queer. It was hardly his own voice droning. It was hardly his brain that saw in the darkness the rapid flickering images of circles and squares and stars and curly lines and crosses. Something directed him, made him speak. He completed the test in forty-two seconds.

BAIM said nothing. He discoursed on individual peculiarities, mentioned how some guessers were fast, others slow, others erratic. He also intimated that memory, that is, the knowledge that one had already called "star" five times and consequently would not call it again during the same testing—might subconsciously influence the guessing.

"A real definitive score," he said, "can be obtained only after seven consecutive tests. Ah—Mr. Clinton, would you care to go through the pack again six times for the benefit of the class?"

Clinton agreed, sat down in the chair again.

The images came swiftly.

The period bell rang as the tests were concluded, and the students trooped out.

Baim's bulky figure leaned close as Clinton rose and removed his bandages.

"Mr. Clinton, I'd like to have a word with you."

"Yes, Professor."

"Mr. Clinton, I should very much appreciate your working with me this semester on these tests. Your initial scores, I might say, are—ah, remarkably high. This might be a fluke, an accident; but any extraordinary ability should be cultivated. Of course, this will be credited to your regular work, you know."

"Why, sure. Why not? Say, what is my average, anyway?"

"Twenty-three, Mr. Clinton. An amazing twenty-three."

Clinton worked with Professor Baim for months. The experiments broadened in their technique. New methods were employed. One night Baim called Clinton on the phone and requested him to guess the cards over the wire. They worked in separate rooms for several days; worked

with screens between them; worked in total darkness; conducted the tests with telegraph keys, and called the guesses in French and German. It made no difference; Clinton showed his remarkable aptitude throughout.

At first, for Clinton, it was a lark. Then it became a problem to wonder over. After a time it reached the stage of a competition, a battle of wits against the Unknown. And finally, during the third month, it was drudgery.

Baim was writing a monograph on his work with Clinton. Although the professor endeavored to repress his enthusiasm, Clinton knew that he was highly pleased with the venture.

The extra-classroom nature of the studies kept Clinton very busy. Baim's demands on his time, and his insistence on undertaking tests at odd hours and under odder circumstances began after a while to annoy him.

There were days when Clinton went through the deck thirty times running. He grew sick of the symbols, exasperated. Even the surprisingly high percentage of totally correct scores no longer seemed a worthy goal to him. Despite all the work, he understood no more of his unusual power or ability than he had at the beginning. He merely closed his eyes and the pictures came; the five symbols loomed up almost automatically.

He tried guessing ordinary playing cards and failed miserably. He lost two dollars on the home team in a football game. He had no luck in guessing examination questions. Undoubtedly, this peculiar sixth sense was uncontrollable.

By the conclusion of the third month it was worse than that. He left his daily tests with headaches. He began to experience periods of moody irritability. Moreover, he had a tendency to forget trifles and details. A sort of mild amnesia seemed to steal over him at times, so that he was unable to account for his actions for half-hours at a time.

Usually, after his testing periods, he would have difficulty in concen-

trating on anything else for quite a while. The symbols stuck with him, and closing his eyes he would involuntarily conjure up images of crosses and stars and curly lines and squares and circles. They floated in his head, and when he opened his eyes again an hour had passed, somehow.

This got worse. Clinton told no one, for he himself did not quite know what was the matter. But in the middle of May he suddenly experienced an attack of amnesia which lasted for three days.

* * * *

IT WAS so hard to think.

Harry Clinton—that was his name—had gone into a room and now his hands were around something soft.

He had done many things in the past three days and somehow he couldn't think just what they were. Or rather, a part of him didn't want to remember what they were. They had been bad things.

Was he at home, in the rooming-house, in his own bed? Was this all a nightmare?

No, it was real. He was standing with his hands around something soft, and three days had passed.

Three days of school, of study, of work. Why couldn't he remember them?

It was even hard to see. He felt as though his eyes were closed, as though he was taking the tests—guessing at the brightly-colored mental pictures of crosses, stars, curly lines, squares, and circles.

That was why he couldn't remember. It had something to do with the tests, and the way they had affected him lately.

He must think back now. For a week or so he had been taking forty turns through the deck a day. Professor Baim had asked him to, as a final experiment to be written up for his almost completed monograph. Each day's testing had left him with a terrific headache.

More than that, he had been unable, lately, to shake off the recurring visions of the five symbols. He

would leave the college and one or more of the symbols would come and stay in his brain. He would fall asleep thinking of the cross, and awake with the same thought static in his mind. That had caused his memory lapse. But where was he now?

He stared down again at his hands, and gasped as mists cleared.

He—Harry Clinton—remembered. He remembered that first evening, when he had thought he was going to be sick, and had stepped into the alley. He had leaned over the refuse-box as consciousness dissolved into a swirling mist. But now he could recall what happened.

He had leaned over the refuse-box, had gazed into it and seen what lay at the bottom. Two broken sticks lay there; probably torn from some packing-crate. They lay there, one atop the other—and they had formed a cross.

A cross. Clinton had picked them up—that is, his hands had done so. Clinton, himself, did not exist. There were only hands, and something guiding them which was not Clinton, or Clinton's brain—some alien force that felt drawn to the symbol of the cross. The hands picked up the sticks, fumbled about in the trash-box for a length of wire, bound the sticks into a permanent crucifix-shape. Then Clinton's body had walked down the narrow alley, and Clinton's eyes had kept looking at the base of the cross, where the stick was broken and ended in a jagged point. Clinton's eyes had gloated.

But Clinton himself had hated what he was doing because he did not understand, and hated the other part of consciousness which drove him to fashion a symbol he wished to forget; so that as he walked, he grew very angry. Every time he closed his eyes the cross was there, in his forehead.

It was burning up there, just the way it did when Clinton guessed the cards at school. Only there were no cards this time, and still the cross remained. The memory was haunting him, making him do absurd

things like fashioning this wooden crucifix with the pointed end. If only Clinton could forget the cross! He closed his eyes quite tightly, lurching down the alley, wishing that the two crossed iron bars against his brain would go away. He must not see the cross—

Clinton opened his eyes and saw the man coming down the alley from the opposite direction. It was dark, but the moon was up, and he saw that the man wore black skirts. For a moment he feared he was delirious, and then he realized the truth. It was a priest. Coming near, he saw the moonlight pick out a glittering pattern on the priest's chest. A glittering pattern—of a cross.

The golden cross dangled, it swayed from side to side as the priest walked. The moon was cruelly bright, so that its rays made of the crucifix a blinding blur. Clinton looked and could not tear his eyes away. But he wanted to; he wanted to with all his soul. He did not want to do what he—

And then Clinton stepped over to the priest just as he passed, and from behind his back he drew the wooden crucifix with the pointed end, and drove the point straight into the priest's chest.

He walked away, his empty hands clutching at the air with a sort of joy born of the fact that they were empty; they no longer held the

cross. There was joy in his mind, too, for it was empty of the symbol which, when normal, he so deeply respected, but which, in his dream-like state of abnormality, obsessed him. No cross now, only that tingling emptiness—his whole brain was empty and free.

Harry Clinton went home and slept; slept gratefully without dreams. For he was empty, and when he awoke he had forgotten the night before with the cross and the priest.

In the class the next day when the cards were called Clinton scored only seven. Two squares had come, two circles, one curly line, and two stars. But no cross. Never, during the entire test, had he called out a cross or thought of one.

There were times when, his eyes closed, he had almost consciously tried to conjure up the vision of the cross in his mind. He had failed. He knew that there were five cross-marks in the pack of twenty-five, and yet in honesty he could not call aloud an image that he did not see.

This Clinton now remembered.

HE remembered the following day—the day he guessed the five stars correctly. It was the day of the astronomy lecture too. Had that affected him? He wondered.

He had called the five stars correctly. After leaving class the headache had come.

[Turn Page]

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He walked through the cool streets of dusk, his feet moving automatically along unbidden paths. Thoughts refused to come. He stopped in at a drug store and bought some aspirin, then meandered along the streets again. He had not wanted to go to his room. He caught himself straining to hear the sound of cars passing, the conversation of others in the street. For some reason he was particularly anxious to be amidst noise and lights and people—anything that might arrest his attention and ease the ache in his temples; the ache that was all dull nothingness in which a bright star blazed.

Erratic footsteps followed his gregarious urge until he was moving along downtown. The welcome clangor of street-cars began to fade, and only constant blinking enabled him to keep his eyes open. Abnormal nictation seemed the sole salvation at the moment when now even sounds failed to hold his attention.

GRATEFULLY he had entered the vaudeville theater, sunk into a loge seat, and willed himself to watch the final reels of the motion picture flashing across the screen. At the conclusion he experienced a nasty shock when the trademark of the producing company flickered into view with its crest of five stars. The theater was nearly deserted at supper-hour, and in the darkness Harry Clinton fought a losing battle with the five-pointed image that thrust itself again and again between his inner eyes and his outer vision of the screen.

The brassy orchestra heralded the stage show, and for a few minutes Clinton again knew peace.

But the star act—Clinton had winced when the master of ceremonies announced the turn as such—was the personal appearance of a movie queen.

The whole thing was madness. Movie star—she swept onto the stage against a background of a glittering silver-foil star. Garishly lighted, the five silver points gleamed painfully, and Clinton could not move his eyes away. The image mocked him, and

the blonde girl before it, undulating about the stage in sequins, seemed a part of the star itself.

Clinton bit his hand to keep from screaming.

His mind groped for a thought—any thought to hold his attention, to swerve it from the thought which engulfed him. And in the darkness he lost.

He rose to his feet and started down the aisle before the act was over. No longer was he conscious, aware of thought or action. He passed the boxes and entered the passageway which led backstage. Some part of him was moving slowly, cautiously. All he saw was a great glittering star—a star which was emblazoned on his mind and which obtruded between any other image and reality. He must get rid of the star in his mind.

Cautiously he moved along the deserted backstage corridor. The act was over, the hallway momentarily deserted. He walked slowly down toward the door under the light, paused before it.

There was a gold star on the door of the dressing-room. Its five points were saw-teeth biting into his brain. He stared at it, then pushed the door open.

The blond girl was sitting at her dressing-table, eating. Clinton did not see her. He saw a star.

There was a heavy, blunt-ended mirror on the table. There was a large, sturdy walking-stick in the corner. Clinton did not see them. He saw a stage-property artificial mace in a wall-stand. Its head was studded with five-points. A star. Clinton ignored the other weapons. Walking slowly, he seized the mace as the door closed behind him.

The girl turned around. Clinton saw the star burn brighter. She rose, said something. Clinton saw the star move closer. It was close enough to reach now. Some part of him held the mace. And then dream fused with reality as he brought the mace down. One, two, three, four, five times—each time a point fell away from the core of torment in his brain. Then there was only a blur

that became red; red as the pool on the floor where something lay.

Clinton turned, opened the door, walked out back through the passage and resumed his seat in the theater. He must have fallen asleep, for when he awoke the last show was over, and the house-lights were going up.

He did not remember how he had come to this place, or what he had done here. And he did not think about stars.

The next day in class he had refused to take the test, telling Professor Baim that he was indisposed. At the time he did not know any reason for doing so, except that he felt vaguely tired and incapable of effort.

He asked to be excused early and went home. He did not even read the papers; had he done so he might have seen the accounts of the mysterious death of Father Pornelski who had been murdered by an unknown religious fanatic two days before. He could have read of a second murder which was already making national headlines; the strange death of a well-known motion picture actress.

HARRY CLINTON was oblivious to all; he only knew that he felt tired, and quite unaccountably he did not wish to continue with the extra-sensory perception experiments. They had given him these recent headaches and peculiar lapses of memory, he felt sure. Today he was glad that his mind was free. Once in his room he lay back in the windowless gray and almost revelled in the blankness of his brain.

Funny—since taking up these psych. experiments, he'd thought a hell of a lot about his own mind. Before that he had never even known he had one. Oh, well. It was pleasant and soothing here. Closing his eyes he watched the two dancing lines of parallel curlicues—two gray curly lines wriggling before his naked brain. Two curly lines. What did they remind him of?

Sally.

Of course, Sally. Sally's curly hair. He sure was forgetful these

days—why, he hadn't seen Sally for over a week. Mrs. Johnson, the landlady, had left a note under his door three days ago saying that Sally had called the night he was out somewhere, walking off his headache. The poor kid; she was worrying about him! Why had he neglected her that way?

NOW that he thought of it—thought of gray lines—he could not stop. This psych. stuff was sure developing his concentration, all right. It seemed as though he just had to go and see Sally. She would be home now, Thursday afternoon. Her biology lab. period was over at eleven on Thursdays. He must drop in and surprise her. He had to surprise Sally. Sally with the curly yellow hair. Two curls in back. Long golden curls. Old-fashioned girl. Curls.

He was already walking down the street, turning up. A light misty rain was falling, and glancing into the street Clinton noticed the tread-markings caused by the tires of a skidding car. They left two curly lines. He was going to see Sally.

One block more. The curly lines. They got mixed up with his thoughts of Sally. Two golden caterpillars on her neck. On her white neck. Two curly lines.

Ring the bell. No one in? Open the door, her room is in front.

Curly fringes on the carpet beneath his feet. Curly fingers knocking on the door. Curly lines of two red lips to kiss.

"Oh Harry—where have you been. I've worried so—"

Curls. On her neck. Think about Sally, not the curls.

"What are you staring at? You look—funny."

Must feel the curls. Don't want to, but must. Can't think until they are felt.

Can't think at all. . . .

It was only after touching the curls that Harry Clinton did begin to think. It was then that he remembered everything—the death of the priest, and the star, and the obsessive mingling of Sally and the

curly lines. Clinton thought of all these things because he had been shocked into doing so—shocked by gazing down at his own hands clutching Sally's curls! Sally's curls which his hands had wound about her neck and tightly pressed to strangle her to death!

Clinton knew then. Even as he ran through the streets he knew. He could think only too clearly now. He was in the grip of some obsession concerning the five symbols on the extra-sensory perception cards. The strain of guessing those symbols with closed eyes, day after day for months, in a variety of experiments; his facility in conjuring up the proper mental images—these things had induced some abnormal condition whereby one or more of the symbols now came to his mind without conscious effort to recall any. It was sheer habit to think of a star, a cross, a curly line, a square, or a circle.

Telepathy—what was it? What peculiar force in the brain aided him in his guessing? Was it a psychic power, or an alien intelligence prompting him?

Whatever the cause, the matter had passed all controllable bounds. He was helpless to fend off the power of the symbols; for symbols they had become.

When preyed upon by the recurring image of the cross, he had encountered the priest, and some part of his brain had identified the holy man with the cause of his torment. He had killed the priest to erase from his mind the cross symbol. And had not instinct guided him to choose a symbolic weapon?

In the vaudeville theater he had seen the star. Out of several weapons in her dressing-room he was prompted by the symbolism of the mace-head.

Was he actually guilty of such crimes? Or was he a dual personality? Some subconscious murdering impulse had guided him very cunningly in the execution of his killings. Was he insane?

He must have been, to kill Sally. Good God, he had killed her! That

was why he was running. No one had seen him. Her curly hair, two curly lines on her neck, writhing through his brain—he was forced to erase the crawling curly lines from memory. Symbolically, he did so with her death.

That was another thing. He had not taken the test. Merely thinking of Sally, this last time, had caused identification. And there was still the circle and the square to go. Would he murder two images of transference because of them?

He panted with exhaustion, lying on the bed in his room. Would he murder two more? What could he do to prevent it?

HAD to drop psych. That was certain. And keep from anything which might even vaguely be associated with the last two symbols. He could not, he fancied, play poker any more with the three boys down the hall. They sat at a square table, and there were four of them. It might suggest the square. Or the chips might suggest the circle. A fat man could evoke the circle image. Or even the phrase, "a square-shooter," applied to some man, was liable to set him off.

Yet he needed a square-shooter. He had to tell someone about this. That was the way they did it in psychiatry, wasn't it? The old idea of the confessional. Whom could he trust? Whom could he tell? He would state the case hypothetically, of course, and get the dope straight. But whom?

Professor Baim. Yes, Baim was the logical man. He knew about all this. Clinton would have to see him to drop the class, anyway. And perhaps Baim knew of a way out.

There had to be a way out, at once. Murders could not continue. He was going crazy. It was all insane, and at any minute the torturing images might recur to blot out all thought and sanity.

Why not go now?

Clinton rose and walked swiftly out of the room, out of the house, down the street to the Campus Square.

It was four o'clock.

He had murdered Sally at two-thirty.

It was an absurd thought. An hour and a half ago he had murdered a woman. Now he was going to—what was he going to do? Oh yes, see Baim. Good old Baim. He would know a way to help. His classes were over, he'd be working in his office.

The wide office door loomed before him. It was very wide. Almost square.

Clinton walked in. Baim was sitting at the desk, his square shoulders hunched over—

Oh no. Mustn't think of squares. "Hello, Professor."

Don't think about the square jaw. "I wanted to talk to you."

Think of something else, quick. What's he doing? Oh yes, he has the cards out on the desk. Why—the cards are square!

"Your cards are square, Professor."

WHAT was he saying? *The cards are square.* Professor Baim's cards are square. Professor Baim taught me to think of squares. Professor Baim will play square with me. Professor Baim is a square.

"What's the matter? Don't be afraid, Professor."

Professor Square—no, Baim—he's afraid. He's backing away. What do I look like? What am I doing? He's backing up to the window. The window, think of the window, for God's sake, think of anything but Professor Baim is a square. Think of the window.

The window is square.

Baim is backed against the open square window.

Square against square.

Square accounts.

"Professor, I—"

He's falling. Twisting around. Twisting—why he isn't square any more. He's all crumpled.

Well. That was easy. It's gone. Simple. Now, to get rid of that damned circle.

Clinton was almost happy as he slipped out the side entrance. He

walked slowly back to the rooming-house, even listened to the newsboy on the corner of Hale and Jefferson shouting about the "Extra! Reedalla bouta moider! Collichgoil-foundead! Extraaah!"

He didn't buy a paper. He knew all about the murder. He knew all about lots of murders. But what worried him was that he didn't know about the next murder.

There had to be one. There simply had to be one. He must get rid of the circle. Then he'd be all right again. Somehow he realized that these things were not right, but it was all necessary. A man couldn't live when his brain was on fire with incomprehensible images. This peculiar power of his—this psychic power of guessing correctly—it was somehow alien, and evil.

Poor old Baim; had he actually realized the full extent of the forces he had tampered with? There was certainly a lot to it he hadn't suspected. Must have had his suspicions though, when he went out the window. Perhaps he knew now.

This stuff was all from across the Border. Clinton didn't know and couldn't control it. Funny idea. Suppose this was really some "extra-sensory perception" of his, this guessing faculty he'd developed. Suppose it were, and that it was not meant for men. Something or some one might guard it. Or perhaps this faculty merely opened up a new part of the mind in such a way that the old mind was unable to govern or control the actions of its augmented self?

There was dark stuff here, and Clinton didn't want to tamper with it. Do the murder, get rid of the last image, forget about it all—erase the circle and be free.

Whom to sacrifice?

The moonfaced husband of Mrs. Johnson, the landlady? Rogers, the kid with the shaved head and the round skull?

The circle is the symbol of infinity, eternity. All life is a circle. Curved space. Curved existence. Round. Round and black.

Up the stairs, around to the room.

Think deliberately of the circle, so that it may provide a key to the way out. Release the brain.

This would be a planned, deliberate murder. Why not? There was a gun in the drawer. A gun.

Clinton took out the gun, filled it with round cartridges, gazed down the round hole in the muzzle.

He was trying hard to think of the person he meant to kill, and strangely no thought came; although by this time he could see the circle quite plainly in his mind, and for the first time he actually rejoiced in the pain. The blazing circle coruscated, swirling round and round and round as he looked down the dark round muzzle of the gun.

It was then that he heard the sounds from below, and the tramp of footsteps on the stairs.

Sluggishly he realized the truth. They were coming for him. After all, four murders—he was in a daze, must have left many clues. They were coming for him now.

But they couldn't come. They couldn't lock him up now. Not now, when the circle was squeezing tightly around his brain. He must get rid of the circle first, find peace. Because they would shut him away for the rest of his life in a madhouse,

and he couldn't stand it there with nothing but the thought of the circle. They were coming up the stairs.

Who? What? Clinton rose and stepped forward wildly, gun in hand. The circle of his room.

Something bright arrested his attention. Something bright, and round like the circle in his head. He tried to see it. Yes. Yes. He could see it. It was the mirror—the silver circle of the mirror over his bureau. He stared into it.

In the silver circle he saw himself—his own round head.

The knocking on the door came.

But Clinton stared into the silver circle at his own round head. Clinton stared into the dark circle of the gun-muzzle. He put the round muzzle to his round head and looked into the round mirror as though for confirmation.

Yes, it was right.

"Open in the name of the law."

He had found the fifth symbol. It was the circle of life—back to himself. He was the last symbol. Once he erased that he could find peace.

Harry Clinton sent a circular bullet into his circular brain.

Whatever the source of his extra-sensory perception, he had guessed right at the end.

NEXT ISSUE

FOR FEAR OF LITTLE MEN

A Novelet of Tribal Wraiths

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Change to
Mint Springs
and keep the
change!

A PRODUCT
OF GLENMORE

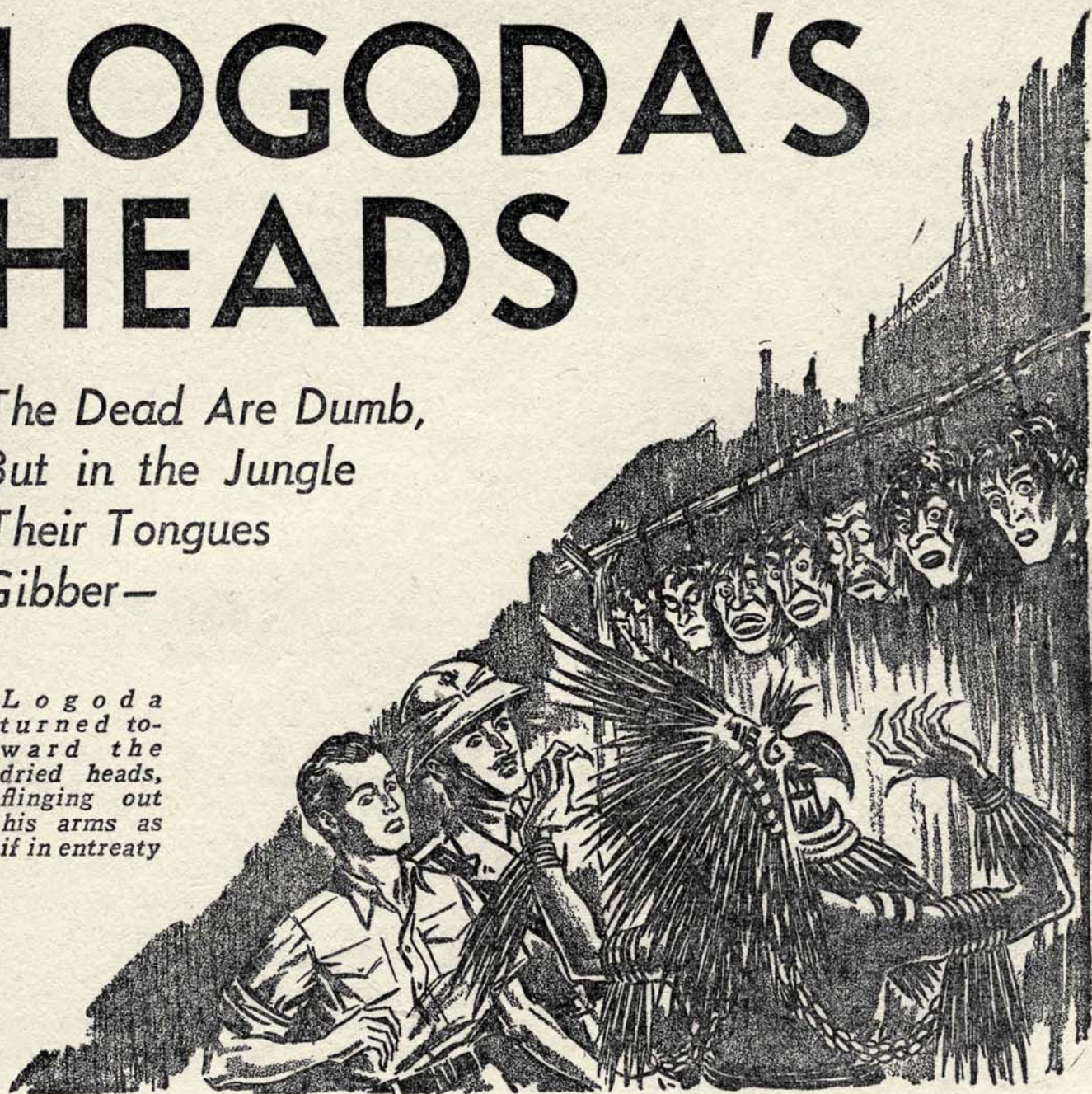
Ask for this quality Kentucky Straight Bourbon. It's easy on your pocketbook.

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90 PROOF
ONE PINT

LOGODA'S HEADS

*The Dead Are Dumb,
But in the Jungle
Their Tongues
Gibber—*

*Logoda
turned to-
ward the
dried heads,
flinging out
his arms as
if in entreaty*



By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Author of "Eyes of the Serpent," etc.

"ALL right, here we are," said Major Crosby, halting. He glanced briefly at the four men who formed his body-guard, and then turned to young Henley.

"Now, Henley," he said, "I don't want any interruption from you. I'm going to handle this thing myself, understand? You know how much influence these native witch-doctors have, and it's no go angering them needlessly. And Logoda's a bad one—he and his filthy heads."

Henley flushed beneath his bronze. "One of those heads may be all that's

left of my brother," he said shortly.

"Logoda knows too much to bother an Englishman," returned the major.

"My brother knew his magic. He knew too much of his magic," said Henley, staring through the bushes toward the squat hut of the witch-doctor, Logoda.

"Well, for God's sake, don't start anything."

The major started forward, but Henley caught his arm.

"Wait, Major," he said.

"What is it?" Crosby snapped.

"Talk to him in his own language," said Henley.

"I haven't mastered the native tongue yet," returned the major crossly.

"I didn't mean that," said Henley significantly.

"Oh," said the major, startled for a moment. Then he shook his head moodily and strode on across the clearing, with Henley at his heels.

A few natives scattered warily as they came on, leaving the door to Logoda's hut clear. There was a collection of trophies about the entrance; some of them were not pleasant to look at. Major Crosby reflected briefly upon England's inability to stamp out certain practises. Then he turned and curtly ordered his men to stay outside.

Major Crosby lifted the matted doorway and went inside, followed by Henley. It took them a minute to get used to the darkness. Then they saw Logoda—and the ugly, stained heads dried and strung along on poles above the witch-doctor's head.

Major Crosby had been in the hut once before, not so very long ago. There were ten heads then; now there were eleven. The additional one, in the light of Bob Henley's disappearance, made him uneasy.

LOGODA, an ungainly hulking man, sat on his haunches in a corner. He wore an odd head-dress, apparently hastily put on at the intimation of visitors, but apart from this and a few streaks of none too fresh paint, he looked very little different from his fellow natives. Yet the man was a very tangible and irritating power to the English stationed at the nearby post.

"Logoda, a white man is missing," said the major, coming directly to the point of his visit. "He was known to have come in your direction. A week ago, seven days. Seven times the sun he came this way. Where is he?"

"No white man," said Logoda serenely.

He moved the upper half of his body slightly forward, so that his outflung arms came to rest on palms pressed flat against the ground.

"No white man," he said again.

"Logoda," Crosby replied sternly, "many men will come to search. They will burn your village, they will put you in a room with many bars."

Surprisingly, Henley interrupted. "You're wasting our time, Major. I told you to talk to him in his own language. Will you let me talk to him?"

"No," snapped the major angrily. "I'm convinced you're needlessly worried. We've no actual proof that your brother's dead, and there's—"

Once again Henley interrupted him. "I'm going to look at those heads," he said, and before Crosby could stop him, he stepped forward.

Instantly Logoda pointed furiously at Henley and shouted, "You go 'way!"

But Henley paid no attention. He stood under the dried heads, gazing at them imperturbably amid Logoda's furious mouthings and Major Crosby's nervous scrutiny.

Suddenly Henley caught his breath, and expelled it again with a sharp, hissing sound.

"Bob!" he muttered.

Major Crosby expostulated. "Now, look here, Henley—Logoda's not had time to dry a head. Only a week, hardly that."

Henley looked at him. "You are too new here, Major Crosby," he said. "I know how quickly they can dry them."

There was something about Henley's cold stare that stayed Crosby's angry words on his lips.

Abruptly Logoda crossed his hands before his face, bowed his head quickly to the ground, and turned toward the dried heads, flinging out his arms as if in entreaty to them, his palms turned upward toward them. From his mouth issued a stream of weird gibberings.

"He is talking to the heads," said Henley softly. "Do not be surprised if they answer."

"You don't actually believe in this tom foolery, Henley?" demanded the major incredulously.

"Yes," said Henley simply. "I do. Bob and I have studied it a long

time. There is more in it than you think."

Logoda's gibbering quickly ceased. For a moment there was complete silence. The major was about to stalk out, disgusted—

Then there sounded, as if from far away, a shrill, strange tittering—it grew—it mounted—until it sounded all about them . . . and then it subsided—it subsided into a subdued whispering, which was lost, gradually lost, in silence again.

Above them, Logoda's heads were

The major's skepticism was shaken and he was trying not to show it.

"Will you do me this favor, Major? I will not bother you again, on my honor. I want to talk to Logoda's heads, and I do not want him to hear what I say to them.

The simplicity with which this request was uttered was in strange contrast to the weirdness of its content.

The major swallowed with some difficulty and asked in a thick voice, "Will you go after that?"

"Yes, I'll go then," replied Henley.

Coming in the **NEXT ISSUE**

THE MAN WHO WAS DEATH

A Complete Novelet of Supernatural Powers

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**



PLUS MANY OTHER GRIPPING TALES OF THE UNCANNY

swaying back and forth, though no one had touched them.

"Good God," whispered the major.

"Major," said Henley in a strong voice, "will you take Logoda out of the hut for a minute or two. I want to be alone here."

LOGODA sat smiling to himself, his eyes half-closed, rocking back and forth a little, like a drowsy joss.

"But I thought you promised—" stammered the major.

"Nothing will be disturbed, I promise you. Logoda will have no cause for complaint."

"But then why must he go out?"

"Very well."

The major stepped to the doorway and signalled to two of his men, knowing they would be needed to move Logoda, who would certainly not go of his own volition. Despite his furious protests, Logoda was dragged to the doorway, where he rose and walked, so that his natives might not see this indignity being visited on him.

Henley was left alone in the hut, and his whispering voice drifted eerily to Major Crosby and his men, who looked questioningly at each other. Henley was speaking in a native tongue.

Only a few minutes elapsed. Then Henley stepped from the hut, his eyes glittering strangely, and Logoda, after glaring at him in murderous fury, entered his home again.

"I'm ready now, Major," said Henley.

"Very well," said the major in a low voice.

The five men made their long way back to the English post, where they arrived just in time for supper.

For a long time Henley and the major did not speak to each other, but over coffee at last, Henley spoke.

"How much would you people give to be rid of Logoda?" he asked softly.

Major Crosby was startled, but resolved not to show it. "A good deal, I think. But if you're planning to go back there to get him, stop now. We could have potted him a long time ago, but for an Englishman to be seen anywhere around when a witch-doctor dies suspiciously is certain to cause an insurrection—and a nasty one."

"Will you guarantee me passage to the coast?" pursed Henley.

"I told you it was impossible, Henley. I need all my men here, anyway."

"I didn't mean protection—I meant money. I have money waiting for me in Cairo—but that's a hellish long way off. I want to get there, and I haven't enough money."

"Oh," said the major, softening. "I had no idea. Well, you don't have to earn it," he went on, smiling now. "I'm glad to be able to help you out."

"And get rid of me," murmured Henley, smiling, too. "But there's one more favor I want to ask of you before I leave."

"And that?" asked the major apprehensively.

"I want you to tie me to my cot tonight, and set a guard over me," said Henley grimly.

"What an extraordinary request!" exclaimed Major Crosby.

"Nevertheless an earnestly meant one. Will you, Major?"

"Well . . . if you insist. And will you go then, in the morning?"

"Yes."

"I feel very odd about this," said the major some hours later, as he sat beside the cot to which Henley had been tied.

"You needn't," said Henley shortly. "I'm just protecting myself. Logoda's afraid of me. He isn't afraid of you, if you'll forgive my saying it. He knows I know too much. Bob did, too, and Bob's a dried head now. I have decided I don't want to die, and there are so many ways of bringing about my death for a man like Logoda. He could call me, and I would have to follow. Or he could come himself—maybe a little white dog, or a snake—almost anything. That's the why of all this, you see."

"Really, Henley," said the major somewhat stiffly, "you're talking like the most impossible madman. I find it difficult to believe that you're the same man who has been so sane in my company the previous weeks."

"Yes, I understand that," said Henley. "I know how you feel. I am sorry to disturb the waters like that. Most of us like them smooth. But there are things like this, and they do happen. Bob and I have studied them too long to deny them. You don't have to believe them—you'd probably be better off without knowing anything about them."

WHO made that laughter this afternoon, and who made those heads sway like that?" asked the major curiously, and obviously against his will.

"I told you—Logoda spoke to them, and they answered."

"That's not telling me a thing," replied the major.

"Perhaps not. That's the only answer, though. Now—forgive me—I've got a long journey ahead of me, and I've got to get some sleep."

In the morning Henley awoke to find the major bending over him, untying the ropes that bound him.

"Good morning," Henley said. "Hope you slept well."

"Thanks," said the major, smiling. "I didn't."

"Did anyone call for me in the

night?" asked Henley, his voice grim.

"No one. I watched for dogs and snakes and things, and even considered potting a couple of birds that got lost in the clearing."

"Good old major. Thanks. I think it was too late for Logoda to send for me."

"I suppose you'll be leaving directly after breakfast?" asked the major then.

"I am expecting a message—and as soon as it comes, I'll be on my way."

"From whom?" asked Major Crosby bluntly.

"That I can't say. But you have scouts out, haven't you?"

"Of course," said Crosby shortly. Henley smiled.

THEY were at breakfast when one of the major's scouts came dodging out into the clearing. He was excited and breathless from the exertion of running.

"There's my message, I think," said Henley calmly. "How about my passage money, Major?"

The scout came up to them. "Logoda's dead," he said jerkily. "He's been killed!"

"Killed!" echoed the major. "Good God! I hope there weren't any Englishmen around. How'd it happen?"

"The natives say his magic killed him. It's a queer business, sir. His guards didn't see anyone enter the hut or anyone come out. They heard Logoda talking to his heads and they heard the heads answer. Then they heard him cough once or twice, and finally he slept. That was all. This morning he was found in his hut with his throat torn out—terribly mutilated, cut and torn as if by thousands of rats.

"Go back and find out whatever else you can," ordered Major Crosby.

The scout disappeared at once into the jungle.

Crosby turned to Henley. "You were on the bed all night, Henley. I know. And you guessed Logoda would be killed. Who did it?" the question came angrily.

"I did," said Henley simply.

Major Crosby flushed. "Nonsense," he snapped.

Henley stood up, smiling. Yet his voice was grim.

"I told you it wasn't good to know about forbidden things. But I'll tell you. You heard Logoda and those heads and you will recall my insistence on being left alone with them. Logoda knew how to make them talk and sway back and forth. *I knew how to make them rend and tear!*"

NEXT ISSUE

THE UNHEAVENLY TWIN

A Story of Vampire Thralldom by ROBERT BLOCH

MEET "SAWTOOTH HARRY" THE RAZOR BLADE PHILOSOPHER



Says Sawtooth Harry: LISTEN, BROTHER... DON'T YOU NEVER, NEVER TRY A TWENTY GRAND RAZOR BLADE! WHY? BECAUSE THEY'RE HABIT-FORMING

Once yuh feel tha perfect leather-stropped edge against yer face and them whiskers slide off like magic, yer DOOMED. Yuh won't be able ta get along without 'em. Keep away from them handy self-help displays on the counters of Drug and other stores.

Beware of

TWENTY GRAND
RAZOR BLADES

WORLD'S PRODUCTS COMPANY, Spencer, Ind.



Cursed

This is the tale they tell, O King: that ere the royal banners were lifted upon the tall towers of Chaldean Ur, before the Winged Pharaohs reigned in secret Aegyptus, there were mighty empires far to the east. There in that vast desert known as the Cradle of Mankind—aye, even in the heart of the measureless Gobi—great wars were fought and high palaces thrust their minarets up to the purple Asian sky. But this, O King, was long ago, beyond the memory of the oldest sage; the splendor of Imperial Gobi lives now only in the dreams of minstrels and poets. . . .

The Tale of Sakhmet the Damned.

CHAPTER I

The Gates of War

IN THE gray light of the false dawn the prophet had climbed to the outer wall of Sardopolis, his beard streaming in the chill wind. Before him, stretching across the broad plain, were the gay tents and pavilions of the besieging army, emblazoned with the scarlet symbol of the wyvern, the winged dragon beneath which King Cyaxares of the north waged his wars.

Already soldiers were grouped about the catapults and scaling-towers, and a knot of them gathered beneath the wall where the prophet

A Complete Novelet of Inhuman Bondage

Someone flung a shield. Kialeh

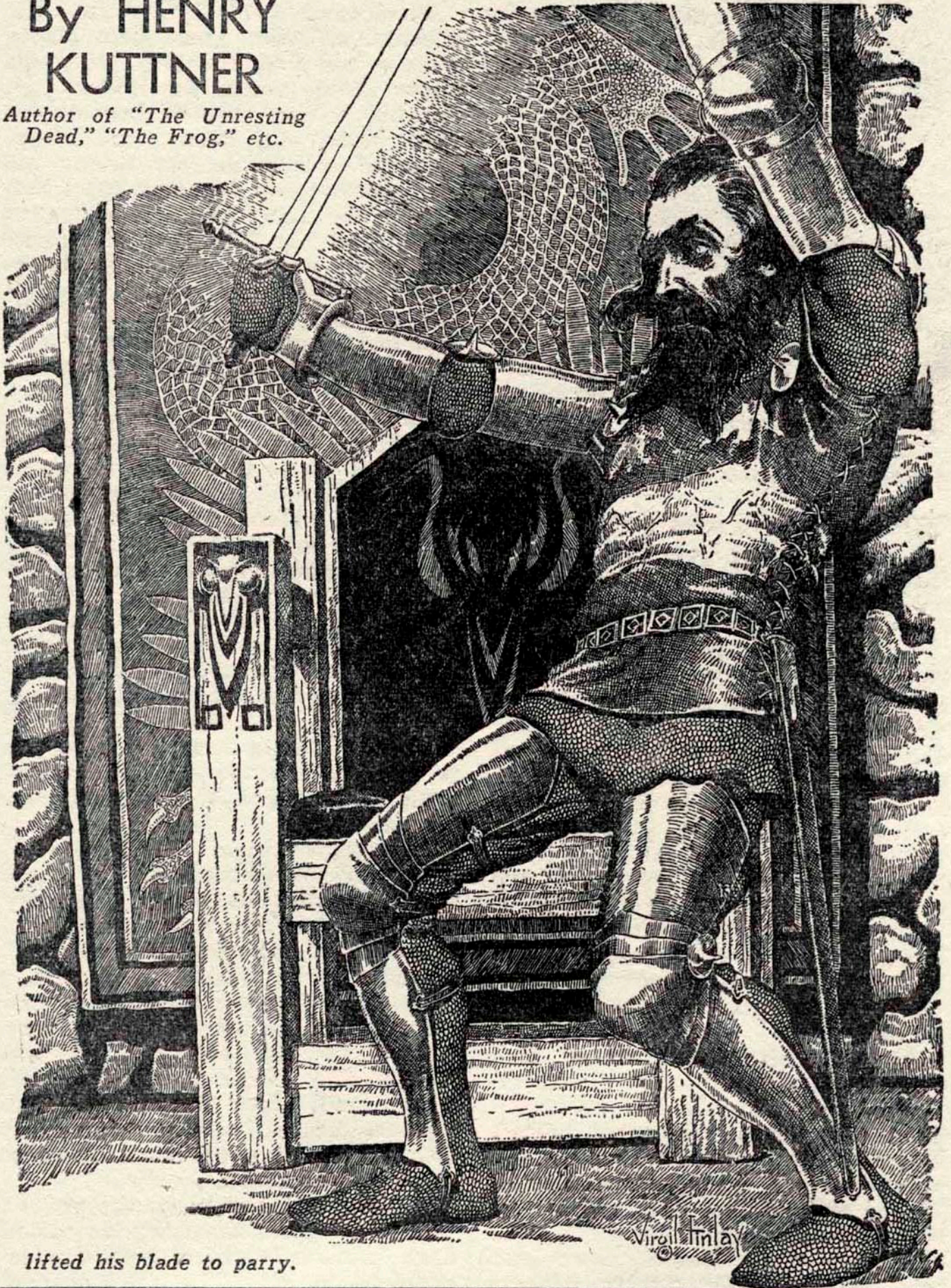


Pan Plays His Pipes and A Rushing Wind

Be the City

By HENRY
KUTTNER

Author of "The Unresting
Dead," "The Frog," etc.



lifted his blade to parry.

Roars Through the Cradle of Mankind!

stood. Mocking, rough taunts were voices, but for a time the white-bearded oldster paid no heed to the gibes. His sunken eyes, beneath their snowy penthouse brows, dwelt on the far distance, where a forest swept up into the mountain slopes and faded into blue haze.

His voice came, thin piercing.

"Wo, wo unto Sardopolis! Fallen is Jewel of Gobi, fallen and lost forever, and all its glory gone! Dese-cration shall come to the altars, and the streets shall run red with blood. I see death for the king and shame for his people. . . ."

For a time the soldiers beneath the wall had been silent, but now, spears lifted, they interrupted with a torrent of half-amused mockery. A bearded giant roared:

"Come down to us, old goat! We'll welcome you indeed!"

THE prophet's eyes dropped, and the shouting of the soldiers faded into stillness. Very softly the ancient spoke, yet each word was clear and distinct as a sword-blade.

"Ye shall ride through the streets of the city in triumph. And your king shall mount the silver throne. Yet from the forest shall come your doom; an old doom shall come down upon you, and none shall escape. He shall return—*He*—the mighty one who dwelt here once. . . ."

The prophet lifted his arms, staring straight into the red eye of the rising sun. "*Evohe! Evohe!*"

Then he stepped forward. Two steps and plunged. Straight down, his beard and robe streaming up, till the upthrust spears caught him, and he died.

And that day the gates of Sardopolis were burst in by giant battering-rams, and like an unleashed flood the men of Cyaxares poured into the city, wolves who slew and plundered and tortured mercilessly. Terror walked that day, and a haze of battle hung upon the roofs. The defenders were hunted down and slaughtered in the streets without mercy. Women were outraged, their children impaled, and the glory of Sardopolis faded in a smoke of shame

and horror. The last glow of the setting sun touched the scarlet wyvern of Cyaxares floating from the tallest tower of the king's palace.

Flambeaux were lighted in their sockets, till the great hall blazed with a red fire, reflected from the silver throne where the invader sat. His black beard was all bespattered with blood and grime, and slaves groomed him as he sat among his men, gnawing on a mutton-bone. Yet, despite the man's gashed and broken armor and the filth that besmeared him, there was something unmistakably regal about his bearing. A king's son was Cyaxares, the last of a line that had sprung from the dawn ages of Gobi when the feudal barons had reigned.

But his face was a tragic ruin.

Strength and power and nobility had once dwelt there, and traces of them still could be seen, as though in muddy water, through the mask of cruelty and vice that lay heavy upon Cyaxares. His gray eyes held a cold and passionless stare that vanished only in the crimson blaze of battle, and now those deadly eyes dwelt on the bound form of the conquered king of Sardopolis, Chalem.

In contrast with the huge figure of Cyaxares Chalem seemed slight; yet, despite his wounds, he stood stiffly upright, no trace of expression on his pale face.

A strange contrast! The marbled, tapestried throne-room of the palace was more suitable to gay pageantry than this grim scene. The only man who did not seem incongruously out of place stood beside the throne, a slim, dark youth, clad in silks and velvets that had apparently not been marred by the battle. This was Necho, the king's confidant, and, some said, his familiar demon. Whence he had come no one knew but of his evil power over Cyaxares there was no doubt.

A little smile grew on the youth's handsome face. Smoothing his curled dark hair, he leaned close and whispered to the king. The latter nodded, waved away a maiden who was oiling his beard, and said shortly:

"Your power is broken, Chalem.

Yet are we merciful. Render homage, and you may have your life."

For answer Chalem spat upon the marble flags at his feet.

A curious gleam came into Cyaxares' eyes. Half inaudibly he murmured, "A brave man. Too brave to die. . . ."

Some impulse seemed to pull his head around until he met Necho's gaze. A message passed in that silent staring. For Cyaxares took from his side a long, bloodstained sword; he rose, stepped down from his dais—and swung the brand.

CHALEM made no move to evade the blow. The steel cut through bone and brain. As the dead man fell, Cyaxares stood looking down without a trace of expression. He wrenched his sword free.

"Fling this carrion to the vultures," he commanded.

From the group of prisoners near by came an angry oath. The king turned to face the man who had dared to speak. He gestured.

A pair of guards pushed forward a tall, well-muscled figure, yellow-haired, with a face strong despite its youth, now darkened with rage. The man wore no armor, and his torso was criss-crossed with wounds.

"Who are you?" Cyaxares asked with ominous restraint, the sword bare in his hand.

"King Chalem's son—Prince Raynor."

"You seek death?"

Raynor shrugged. "Death has come close to me today. Slay me if you will. I've butchered about a dozen of your wolves, anyway, and that's some satisfaction."

Behind Cyaxares came a rustle of silks as Necho moved slightly. The king's lips twitched beneath the shaggy beard. His face was suddenly hard and cruel again.

"So! Well, you will crawl to my feet before the next sun sets." He gestured. "No doubt there are torture vaults beneath the palace. Sudrach!"

A brawny, leather-clad man stepped forward and saluted. "You have heard my will. See to it."

"If I crawl to your feet," Raynor said quietly, "it'll be to hamstringing you, bloated toad."

The king drew in his breath with an angry sound. Without another word he nodded to Sudrach, and the torturer followed Raynor as he was conducted out. Then Cyaxares went back to his throne and mused for a time, till a slave brought him wine in a gilded chalice.

But the liquor had no power to break his dark mood. At last he rose and went to the dead king's apartments, which the invaders had not dared to plunder for fear of Cyaxares' wrath. Above the silken couch a gleaming image hung from its standard—the scarlet wyvern, wings spread, barbed tail stiffly upright. Cyaxares stood silently staring at it for a space.

He did not turn when he heard Necho's soft voice. The youth said, "The wyvern has conquered once again."

"Aye," Cyaxares said dully. "Once again, through vileness and black shame. It was an evil day when we met, Necho."

Low laughter came. "Yet you summoned me, as I remember. I was content enough in my own place, till you sent your summons."

Involuntarily the king shuddered. "I would Ishtar had sent down her lightnings upon me that night."

"Ishtar? You worship another god now."

Cyaxares swung about, snarling. "Necho, do not push me too far! I have still some power—"

"You have all power," the low voice said. "As you wished."

For a dozen heart-beats the king made no answer. Then he whispered, "I am the first to bring shame upon our royal blood. When I was crowned I swore many a vow on the tombs of my fathers—and for a time I kept those vows. I ruled with truth and chivalry—"

"And you sought wisdom."

"Aye. I was not content. I sought to make my name great, and to that end I talked with sorcerers—with Bleys of the Dark Pool."

"Bleys," Necho murmured. "He

was learned, in his way. Yet—he died.”

The king’s breathing was unsteady. “I know. I slew him—at your command. And you showed me what happened thereafter.”

“Bleys is not happy now,” Necho said softly. “He served the same master as you. Wherefore—” The quiet voice grew imperious. “Wherefore live! For by our bargain I shall give you all power on earth, fair women and treasure beyond imagination. But when you die—you shall serve me!”

The other stood silent, while veins swelled on his swarthy forehead. Suddenly, with a bellowing, inarticulate oath, he snatched up his sword. Bright steel flamed through the air—and rebounded, clashing. Up the king’s arm and through all his body raced a tingling shock, and simultaneously the regal apartment seemed to darken around him. The fires of the flambeaux darkened. The air was chill—and it whispered.

Steadily the room grew blacker. Now all was midnight black, save for a shining figure that stood immobile, blazing with weird and unearthly radiance. Little murmurs rustled through the deadly stillness. The body of Necho shone brighter, blindingly. And he stood without moving or speaking, till the king shrank with a shuddering cry, his blade clattering on the marble.

“No!” he half sobbed. “For *His* mercy—*no!*”

“He has no mercy,” the low voice came, bleak and chill. “Therefore worship me, dog whom men call king. *Worship me!*”

And Cyaxares worshiped. . . .

CHAPTER II

Blood in the City

PRINCE RAYNOR was acutely uncomfortable. He was stretched upon a rack, staring up at the dripping stones of the vault’s roof, and

Sudrach, the torturer, was heating iron bars on the hearth. A great cup of wine stood nearby, and occasionally Sudrach, humming under his breath, would reach for it and gulp noisily. “A thousand pieces of gold if you help me escape,” Raynor repeated without much hope.

“What good is gold to a flayed man?” Sudrach asked. “That would be my fate if you escaped. Also, where would you get a thousand golden pieces?”

“In my apartment,” Raynor said. “Safely hidden.”

“You may be lying. At any rate, you’ll tell me where this hiding place is when I burn out your eyes. Thus I’ll have the gold—if it exists—without danger to myself.”

Raynor made no answer, but instead tugged at the cords that bound him. They did not give. Yet Raynor strained until blood throbbed in his temples, and was no closer to freedom when he relaxed at last.

“You’ll but wear yourself out,” Sudrach said over his shoulder. “Best save your strength. You’ll need it for screaming.” He took an iron bar from the fire. Its end glowed redly, and Raynor watched the implement with fascinated horror. An unpleasant way to die. . . .

But as the glowing bar approached Raynor’s chest there came an interruption. The iron door was flung open, and a tall, huge-muscled black entered. Sudrach turned, involuntarily lifting the bar as a weapon. Then he relaxed, his eyes questioning.

“Who the devil are you?” he grunted.

“Eblik, the Nubian,” said the black, bowing. “I bear a message from the king. I lost my way in this damned palace, and just now blundered to my goal. The king has two more prisoners for your hands.”

“Good!” Sudrach rubbed his hands. “Where are they?”

“In the—” The other stepped closer. He fumbled in his belt.

Then, abruptly, a blood-reddened dagger flashed up and sheathed itself in flesh. Sudrach bellowed, thrust out clawing hands. He doubled up slowly, while his attacker leaped

free, and then he collapsed upon the dank stones and lay silent, twitching a little.

"The gods be praised!" Raynor grunted. "Eblik, faithful servant, you come in time!"

Eblik's dark, gargoylish face was worried. "Let me—" He slashed the cords that bound the prisoner. "It wasn't easy. When we were separated in the battle, master, I knew Sardopolis would fall. I changed clothes with one of Cyaxares' men—whom I slew—and waited my chance to escape. It was by the merest luck that I heard you had offended the king and were to be tortured. So—" He shrugged.

Raynor, free at last, sprang up from the rack, stretching his stiffened muscles. "Will it be easy to escape?"

"Perhaps. Many are drunk or asleep. At any rate, we can't stay here."

The two slipped cautiously out into the corridor. A guard lay dead, weltering in his blood, not far away. They hurried past him, and silently threaded their way through the palace, more than once dodging into passages to evade detection.

"If I knew where Cyaxares slept, I'd take my chances on slitting his throat," Raynor said. "Wait! This way!"

At the end of a narrow hall was a door which, pushed open, showed a moonlit expanse of garden. Eblik said, "I remember—I entered this way. Here—" He dived into a bush and presently emerged with a sword and a heavy battle-ax; the latter he thrust in his girdle. "What now?"

"Over the wall," Raynor said, and led the way. The high rampart was not easy to scale, but a spreading tree grew close to it, and eventually the two had surmounted the barrier. As Raynor dropped lightly to the ground he heard a sudden cry, and, glancing around, saw a group of men, armor gleaming in the moonlight, racing toward him. He cursed softly.

Eblik was already fleeing, his long legs covering the yards with amazing speed. Raynor followed, though

his first impulse was to wait and give battle. But in the stronghold of Cyaxares such an action would have been suicidal.

Behind the pair the pursuers bayed menace. Swords came out flashing. Raynor clutched his comrade's arm, dragged him into a side alley, and the two sped on, frantically searching for a hiding-place. It was Eblik who found sanctuary five minutes later. Passing the blood-smeared, corpse-littered courtyard of a temple, he gasped a hasty word, and in a moment both Raynor and Eblik were across the moonlit stretch and fleeing into the interior of the temple.

From a high roof hung a golden ball, dim in the gloom. This was the sacred house of the Sun, the dwelling place of the primal god Ahmon. Eblik had been here before, and knew the way. He guided Raynor past torn tapestries and overthrown censers, and then, halting before a golden curtain, he listened. There was no sound of pursuit.

"Good!" the Nubian warrior said. "I've heard of a secret way out of here, though where it is I don't know. Maybe we can find it."

HE drew the curtain aside, and the two entered the sanctuary of the god. Involuntarily Raynor whispered a curse, and his brown fingers tightened on his rapier hilt.

A small chamber faced them, with walls and floor and ceiling blue as the summer sky. It was empty, save for a single huge sphere of gold in the center.

Broken upon the gleaming ball was a man.

From the wall a single flambeau cast a flickering radiance on the twisted, bloodstained body, on the white beard that was dappled with blood. The man lay stretched across the globe, his hands and feet impaled with iron spikes that had been driven deeply into the gold.

Froth bubbled on his lips. His hoary head rolled; eyes stared unseeingly. He gasped, "Water! For the love of Ahmon, a drop of water!"

Raynor's lips were a hard white

line as he sprang forward. Eblik helped him as he pried the spikes free. The tortured priest moaned and bit at his mangled lips, but made no outcry. Presently he lay prostrate on the blue floor. With a muttered word, Eblik disappeared, and came back bearing a cup which he held to the dying man's mouth.

The priest drank deeply. He whispered, "Prince Raynor! Is the King safe?"

Swiftly Raynor answered. The other's white head rolled.

"Lift me up—swiftly!"

Raynor obeyed. The priest ran his hands over the golden sphere, and suddenly, beneath his probing fingers, it split in half like a cloven fruit, and in its center a gap widened. A steep staircase led down into hidden depths.

"The altar is open? I cannot see well. Take me down there. They cannot find us in the hidden chamber."

Raynor swung the priest to his shoulders and without hesitation started down the steps, Eblik behind him. There was a low grating as the altar swung back, a gleaming sphere that would halt and baffle pursuit. They were in utter darkness. The prince moved cautiously, testing each step before he shifted his weight. At last he felt the floor level beneath his feet.

SLOWLY, a dim light began to grow, like the first glow of dawn. It revealed a bare stone vault, roughly constructed of mortised stones, strangely at variance with the palatial city above. In one wall a dark hole showed. On the floor was a circular disk of metal, its center hollowed out into a cup. Within this cup lay a broken shard of some rock that resembled gold-shot marble, half as large as Raynor's hand. On the shard were carved certain symbols the prince did not recognize, and one that he did—the ancient looped cross, sacred to the sun-god.

He put the priest down gently, but nevertheless the man moaned in agony. The maimed hands clutched at air.

"Ahmon! Great Ahmon . . . give me more water!"

Eblik obeyed. Strengthened, the priest fumbled for and gripped Raynor's arm.

"You are strong. Good! Strength is needed for the mission you must undertake."

"Mission?"

The priest's fingers tightened. "Aye; Ahmon guided your steps hither. You must be the messenger of vengeance. Not I. I have not long to live. My strength ebbs. . . ."

He was silent for a time, and then resumed, "I have a tale to tell you. Do you know the legend of the founding of Sardopolis? How, long ago, a very terrible god had his altar in this spot, and was served by all the forest dwellers . . . till those who served Ahmon came? They fought and prisoned the forest god, drove him hence to the Valley of Silence, and he lies bound there by strong magic and the seal of Ahmon. Yet there was a prophecy that one day Ahmon would be overthrown, and the bound god would break his fetters and return to his first dwelling place, to the ruin of Sardopolis. The day of the prophecy is at hand!"

The priest pointed. "All is dark. Yet the seal should be there—is it not?"

Raynor said, "A bit of marble—"

"Aye—the talisman. Lift it up!" The voice was now peremptory. Raynor obeyed.

"I have it."

"Good. Guard it well. Lift the disk now."

Almost apprehensively the prince tugged the disk up, finding it curiously light. Beneath was nothing but a jagged stone, crudely carved with archaic figures and symbols. A stone—yet Raynor knew, somehow, that the thing was horribly old, that it had existed from the dawn ages of Gobi.

"The altar of the forest god," said the priest. "He will return to this spot when he is freed. You must go to the Reaver of the Rock, and give him the talisman. He will know its meaning. So shall Ahmon be avenged upon the tyrant. . . ."

Suddenly the priest surged upright, his arms lifted, tears streaming from the blind eyes. He cried, *Ohé—ohé!* Fallen forever is the House of Ahmon! Fallen to the dust. . . ."

He fell, as a tree falls, crashing down upon the stones, his arms still extended as though in worship. So died the last priest of Ahmon in Gobi.

Raynor did not move for a while. Then he bent over the lax body. A hasty examination showed him that the man was dead, and shrugging, he thrust the marble shard into his belt.

"I suppose that's the way out," he said, pointing to the gap in the wall, "though I don't like the look of it. Well—come on."

He squeezed himself into the narrow hole, cursing softly, and Eblik followed.

CHAPTER III

The Reaver of the Rock

WITH slow steps Cyaxares paced his apartment, his shaggy brows drawn together in a frown. Once or twice his hand closed convulsively on his sword-hilt, and again the secret agony within him made him groan aloud. But not once did he glance at the scarlet symbol of the wyvern that hung above his couch.

Going to a window, he looked down over the city, and then his gaze went out to the plain and the distant, forested mountains. He sighed heavily.

A voice said, "You may well look there, Cyaxares. For there is your doom, unless you act swiftly."

"Is it you, Necho?" the king asked heavily. "What new shamefulness must I work now?"

"Two men go south to the Valley of Silence. They must be slain ere they reach it."

"Why? What aid can they get there?"

Necho did not answer at first. His voice was hesitant when he said, "The gods have their own secrets. There is something in the Valley of Silence that can send all your glory and power crashing down about your head. Nor can I aid you then. I can only advise you now and if you follow my advice—well. But act I cannot and must not, for a reason which you need not know. Send out your men therefore, with orders to overtake those two and slay them—swiftly!"

"As you will," the king said, and turned to summon a servitor.

"**S**OLDIERS follow us," Eblik said, shading his eyes with a calloused hand. He was astride a rangy dun mare, and beside him Raynor rode on a great gray charger, red of nostril and fiery of eye. The latter turned in the saddle and looked back.

"By the gods!" he observed. "Cyaxares has sent half an army after us. It's lucky we managed to steal these mounts."

The two had reined their horses at the summit of a low rise in the forest. Back of them the ground sloped to the great plain and the gutted city of Sardopolis; before them jagged mountains rose, covered with oak and pine and fir. The Nubian licked dry lips, said thirstily, "The fires of all hells are in my belly. Let's get out of this wilderness, where there's nothing to drink but water."

"The Reaver may feed you wine—or blood," Raynor said, "Nevertheless, our best chance is to find this Reaver and seek his aid. A mercenary once told me of the road."

He clapped his heels against the charger's flanks, and the steed bounded forward. In a moment the ridge had hidden them from the men of Cyaxares. So the two penetrated deeper and deeper into the craggy, desolate wilderness, a place haunted by wolves and great bears and, men whispered, monstrous, snake-like cockadrills.

They went by snow-peaked mountains that lifted white cones to the

blue sky, and they fled along the brink of deep gorges from which the low thunder of cataracts rose tumultuously. And always behind them rode the pursuers, a grim and warlike company, following slowly but relentlessly.

But Raynor used more than one stratagem. Thrice he guided his charger up streams along which the wise animal picked its way carefully; again he dislodged an avalanche to block the trail. So it came about that when the two rode down into a great, grassy basin, the men of Cyaxares were far behind.

On all sides the mountains rose. Ahead was a broad, meadow-like valley, strewn with thickets and green groves. Far ahead the precipice rose in a tall rampart, split in one place into a narrow canyon.

To the right of the gorge lifted a great gray rock, mountain-huge, bare save for a winding trail that twisted up its surface to a castle upon the summit. Dwarfed by distance, the size of the huge structure could yet be appreciated—a castle of stone, incongruously bedecked with fluttering, bright banners and pennons.

Raynor pointed. "He dwells there. The Reaver of the Rock."

"And here comes danger," Eblik said, whipping out his battle-ax. "Look!"

From a grove of nearby trees burst a company of horsemen, glittering in the afternoon sunlight, spears lifted, casques and helms agleam. Shouting, they rode down upon the waiting pair. Raynor fingered his sword-hilt, hesitating.

"Put up your blade," he directed Eblik. "We come in friendship here."

The Nubian was doubtful. "But do they know that?"

Nevertheless he sheathed his sword and waited till the dozen riders reined in a few paces away. One spurred forward, a tall man astride a wiry black.

"Are you tired of life, that you seek the Reaver's stronghold?" he demanded. "Or do you mean to enter in his service?"

"We bear a message," Raynor countered. "A message from a priest of Ahmon."

"We know no gods here," the other grunted.

"Well, you know warfare, or I've misread the dents in your armor," Raynor snapped. "Sardopolis is fallen! Cyaxares has taken the city and slain the king, my father, Chalem of Sardopolis."

TO his amazement a bellow of laughter burst from the troop. The spokesman said, "What has that to do with us? We own no king but the Reaver. Yet you shall come safely before him, if that is your will. It were shameful to battle a dozen to two, and the rags you wear aren't worth the taking."

Eblik started like a ruffled peacock. "By the gods, you have little courtesy here! For a coin I'd slit your weasand!"

The other rubbed his throat reflectively, grinning. "You may have a trial at that later, if you wish, my ragged gargoyle. But come, now, for the Reaver is in hall, and tonight he rides forth on a raid."

With a nod Raynor spurred his horse forward, the Nubian at his side, and, surrounded by the men of the Reaver, they fled across the valley to the castle. Thence they mounted the steep, dangerous path up the craggy ramp, till at last they crossed a drawbridge and dismounted in a courtyard.

So they took Raynor before the Reaver of the Rock.

A great, shining, red-cheeked man he was, with grizzled gray beard and a crown set rakishly askew on tangled locks. He sat before a blazing fire in a high-roofed stone hall, an iron chest open at his feet. From this he was taking jewels and golden chains and ornaments that might have graced a king's treasury, examining them carefully, and making notes with a quill pen upon a parchment on his lap.

He looked up; merry eyes dwelt on Raynor's flushed face and touseled yellow hair.

"Well, Samar, what is it now?"

"Two strangers. They have a message for you—or so they say."

Suddenly the Reaver's face changed. He leaned forward, spilling treasure from his lap. "A message? Now there is only one message that can ever come to me . . . speak, you! Who sent you?"

RAYNOR stepped forward confidently. From his belt he drew the broken shard of marble, and extended it.

"A priest of Ahmon bade me give you this," he said. "Sardopolis is fallen."

For a heartbeat there was silence. Then the Reaver took the shard, examining it carefully. He murmured, "Aye. So my rule passes. For long and long my fathers held the Rock, waiting for the summons that never came. And now it has come."

He looked up. "Go, all of you, save you two. And you, Samar—wait, for you should know of this."

The others departed. The Reaver shouted after them, "Summon Delphia!"

He turned to stare into the fire. "So I, Kialeh, must fulfill the ancient pledge of my ancestors. And invaders are on my marches. Well—"

There came an interruption. A girl strode in, dark head proudly erect, slim figure corseted in dented armor. She went to the Reaver, flung a blazing jewel in his lap.

"Is this my guerdon?" she snarled. "Faith o' the gods, I took Ossan's castle almost single-handed. And my share is less than the share of Samar here!"

"You are my daughter," the Reaver said quietly. "Shall I give you more honor, then, in our free brotherhood? Be silent. Listen."

Raynor was examining the girl's face with approval. There was beauty there, wild dark lawless beauty, and strength that showed in the firm set of the jaw and the latent fire of the jet eyes. Ebony hair, unbound, fell in ringlets about steel-corseleted shoulders.

The girl said, "Well? Have you had your fill of staring?"

"Let be," the Reaver grunted. "I

have a tale for all of you . . . listen."

His deep voice grew stronger. "Ages on ages ago this was a barbarous land. The people worshipped a forest-god called—" his hand moved in a queer quick sign—"called Pan. Then from the north came two kings, brothers, bringing with them the power of the sun-god, Ahmon. There was battle in the land then, and blood and reddened steel. Yet Ahmon conquered.

"The forest-god was bound within the Valley of Silence, which lies beyond my castle. The two kings made an agreement. One was to rule Sardopolis, and the other, the younger, was to rear a great castle at the gateway of the Valley of Silence, and guard the fettered god. Until a certain word should come. . . ."

The Reaver weighed a glittering stone in his hand. "For there was a prophecy that one day the rule of Ahmon should be broken. Then it was foretold that the forest-god should be freed, and should bring vengeance upon the destroyers of Sardopolis. For long and long my ancestors have guarded the Rock—and I, Kialeh, am the last. Ah," he sighed. "The great days are over indeed. Never again will the Reaver ride to rob and plunder and mock at gods. Never—what's this?"

A man-at-arms had burst into the hall, eyes alight, face fierce as a wolf's. "Kialeh! An army is in the valley!"

"By Shaitan!" Raynor cursed. "Cyaxares' men! They pursued us—"

The girl, Delphia, swung about. "Gather the men! I'll take command—"

Suddenly the Reaver let out a roaring shout. "No! By all the gods I've flouted—no! Would you grudge me my last battle, girl? Gather your men, Samar—but I command!"

Samar sprang to obey. Delphia gripped her father's arm. "I fight with you, then."

"I have another task for you. Guide these two through the Valley of Silence, to the place you know. Here—" he thrust the marble shard at the prince. "Take this. You'll

know how to use it when the time comes."

Then he was gone, and curtains of black samite swayed into place behind him.

Raynor was curiously eying the girl. Her face was pale beneath its tan, and her eyes betrayed fear. Red battle she could face unflinchingly, but the thought of entering the Valley of Silence meant to her something far more terrible. Yet she said, "Come. We have little time."

Eblik followed Raynor and Delphia from the hall. They went through the harsh splendor of the castle, till at last the girl halted before a blank stone wall. She pressed a hidden spring. A section of the rock swung away, revealing the dimlit depths of a passage.

Delphia paused on the threshold. Her dark eyes flickered over the two.

"Hold fast to your courage," she whispered—and her lips were trembling. "For now we go down into Hell. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

The Valley of Silence

YET at first there seemed nothing terrible about the valley. They entered it from a cavern that opened on a thick forest, and, glancing around, Raynor saw tall mountainous ramparts that made the place a prison indeed. It was past sunset, yet already a full moon was rising over the eastern cliffs, outlining the Reaver's castle in black silhouette.

They entered the forest.

Moss underfoot deadened their footsteps. They walked in dim gloom, broken by moonlit traceries filtered through the leaves. And now Raynor noted the curious stillness that hung over all.

There was no sound. The noise of birds and beasts did not exist here, nor did the breath of wind rustle the silent trees. But, queerly, the prince thought there was a sound whisper-

ing through the forest, a sound below the threshold of hearing, which nevertheless played on his taut nerves.

"I don't like this," Eblik said, his ugly face set and strained. His voice seemed to die away with uncanny swiftness.

"Pan is fettered here," Delphia whispered. "Yet is his power manifest. . . ."

Soundlessly they went through the soundless forest. And now Raynor realized that, slowly and imperceptibly, the shadowy whisper he had sensed was growing louder—or else his ears were becoming more attuned to it. A very dim murmur, faint and far away, which yet seemed to have within it a multitude of voices. . . .

The voices of the winds . . . the murmur of forests . . . the goblin laughter of shadowed brooks. . . .

It was louder now, and Raynor found himself thinking of all the innumerable sounds of the primeval wilderness. Bird-notes, and the call of beasts. . . .

And under all, a dim, powerful motif, beat a wordless shrilling, a faint piping that set the prince's skin to crawling as he heard it.

"It is the tide of life," Delphia said softly. "The heart-beat of the first god. The pulse of earth."

For the first time Raynor felt something of the primal secrets of the world. Often he had walked alone in the forest, but never yet had the hidden heart of the wilderness reached fingers into his soul. He sensed a mighty and very terrible power stirring latent in the soil beneath him, a thing bound inextricably to the brain of man by the cords of the flesh which came up, by slow degrees, from the seething oceans which once rolled unchecked over a young planet. Unimaginable eons ago man had come from the earth, and the brand of his mother-world was burned deep within his soul.

Afraid, yet strangely happy, as men are sometimes happy in their dreams, the prince motioned for his companions to increase their pace.

The forest gave place to a wide clearing, with shattered white stones

rearing to the sky. Broken plinths and peristyles gleamed in the moonlight. A temple had once existed here. Now all was overgrown with moss and the slow-creeping lichen.

"Here," the girl said in a low whisper. "Here. . . ."

In the center of a ring of fallen pillars they halted. Delphia pointed to a block of marble, on which a metal disk was inset. In a cuplike depression in the metal lay a broken bit of marble.

"The talisman," Delphia said. "Touch it to the other."

Silence . . . and the unearthly tide of hidden life swelling and ebbing all about them. Raynor took the amulet from his belt, stepped forward, fighting down his fear. He bent above the disk—touched marble shard to marble—

As iron to lodestone, the two fragments drew together. They coalesced into one. The jagged line of breakage faded and vanished.

Raynor held the talisman—complete, unbroken!

Now, quite suddenly, the vague murmurings mounted into a roar—gay, jubilant, triumphant! The metal disk shattered into fragments. Beneath it the prince glimpsed a small carved stone, the twin of the one beneath the temple of Ahmon.

Above the unceasing roar sounded a penetrating shrill piping.

Delphia clutched at Raynor's arm, pulled him back. Her face was chalk-white.

"The pipes!" she gasped. "Back—quickly! To see Pan is to die!"

Louder the roar mounted, and louder. In its bellow was a deep shout of alien laughter, a thunder of goblin merriment. The chuckle of the shadowed brooks was the crash of cataracts and waterfalls.

The forest stirred to a breath of gusty wind.

"Back!" the girl said urgently. "Back! We have freed Pan!"

Without conscious thought Raynor thrust the talisman into his belt, turned, and, with Delphia and Eblik beside him, fled into the moonlit shadows. Above him branches tossed

in a mounting wind. The wild shrieking of the pipes grew louder.

Tide of earth life—rising to a mad paean of triumph!

The wind exulted:

"Free . . . free!"

And the unseen rivers shouted:

"Great Pan is free!"

CLATTERING of hoofs came from the distance. Bleating calls sounded from afar.

The girl stumbled, almost fell. Raynor gripped at her arm, pulling her upright, fighting the unreasoning terror mounting within him. The Nubian's grim face was glistening with sweat.

"Pan, Pan is free!"

"Evohé!"

The black mouth of a cavern loomed before them. At its threshold Raynor cast a glance behind him, saw all the great forest swaying and tossing. His breath coming unevenly, he turned, following his companions into the cave.

"Shaitan!" he whispered. "What demon have I loosed on the land?"

Then it was race, sprint, pound up the winding passage, up an unending flight of stone steps, through a wall that lifted at Delphia's touch—and into a castle shaking with battle. Raynor stopped short, whipping out his sword, staring at shadows flickering in the distance.

"Cyaxares' men," he said. "They've entered."

In the face of flesh-and-blood antagonists the prince was suddenly himself again. Delphia was already running down the corridor, blade out. Raynor and the Nubian followed.

They burst into the great hall. A ring of armed men surrounded a little group who were making their last stand before the hearth. Towering above the others Raynor saw the tangled locks and bristling beard of Kialeh, the Reaver, and beside him his lieutenant Samar. Corpses littered the floor.

"Ho!" roared the Reaver, as he caught sight of the newcomers. "You come in time! In time—to die with us!"

CHAPTER V

Cursed Be the City

GRIM laughter touched Raynor's lips. He drove in, sheathing his sword in a brawny throat, whipped it out, steel singing. Nor were Eblik and Delphia far behind. Her blade and the Nubian's ax wreaked deadly havoc among Cyaxares' soldiers, who, not expecting attack from the rear, were confused.

The hall became filled with a milling, yelling throng, from which one soldier, a burly giant, emerged, shouting down the others.

"Cut them down! They're but three!"

Then all semblance of sanity was lost in a blaze of crimson battle, swinging brands, and huge maces that crashed down, splitting skulls and spattering gray brain-stuff. Delphia kept shoulder to shoulder with Raynor, seemingly heedless of danger, her blade flicking wasplike through the air. And the prince guarded her as best he could, the sword weaving a bright maze of deadly lightnings as it whirled.

The Reaver swung, and his sword crushed a helm and bit deep into bone. He strained to tug it free—and a soldier thrust up at his throat. Samar deflected the blade with his own weapon, and that cost him his life. In that moment of inattention a driven spear smashed through corselet and jerkin and drank deep of the man's life-blood.

Silent, he fell.

The Reaver went beserk. Yelling, he sprang over his lieutenant's corpse and swung. For a few moments he held back his enemies—and then someone flung a shield. Instinctively Kialeh lifted his blade to parry.

The wolves leaped in to the kill.

Roaring, the Reaver went down, blood gushing through his shaggy beard, staining its iron-gray with red. When Raynor had time to look

again, Kialeh lay a corpse on his own hearth, his head amid bright jewels that had spilled from the overturned treasure-chest.

The three stood together now, the last of the defenders—Raynor and Eblik and Delphia. The soldiers ringed them, panting for their death, yet hesitating before the menace of cold steel. None wished to be the first to die.

And, as they waited, a little silence fell. The prince heard a sound he remembered.

Dim and far away, a low roaring drifted to his ears. And the eerie shrilling of pipes. . . .

It grew louder. The soldiers heard it now. They glanced at one another askance. There was something about that sound that chilled the blood.

It swelled to a gleeful shouting, filling all the castle. A breeze blew through the hall, tugging with elfin fingers at sweat-moist skin. It rose to a gusty blast.

In its murmur voices whispered.

"*Evohé! Evohé*"

They grew louder, mad and unchecked. They exulted.

"*Pan, Pan is free!*"

"Gods!" a soldier cursed. "What devil's work is this?" He swung about, sword ready.

The curtains of samite were ripped away by the shrieking wind. Deafeningly the voices exulted:

"*Pan is free!*"

The piping shrilled out. There came the clatter of ringing little hoofs. The castle rocked and shuddered.

Some vague, indefinable impulse made Raynor snatch at his belt, gripping the sun-god's talisman in bronzed fingers. From it a grateful warmth seemed to flow into his flesh—and the roaring faded.

He dragged Delphia and the Nubian behind him. "Close to me! Stay close!"

The room was darkening. No—it seemed as though a cloudy veil of mist dropped before the three, guarding them. Raynor lifted the seal of Ahmon.

The fog-veils swirled. Dimly

through them Raynor could see the soldiers moving swiftly, frantically, like rats caught in a trap. He tightened one arm about Delphia's steel-armored waist.

Suddenly the hall was ice-cold. The castle shook as though gripped by Titan hands. The floor swayed beneath the prince's feet.

The mists darkened. Through rifts he saw half-guessed figures that leaped and bounded . . . heard elfin hoofs clicking. Horned and shaggy-furred beings that cried jubilantly as they danced to the pipes of Pan. . . .

Faun and dryad and satyr swung in a mad saraband beyond the shrouding mists. Faintly there came the screaming of men, half drowned in the loud shrilling.

"Evohé!" the demoniac rout thundered. "Evohé! All hail, O Pan!"

With a queer certainty Raynor knew that it was time to leave the castle—and swiftly. Already the great stone structure was shaking like a tree in a hurricane. With a word to his companions he stepped forward hesitantly, the talisman held high.

The walls of mist moved with him. Outside the fog-walls the monstrous figures gamboled. But the soldiers of Cyaxares screamed no more.

Through a castle toppling into ruin the three sped, into the courtyard, across the drawbridge, and down the face of the Rock. Nor did they pause till they were safely in the broad plain of the valley.

"The castle!" Eblik barked, pointing. "See? It falls."

And it was true. Down it came thundering, while clouds of ruin spurted up. Then there was only a shattered wreck on the summit of the Rock. . . .

Delphia caught her breath in a little sob. She murmured, "The end of the Reavers for all time. I—I lived in the castle for more than twenty years. And now it's gone like a puff of dust before the wind."

The walls of fog had vanished. Raynor returned the talisman to his belt. Eblik, staring up at the Rock, swallowed uneasily.

"Well, what now?" he asked.

"Back along the way we came," the prince said. "It's the only way out of this wilderness that I know of."

The girl nodded. "Yes. Beyond the mountains lie deserts, save toward Sardopolis. But we have no mounts."

"Then we'll walk," Eblik observed, but Raynor caught his arm and pointed.

"There! Horses—probably stampeded from the castle. And—Shaitan! There's my gray charger. "Good!"

So, presently, the three rode toward Sardopolis, conscious of a wierd dim throbbing that seemed to pulse in the air all about them.

AT dawn they topped a ridge and saw before them the plain. All three reined in their mounts, staring. Beneath them lay the city—but changed!

It was a ruin.

Doom had come to Sardopolis in the night. The mighty towers and battlements had fallen, and huge gaps were opened in the walls. Of the king's palace nothing was left but a single tower, from which, ironically, the wyvern banner flew. As they watched, that pinnacle, too, swayed and tottered and fell, and the scarlet wyvern drifted down into the dust of Sardopolis.

On fallen towers and peristyles distant figures moved, with odd, ungainly boundings. Quickly Raynor turned his eyes away. But he could not shut his ears to the distant crying of pipes, gay and pagan, yet with a faintly mournful undertone.

"Pan has returned to his first altar," Delphia said quietly. "We had best not loiter here."

"By all hell, I agree," the Nubian grunted, digging his heels into his steed's flanks. "Where now, Raynor?"

"Westward, I think, to the Sea of Shadows. There are cities on its shore, and galleys to take us to a haven. Unless—" He turned questioning eyes on Delphia.

She laughed, a little bitterly. "I cannot stay here. The land is sunk

back into the pit. Pan rules. I go with you."

The three rode to the west. They skirted, but did not enter, a small grove where a man lay in agony. It was Cyaxares, a figure so dreadfully mangled that only sheer will kept him alive. His face was a bloody mask. The once-rich garments were tattered and filthy. He saw the three riders, and raised his voice in a weak cry which the wind drowned.

Beside the king a slim, youthful figure lounged, leaning idly against an oak-trunk. It was Necho.

"Call louder, Cyaxares," he said. "With a horse under you, you can reach the Sea of Shadows. And if you succeed in doing that, you will yet live for many years."

Again the king cried out. The wind took his voice and shredded it to impotent fragments.

Necho laughed softly. "Too late, now. They are gone."

CYAXARES let his battered head drop, his beard trailing in the dirt. Through shredded lips he muttered, "if I reach the Sea of Shadows . . . I live."

"True. But if you do not, you die.

And then—" Low laughter shook the other.

Groaning, the king dragged himself forward. Necho followed.

"A good horse can reach the Sea of Shadows in three days. If you walk swiftly, you may reach it in six. But you must hurry. Why do you not rise, my Cyaxares?"

The king spat out bitter oaths. In agony he pulled himself forward, leaving a trail of blood on the grass . . . blood that dripped unceasingly from the twin raw stumps just above his ankles.

"The stone that fell upon you was sharp. Cyaxares, was it not?" Necho mocked. "But hurry! You have little time. There are mountains to climb and rivers to cross. . . ."

So, in the trail of Raynor and Eblik and Delphia, crept the dying king, hearing fainter and ever fainter the triumphant pipes of Pan from Sardopolis. And presently, patient as the silent Necho, a vulture dipped against the blue and took up the pursuit, the beat of its wings distinctly audible in the heavy, stagnant silence. . . .

And Raynor and Delphia and Eblik rode onward toward the sea. . . .

BRIDE OF THE ANTARCTIC

A Story of Whispering Coffins

By MORDRED WEIR

—In the Next Issue of STRANGE STORIES

College Humor

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THE BEST COMEDY IN AMERICA

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LORD OF EVIL

*Moncati Couldn't Be Positive
—Until He Developed
the Fatal Negative!*

By TALLY MASON

*Author of "The Lost Wraith,"
"House of Darkness," etc.*

OLD WEMYSS gave him the packet without question, and Moncati stood politely listening to him, his head cocked a little to one side. His bright, dark eyes were smiling coldly, but his thin lips remained devoid of any movement.

"I confess I'd have been afraid of your stepfather myself," said Wemyss. "There were some very strange stories about him, and the man himself always impressed me as something evil."

Wemyss coughed nervously and cast a glance over his shoulder to where his law partner was at work on a brief.

Belatedly lowering his voice, he added, "I admire your fearlessness, Moncati."

"Thank you," said Moncati, and left him.

Outside, his lips smiled, and he said within his mind: *Wemyss, you had the secret!*

His hand tightened a little about the packet and the photograph in it. This kind of blackmail would never have occurred to Wemyss.



The second print was authentic but the framed photograph had changed again in the night!

As he walked through Piccadilly in the sunlight so unusual for London, Moncati held his smile, and his thoughts dwelt upon the photograph and the occasion upon which he had taken it. About his stepfather, Wemyss had put it mildly indeed. Moncati himself had heard the old man boast: "I am the Lord of Evil!" Proudly. Sure of himself.

Moncati remembered it well and had reason to believe it on natural grounds. Wemyss had not been wrong when he had warned him that the old man had an eye on the legacy coming to Moncati at twenty-five. Moncati's dabbling in photography had saved his life—just as Teddifer, his stepfather, was preparing to leap upon him, fingers already curved for his throat, the flashlight bulb had gone off!

Moncati had risen from his simulated sleep, thrust Teddifer away, and gone with the camera and film. He remembered yet the fury and chagrin on the old man's face when he had learned about Moncati's elaborate precautions—but he remembered, too, that already then he had known that some day he would have to take other steps.

MONCATI paused to tear into little pieces the letter that had been with the packet, for Wemyss, which began: "In case of my death, please forward immediately to Inspector Winslow at New Scotland Yard . . ." and went on, chuckling to himself now, light-hearted and gay, with eyes for every pretty girl he met.

Deep in his mind he was well satisfied with himself, as proud as old Teddifer had ever been of his magic and necromancy, and not a little scornful of the evil old man who had come to such a prosaic and untimely end.

Moncati felt not a qualm at remembering how carefully he had tied the cord which had tripped Teddifer at the head of the stairs and left him at the bottom with his scrawny neck broken. After all, Moncati had had every provocation; he had known that by some design or other, Ted-

difer had meant to accomplish his death and take his legacy, and the thought had irritated and at last had worried him into action. If a fly bothers me, I kill it, he had told himself then. Why not Teddifer?

When Moncati reached home, he unpacked the enlarged photograph, found a frame, and hung the picture on the wall squarely over his desk, so that he might remind himself from time to time of his own cleverness in circumventing the evil old man who had been his stepfather. He had already burnt up most of Teddifer's books and papers, and had begun to rearrange the house to suit his own convenience.

He went whistling up the stairs and left the picture there in the patch of sunlight on the wall: the evil-faced old man with head half turned toward the hidden camera and the flare that had surprised him: Moncati himself in bed, the glare of light that made strikingly clear the huge, cruel old hands and the designing mind behind. The sunlight was additionally merciless, and there the picture hung: Moncati in bed and Hercules Teddifer about to reach for his neck.

For some days the picture comforted Moncati; it gave him a deep-seated feeling of contentment, of satisfaction with himself and the world, and he glanced at it, smiling, once or twice a day. Then he went down to Sussex for a weekend and when he came back, he felt for the first time a disquieting note about the picture. It was something intangible, something upon which he could not put a finger, but it was there.

The photograph gave him the old pleasure and satisfaction, but there was something more, something malevolent about it, and he was irritated to think he did not know what it was. For a brief moment he thought that the old man's expression had subtly altered, become more calculating, but, being careful about his imagination, he dismissed the thought.

Two evenings later, as he sat at his desk writing a difficult letter, he glanced absently up at the photo-

graph and saw a movement there.

Because the indirect light threw a diffused glow over the picture, he thought at first that the movement he had seen was a normal hallucination springing from the slight re-focusing of his gaze from paper to photograph, but almost instantly his eyes fixed unconsciously upon the spot where he had thought the movement to have been: Hercules Teddifer's hands.

With a faint tremor he knew that he had seen the old man's large, bony hands flex—open and close—and he involuntarily waited, fascinated, for the hands to move again. But only for a second. He recollected himself and turned the light full upon the photograph, a faint feeling of panic guiding his hand.

He looked at it closely, but nothing happened; there was nothing changed about it, and he suffered a brief moment of distaste before he felt the old pleasure creep over him again, the sense of proud security he had made for himself by so fortunately ridding himself of his menacing step-father.

He sat down again presently, and resumed the letter, but every little while he caught himself looking expectantly up at the photograph, watching nervously and uncertainly; so that in the end he was obliged to give up the letter; somehow his mind would not return to it, would not concentrate properly on the task before it.

With a faintly derisive smile, half for himself, half for the photograph, he left the desk.

He had no doubt that his eyes had played a trick on him, and he slept well that night, without dreams. He rose in the morning, got at his letter again, and finished it without any trouble.

On his way out of the house to the Victoria and Albert Museum, he gave the photograph a fleeting glance with his customary good humor, and went whistling into the morning's fog.

Not until he was seated comfortably in the underground did it occur to him that Hercules Teddifer's face,

as he had seen it in the photograph that morning, was no longer turned toward the hidden camera. He had not actually realized it at first, but his eyes had seen, the image had been transmitted, and now suddenly he remembered it with a certain definiteness which he found difficult to escape.

The possibility of any physical change in the photograph was too absurd to entertain seriously; he began to think very clearly around what his eyes had seen in an attempt to find some explanation of it. But the more he thought, the greater his confusion grew, until he knew that he must return to the house and assure himself that such a change had not actually taken place.

He made a mental note at the same time to see about his eyes; glasses certainly were indicated.

HE let himself in the house with trepidation and went directly to the picture. He looked and looked again; stepped back a little and stared, his mind in outraged tumult. *There was a change!* The old man's face no longer peered out at him; instead, it had turned ever so slightly, and taken new cognizance of the figure in the bed, the head bent a little, and the eyes lost in contemplation. It was incredible, but it was true.

Moncati took the photograph off its hook and peered closely at it. He rubbed his fingers over it as if he might feel some subtle difference his eyes could not see; but there was nothing. Baffled, he put it back and stood looking at it for a long time, until he became conscious of the fact that he was waiting for change to take place there before his eyes.

Then, angry with himself, he turned away and went grimly out of the house intending to complete the day's itinerary as he had set it for himself. But somehow, before he knew it, the museum palled on him, and he found himself sitting down to tea with old Wemyss, who eyed him a little askance.

"Investment trouble?" asked the barrister.

Moncati shook his head. "No dan-

ger of that. I've just developed some curiosity about my late stepfather."

Wemyss put on his pince-nez and looked at him. "God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "What's put you in mind of him now? He's dead, and the world's the better for it—you particularly."

Moncati smiled his most persuasive smile. "Agreed, Mr. Wemyss, but I have a reasonable amount of curiosity and I'd rather like to know something of the nature of those 'strange stories', about which you hinted the last time I called on you."

Wemyss' eyes narrowed. "What misguided impulse roused your curiosity?" he asked.

Moncati shrugged. "Is it misguided?"

"I hesitate to talk about things I don't myself understand and yet must put some belief in," replied Wemyss, "because I dislike being held up to ridicule even if only in the private opinions of my clients. I don't suppose you believe in such things as magic and sorcery, eh?"

Moncati smiled pleasantly and said. "Only a fool refuses to keep an open mind."

"Well said," answered Wemyss shortly. "Teddifer practised that sort of thing—squares and circles and spirit rites and such. I don't hold with it myself, but I understand that some very unusual occurrences took place in that house of his."

Wemyss shrugged, a little irritated, but went on. "The best I can say is that some people died very oddly—servants. Two that I know of. Both strangled. But of course your stepfather was out of the city at the time. No question about that."

Wemyss smiled a little oddly, with a kind of menace behind his lips. "He had some queer theories about the projection of psychic doubles and astrals, and the like; for that matter, no one ever found any prints of any kind on those two dead servants."

Of a sudden Wemyss gulped his tea and was off, saying over his shoulder, "God bless my soul! I've forgotten my appointment with Dotson."

Moncati waved at his back, but he was puzzled; the inference behind Wemyss' words was clear enough, and somehow Moncati could not get his thoughts away from Hercules Teddifer's huge, ungainly hands, the tough, claw-like appendages that had so greedily threatened his own throat. He shook himself presently, paid for the tea, and wandered somewhat reluctantly homeward.

HE looked at the picture, but there was no further change. He was conscious of a slight feeling of relief; but this was dissipated at once in the memory of that first change. He took the photograph down again, and examined it anew, but could discover nothing remarkable about it.

For the first time, he began to be aware of something akin to fear; he began to search his memory for some clue to this strange occurrence; and at the same time he began to cast around for some manner of escape from the intangible dread he had begun to feel insidiously drawing upon him from the recesses of his mind—a malignant dread akin to that same fear he had known when first he had become aware of his stepfather's evil design to kill him.

Doggedly he put the picture back on the wall, and went about his small tasks. By evening he had sufficiently recovered his composure to contemplate coolly some means of combating the subtle dread that lay in the back of his mind. He could not refrain from looking at the picture again, but there was no further change, and he felt a renewal of faith in himself.

He had thought once, fleetingly, of burning the picture, but this seemed to him somehow a reflection upon the resourcefulness and courage that had brought it into being, and he could not contemplate with equanimity the resultant drain upon his self-esteem.

Throughout the evening, he sat in the room reading, his desk light thrown upward upon the picture, but nothing happened, nothing whatever. He had come almost to expect

some further development, but this absence of anything again set him doubting what he had first seen.

Had there been any change in the first place? Or had his imagination over-reached itself? Certain as he was that the old man had first been looking out at him from the photograph, he was equally certain that he was now no longer doing so, but if this change had indeed taken place, it was utterly against natural law.

This thought gave him but little comfort until he realized that he could settle the question of whether or not his imagination had been remiss by taking the negative and having a separate print made for comparison. At once he was flooded with a strange feeling of freedom from dread; he felt that he was about to do the right thing. The possibility that his confidence did not come entirely from within himself did not occur to him.

In the morning, he took the negative and made a second print, enlarged to the same size as the original. He came to his desk with it and stood it up below the framed photograph.

What he saw was so far from reassuring that he caught hold of a chair and eased himself into it. Not only was the second print as he had originally believed the framed photograph to have been, but the latter had again changed in the night: *Hercules Teddifer had moved closer to the figure in the bed, and his hands were clenched!*

Moncati began to perspire, coldly. For a moment he sat there at a loss to know what to do, and he thought confusedly of the old man's strange beliefs. Somehow it had not before occurred to him that by photographing the old man, he had managed, however obscurely to himself, to perpetuate Teddifer and his evil design. But in the height of his misery, hope came to him. He came to his feet and in two strides had torn the photograph from the wall.

Three minutes later all that was left was a small drift of ashes.

He was utterly relieved at once. How the old man could have man-

aged recourse to his magic sorcery in this way was beyond Moncati, but the knowledge that he had circumvented him a second time was not. His opinion of himself soared.

He went out to celebrate. He made a night of it, hilariously told some acquaintances that he was celebrating his freedom, and congratulated himself upon shaking off the dread he had known so briefly again. He came in late, after midnight, his mind a little sluggish, and threw himself partly dressed on to his bed, where he fell asleep at once.

Not quite an hour later he awoke. The clock had struck two, and he lay drowsily staring into the darkness for some minutes before he heard the sound, like the rattling and rustling of paper. Even at that, he did not come fully awake; he pondered the sound sleepily and was not aware of its approach until it was almost upon his room.

THEN he listened carefully, wondering what it might be. It was like nothing he had ever heard before, save for its dry rustling and crackling.

He raised himself tiredly on one elbow just as the door of his room opened. This distracted him momentarily from the sound of movement, and he thought a draft had drawn it open, for at the moment there was nothing but darkness flowing in upon him.

Not until an uncanny chill pervaded his senses did he realize that the darkness he saw was not the shadows in the hall, but that it was something alive, something malignant. Instantly he was caught in a cloud of dread; he saw the darkness resolve itself into a dim, human figure, one side aglow as if a light were falling upon it, and heard a dry chuckling all too familiar.

It was Hercules Teddifer's grim face that looked down upon him.

Even as an outcry rose to Moncati's lips, the ungainly hands closed around his neck.

The last thing Moncati remembered was the thing he had unfortunately forgotten: *the second print.*

The BOX from the STARS


*A Complete Novelet
of
Matter Over Mind*

By
AMELIA REYNOLDS
LONG

*Author of "The Undead," "The
Mechanical Man," etc.*

CHAPTER I *The Empty Cube*

I WAS with Chatham when he discovered the box, and I can still remember his cry of delight and surprise when he unearthed it. We had been doing a bit of fossil hunting on a piece of land of his in southeastern Pennsylvania, where a spur of primal rock strata reared its head practically to the surface. So far we had found little more than the usual fossil shells and a few



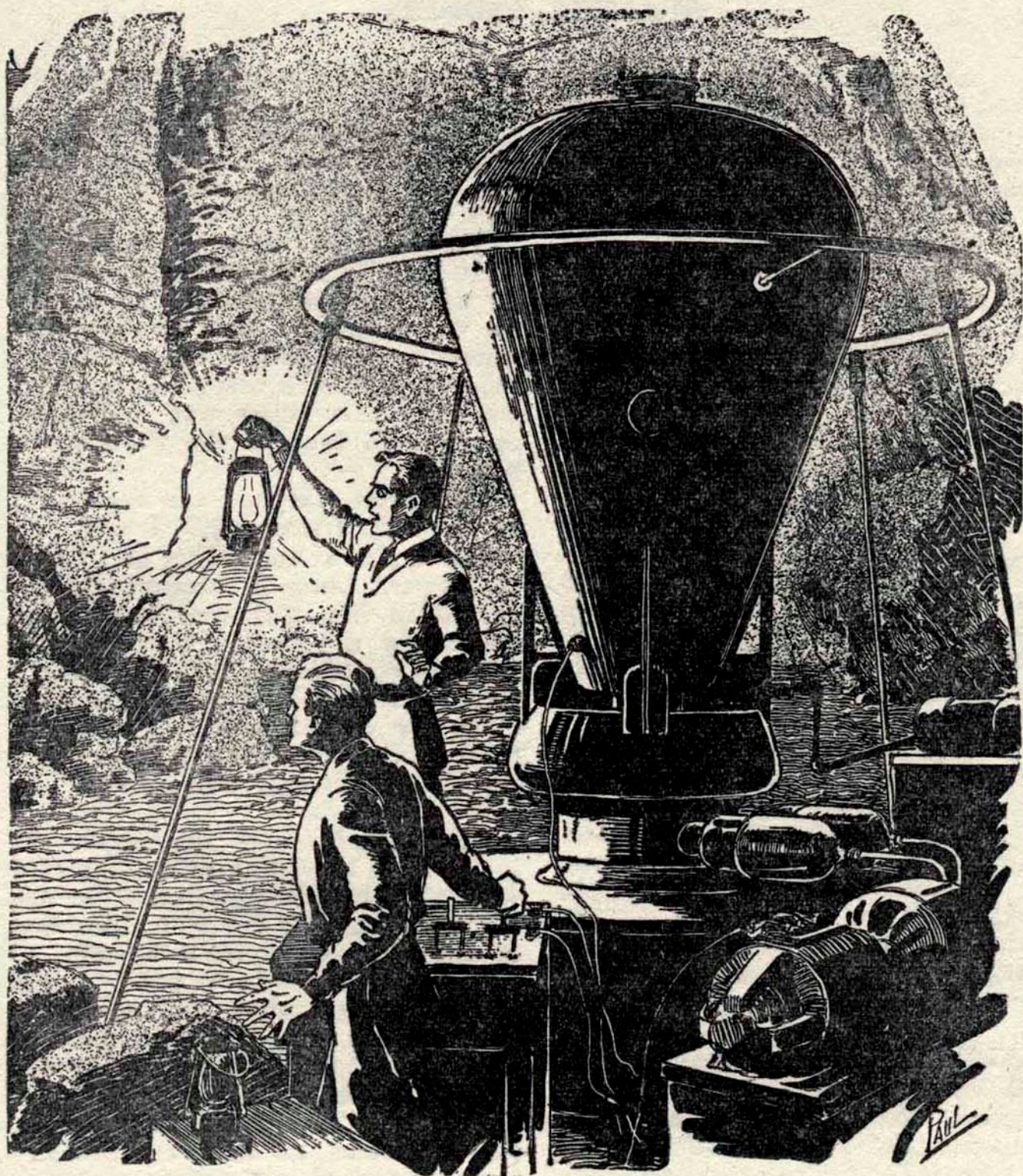
*The lantern was to be
extinguished as soon as
Gunthorp was in
position*

fern impressions so battered by time that they were practically worthless. But this was different.

At his shout, I left my own digging a little distance away, and joined him. He was standing over what looked like a pocket in the solid rock, formed by some freak folding of the strata back in pre-glacial times.

"Look, Wilder!" he exclaimed

It Was Hollow, But Not Empty; Nothing



jubilantly. "I was trying to chip off this upper layer when my pick went straight through. What do you make of it?"

I got down on my hands and knees and peered into the opening he had made. I saw what he was raving about.

The pocket extended a foot or two in all directions beyond the opening, and about four feet downward. And

resting flat upon its bottom was a rectangular shaped object.

"What the dickens!" I exclaimed, and began to pry away pieces of the loose rock with my hands. "What is it?"

He got down beside me. "Looks as though it might be man-made, doesn't it? Nature doesn't work in such perfect cubes."

"I don't know," I replied thought-

Was In It, But Nothing Was—Something!

fully, although the same idea had flashed across my own mind. "There are certain slate formations—"

"But this isn't slate," he interrupted. He picked up a shard of the dull colored rock. "It's igneous stuff. Much older than slate."

"But later than the surrounding rock, apparently," I said. I scrambled to my feet. "Let's enlarge the opening, and see what you've found."

A few blows of our picks cleared away the top of the pocket, giving us an unobstructed view into the cavity beneath. It now measured about four feet in all of its dimensions, with the two foot cube resting upon the middle of its floor.

"I'll drop in and pass it out to you," Chatham said. "Then we can examine it better."

"Think you can manage it alone?" I asked. "It looks as though it were made of solid metal."

"I'll try," he answered, letting himself down into the hole. "If I can't, we'll attach ropes."

He knelt in the confined space and wrapped his arms about the cube, his muscles swelling beneath his khaki shirt in anticipation of the strain. The next instant he had almost gone over backwards, taking the cube with him.

HIS expression of stunned surprise was so comical that I laughed. "Man, you don't know your own strength," I told him. "Here, let me take it."

He rose, holding the cube easily under one arm. "Believe it or not, Wilder," he said, "the thing's hollow!"

"Nonsense!" I scoffed, taking it from him while he climbed back beside me. But immediately I realized that he had spoken the truth: no solid could have been so weightless.

"If it's hollow, it must be a box of some sort," I said, "and there must be a way to open it."

But a careful examination, first with the naked eye and then with a powerful lens, revealed not the slightest trace of latch, key-hole, or hinge. The six sides were as smooth

as though they had been cast in one solid piece.

Chatham was both excited and disturbed. He shook his head. There was the beginning of awe in his eyes.

"One thing's clear at least," he muttered. "It's man-made. But made by what sort of man? It's too old for the stone age, even if they possessed a knowledge of metals in those days, which they didn't. Why, the rock this thing was embedded in must go back to the Pleistocene period."

"And that was just the beginning of the age of mammals," I said.

We looked at each other and I saw the inward sense of strangeness reflected in his eyes, and knew that mine held the same reflection. We felt less elated, even a little subdued. Here was an object unquestionably made by human hands, yet found embedded in rocks that had been formed ages before man himself had come into being!

Chatham laughed nervously. "I know what I'm going to do," he said with sudden determination. "I'm going to telegraph for old Gunthorp at the university. He'll be able to explain it, if anybody can." I got the odd impression that we were like children, a little frightened, and therefore appealing to a father for aid and advice.

Professor Timothy Gunthorp was, like ourselves, an amateur archeologist; but an exceptionally good one. His real work was in the physics department at one of America's largest universities, where he was working upon an experiment to convert energy into matter, thus reversing the usual process.

We rode into town in my rattle-trap car, and sent off our wire at once. Before sundown, we had received an answer:

YOU'RE MISTAKEN. THERE AIN'T NO SUCH ANIMAL. WILL COME ON TOMORROW TO SEE IT.

GUNTHERP.

We felt better. We were clearing away our breakfast things the next morning when the familiar bald head

and steel-rimmed spectacles of Professor Gunthorp looked in at the open door of our shack.

"You're fools, both of you," he announced with his customary abruptness. "Tearing a man away from important work with a cock-and-bull story! Let's have a look at this impossible marvel of yours."

I went over to our work table and removed the tarpaulin that we had thrown over the box. Gunthorp frowned disapprovingly.

"So you couldn't leave it where it was until I got here," he observed. "Well, you must have taken photographs of it in its original position, at least."

Feeling like utter simpletons, we had to admit that in our excitement we had overlooked that bit of routine.

Gunthorp clucked his tongue in annoyance. "And you blockheads call yourselves archeologists!" he snorted.

"Only rank amateurs, Professor," Chatham said humbly.

Gunthorp began to examine the box. First, he lifted it to test its weight, then he rapped upon it with his knuckles.

"Hollow as your two heads," he vouchsafed. He bent closer and studied the metal. "Looks like tungsten," he observed. "But it isn't. Either of you got any idea what it is?"

We both confessed that we had not.

"Well, neither have I," he admitted sourly. "Now take me out and show me where you found it."

We conducted him to the spot, and stood aside while he examined first the hole itself, and then the surrounding rocks. As his inspection progressed, there grew upon his long, lean face a look of bewilderment that afforded both Chatham and me secret satisfaction. Presently he picked up a spade that we had neglected to take in the night before, and with an energy surprising in a man of his years, began to clear away the rubble for about six feet on all sides of the hole.

Of a sudden he threw down the spade and whirled upon us. "I never before suspected either of you of possessing a sense of humor," he barked at us, "but in any case your so-called practical joke is rather thin."

"Practical joke?" we gasped together. We were both accustomed to Gunthorp's peppery outbursts, but this did not sound like the usual thing.

"If there's a practical joke, Professor, it's on us too," I declared. "We found the box in that pocket yesterday, precisely as we told you in our wire. If anybody put it there for a little leg-pulling, they did an unusually clever job, for the rock stratum was closed above it."

"I broke into it accidentally with my pick," Chatham added.

SOMETHING in our words or attitudes must have convinced him, for his manner underwent a subtle change. A queer, unreadable expression crept into his eyes.

"You've noticed, I suppose, that this rock is not the same as the surrounding rocks?" he queried.

We nodded. "A glacial boulder from the Riss or Wurm—" I began, but he interrupted me.

"Use your eyes, Wilder; use your eyes. This is no glacial boulder from the Wurm, the Riss, or any other glacier. Look at its pitted surface. *It's a fallen meteor!*"

I looked. Even with my limited knowledge of meteorology, I realized all at once that he spoke the truth. The thought was dizzying. Millions of years ago, this huge blob of matter had been drawn into the earth's gravitational field, and had become embedded in the still soft rocks. Probably it had originally been buried hundreds of feet deep, and the gradual weathering and wearing down of the top strata through countless millenia had only within the past thousand or so years brought it near the surface, near enough for our spades to strike.

Chatham was staring at the gray, pitted mass that the professor's

spade had cleared. "But—but the box?" he asked dazedly.

"Exactly," Gunthorp repeated. "The box."

Without another word, the three of us marched back to the shack for a further examination of our mysterious find.

But we learned no more than we already knew. Acid tests showed that it was composed of an alloy of tungsten and some other metal with which we were unfamiliar; a further proof, if we had needed any, that it was the work of intelligent beings. But that those beings could have been inhabitants of this earth was utterly impossible, both because of the tremendous age of the rocks in which the box had been embedded, and its unquestionable encasement in a meteor.

WILD thoughts flashed through my mind; imaginings based on remembered legends of a race before the time of Adam, and of things that had supposedly drifted down from the stars. But I did not mention them to Gunthorp. He was striving desperately to keep matters on a rational prosaic plane. Besides, there was bound to be some less fantastic explanation; there had to be.

"What I'd like to know," Chatham remarked in the manner of one thinking aloud, "is what the thing was for. Why should it have been made hollow?"

Gunthorp looked up. "Why not cut it open and find out?" he asked.

The suggestion seemed like a good one, and we agreed. Chatham brought out the large plate camera and took several pictures of the box from all angles; then I set to work upon it with a cold chisel.

We got our second shock. My greatest efforts produced not a single dent in the tough metal!

Chatham and Gunthorp tried their hands, but with no better success. Between us, we turned the edges on four tools; the box itself remained practically unscratched.

Chatham ran his fingers through his red hair. "It's a lot tougher than ordinary tungsten," he said—

Then he had an idea. Going over to the supply cupboard, he brought back two phials; one containing iron oxide, the other powdered aluminum.

"If this doesn't do the trick, we'll get an oxyacetylene torch," he said.

"Not bad," Gunthorp commented in what was, for him, extravagant praise. "Of course, there's a chance of its marring the inside when it burns through; but we'll have to run that risk."

He took the two vials from Chatham, and blended their contents in a thin, careful line along the four edges of the box's topmost plane. Then he lit it.

There was a sharp hiss as the powders ignited; then it began to burn with a brilliant, greenish white flame.

Wordlessly we watched that hollow square of fire, keeping well back from the tremendous heat that it generated. Slowly it began to sink into the metal, eating its way like an acid. In another minute or so, it would be through, and the top of the cube would drop inward.

Gunthorp was standing by with a pail of water which he meant to dash over it at the crucial moment. He had even taken a step forward, when without an instant's warning the unexpected happened.

With a final sputter, the burning powder ate through the last thin bit of metal; but instead of falling in, the top of the box flew *upward*! There was a rush of escaping *force*—the word does not describe it properly, but it is the nearest I can find—and we were hurled backwards into unconsciousness!

We all regained our senses at about the same time and stared at one another in bewilderment.

"What was it?" I muttered. "An infernal machine?"

But I knew better even as I spoke. Had there been any kind of explosion, our frail shack would have been in ruins; whereas not even the glass of the windows were broken.

Gunthorp picked himself up and went over to the work table.

"Whatever it was, it's left no trace behind it," he said jerkily. He held

up the cube, still glowing redly around its seared edges. Its interior was as blank and uninformative as its exterior had been.

"It couldn't have been a gas of any kind," Chatham supplemented. "A gas powerful enough to knock us all out would have left some after-effects. It was more like—like—" He groped inadequately for words.

"Like a great mental shock," I supplied, trying to analyze my own feelings at the time.

"That's it!" Gunthorp rasped. "The thing that was in that box paralyzed our minds temporarily. But it's gone now," he added with a rueful shrug, "dissipated upon the air; and that's the end of it."

But for once Professor Timothy Gunthorp was wrong.

CHAPTER II

Missing Men

TWO weeks drifted by. Gunthorp had returned to his research work at the university, where in his spare time he was writing a monograph upon our mysterious discovery and subsequent experience; a work which, he told us frankly, he had little hope that anyone would believe. Chatham and I had gone back to our fossil hunting, and although we talked about the box often, we felt that there was nothing more we could do about it.

Then one day Chatham, who had gone into town for supplies, brought back a strange story. There was, between our camp and the town, a fair sized woods that formed a veritable paradise for rabbit hunters during the game season. Since the season had just opened the day before, a swarm of them had descended upon it. And that was where Chatham's story came in.

It seemed that a party of local men had started out early in the morning, and had separated after reaching the woods, according to

custom. After hunting all day, they met again at a lodge that they kept to spend the night, and they discovered that one of their number, a man named Ed Stanton, was missing. They waited for him until ten o'clock; then, fearing that he might have met with an accident, they set out in search of him.

They searched with lanterns for half the night, but found no trace of the missing man. Finally someone suggested that he might have gone home instead of returning to the lodge, so they inquired there. But without result. Members of his family and neighbors had then joined in the search, which had continued throughout the night; with the coming of daylight, Stanton was still missing.

"Looks bad," I commented when Chatham had finished his recital. "That woods is large enough so that if he were badly hurt or killed, he could lie there for days before being discovered."

"I know it," Chatham said. He glanced toward the forbidding density of the woods some half mile away. "What do you say we join in the search?"

I was willing, and we set out together. The going was slow. It was nearly noon when we encountered three members of the original hunting party coming from the opposite direction.

"What luck?" I asked.

The oldest of the group shook his head. "Not any," he replied. "We've found plenty of fresh marks in the bushes, but with the gang that was in here yesterday, it's impossible to tell whether any of them are Ed's. It seems funny that he could have disappeared this way; but of course, we've got a good bit of territory still to search."

"What about his dog?" Chatham asked. "Didn't he have a dog?"

"That's another funny thing," the other answered. "The dog's gone, too."

However, we found the dog, or rather another party did, around three o'clock in the afternoon. It was lying under a clump of laurel

bushes, and it was dead, with its tail drawn down between its legs and its eyes bulging. But there was not a single mark of violence upon its body.

"Maybe it got hold of something that poisoned it," one fellow suggested as a number of us gathered round.

But the county sheriff, who had now taken charge of the search, shook his head. "It wasn't any poison killed that dog," he declared. "Look at his eyes and tail. He was scared to death; plumb scared. I'd swear it. And damn it, I'm scared too."

We redoubled our searching efforts. We thrashed literally every foot of the underbrush within a mile radius of the place where we had found the dog. We found no trace of Stanton.

With the coming of night, the sheriff called us all together.

"No use going on after dark," he told us. "These woods are too thick, and we couldn't do a thorough job. Better to wait until daylight, and start in again."

HOWEVER, a few searchers continued on their own, and in the morning one of them, a farm laborer named Jake Mills, had a somewhat weird story to relate. He and a companion had penetrated with a lantern into the deepest part of the woods, when of a sudden they had become aware of a strong sensation of being followed.

"We didn't hear nothin' and we didn't see nothin'," Jake explained. "It was just the way you feel when somebody's behind you, starin' with all his might at the back of your head. We turned around and sent the light of the lantern as far as it would go among the trees, but there was nothin' there. We even went back apiece, but we couldn't find anything. Yet every time we'd start on, we'd have that feelin' of somethin' behind us; but not as close as it had been the first time. Finally it got on our nerves, and so we decided we'd better take the sheriff's advice, and wait till mornin'."

It was this story of Jake's that

gave rise to the belief that an escaped lunatic with homicidal tendencies might be hiding in the woods. But a check-up of all the local and even more distant institutions for the insane revealed that all their inmates were accounted for. A number of the men began to laugh at what they called "Jake's case of cold feet." Others remembered Stanton's dog, and weren't so free with their jibes.

Nor were the others when four days later a second man disappeared.

He was a Dr. Philip Morse, member of a Boston society for physical research. He had arrived at the local hotel shortly after Stanton's disappearance, and advanced the theory that the missing man had fallen victim to some elemental or earth spirit that had been released in the woods. There was considerable amusement at his statement. But when he calmly announced his intention of camping alone in the woods in an attempt to contact the thing, the amusement faded.

"It's not that I hold with your ghost stories, Dr. Morse," the sheriff told him, "but there's something in them woods that's snatched Ed Stanton away bodily, and scared the life out of his dog. A man ain't safe there alone."

Dr. Morse only smiled. That evening he pitched a small tent near the place where Jake Mills and his companion had first felt they were being followed.

Early the next morning, the sheriff and two other men went out to check up on him. What gruesome horror they expected to discover, they themselves did not know; but they found the doctor calmly preparing his breakfast after an uneventful night.

The fact that he had spent one night alone in those supposedly sinister woods without anything out of the ordinary befalling him, lulled everyone into a false sense of security. Hence, the discovery that was made the following day was doubly shocking.

A party of searchers, coming upon the camp around noon of the second

day, found it literally torn to pieces. As for Dr. Morse himself, he had disappeared as completely as Stanton had done five days before!

Chatham and I went to view the wreckage as soon as we heard about it. We found a large crowd there looking about.

"Looks like a cyclone hit the place," one man remarked as we stopped beside him. "The doc must have put up a fearful fight."

"A cyclone or a lunatic," another amended. "One of them funny farms must be holdin' out on us."

But the tent was demolished, the camp furniture, bedding, and even articles of clothing were torn to pieces, in a way that even the most desperate struggle could not properly account for.

The sheriff came over to us. "Well, at least we know where Morse was when he was attacked," he said. "I've sent to Philadelphia for bloodhounds; when they come, I'm going to start out from here and see what they can find."

We complimented him upon the plan. He nodded; then, with a significant glance and quick gesture, implied that he had something else to discuss with us in private. He motioned us aside.

"I found this notebook under a part of the tent," he explained when we had drawn a little away from the others. "Morse must have been writing in it just before the thing got him. I thought maybe you fellows would take a look at it, and tell me whether there's anything in it except just craziness."

I took the notebook from him, and flipped open the top cover. Several pages were covered with a cramped, closely written shorthand, almost undecipherable.

"It will take a little while to figure this out," I said. "May I keep it until tomorrow morning?"

"Sure," he agreed readily. "Keep it as long as you like, just so you find out what it says."

But I was destined not to translate, personally, more than the opening pages of that manuscript, for that evening the bloodhounds arrived.

CHAPTER III

The Cave

AT THE sheriff's invitation, we joined him and a party of about a dozen others on the man-hunt. Darkness had already fallen when we assembled at the scene of Dr. Morse's demolished camp. In the flickering, yellow light of lanterns the shadows of trees and bushes danced and writhed in grotesque contortions, giving the scene an eeriness that unpleasantly affected all of us.

A little to one side a stranger stood with the dogs, two powerful black fellows who lolled passively at the ends of their chains, as though they had no interest in what was going on. Presently the sheriff went over and held a brief, low-voiced conversation with their owner; then he addressed the rest of us.

"Mr. Patton's gonna let the dogs go now," he announced. "He says we should stand back till they've picked up the scent; then we can follow as close as we're able. If they start up any ruckus, you fellas that have guns ain't to use them unless you can see plain what you're shootin' at. You're liable to hit the dogs or the doc."

The man called Patton was holding part of a torn coat—evidently Morse's—against the muzzle of first one dog, then the other. When they had sniffed their fill, he slipped the chains from their collars, and with a final, indistinguishable command to them, stepped back.

Noses pressed to the ground, the two animals began to run around the wreckage of the tent in gradually widening circles. Then with a kind of nasal whine, one of them suddenly darted off at a tangent, followed almost immediately by the other.

With a feeling of rising excitement, we started after them, falling into a rough single file to facilitate travel. We lost sight of the dogs almost from the beginning; but we could hear them breaking through

the underbrush a short distance ahead of us, while they gave voice almost continuously to their deep-throated baying.

For nearly a mile we pushed on without anyone uttering a word, the silence around us broken only by the crackle of twigs and the baying of the dogs, now farther distant. Then of a sudden their baying gave place to excited yelping interspersed with high-pitched, whining noises!

"They've found him!" the sheriff exclaimed, and broke into a run.

I KNOW practically nothing about bloodhounds, but I had a premonition the moment their tone changed that everything was not going according to schedule. No dog, regardless of his breed, ever indulges in that high-pitched whine when everything is running entirely to his satisfaction. I glanced at Patton, and saw the same suspicion reflected on his face.

By this time we had come out upon a deep gully, whose opposite wall was broken by the yawning blackness of a cave's mouth. The dogs had already crossed this gulley, and were now yelping and whining in front of the cave.

"Gosh Almighty! He must be in there!" the sheriff exclaimed, and started scrambling down the steep side of the ravine. "Who'd have thought—"

Equally puzzled, the rest of us followed. We all knew about the cave, of course; but no one had thought to search it because it was known to be the abode of bats and small but very disagreeable snakes. Ed Stanton would never have gone in there alive, and he could not have got there dead. But Dr. Morse, now, might be another story—

Patton had forged on ahead of the rest of us, and was standing over the dogs when we came up.

"They've got something cornered in there, but they won't go in after it," he announced. "I've never known them to act like this before. I don't understand it."

The sheriff went over and held up his lantern so that its light pene-

trated some ten or twelve feet into the cave. "The dogs came straight here without seemin' to lose the trail," he commented, "so Morse must be inside. Shall we go in?"

Someone in the crowd offered an objection. "Maybe there's a wild animal in there. If the dogs won't go in—"

But Patton scouted the suggestion. "There's no animal in this part of the country that these dogs are afraid of," he declared. "Still, I'll admit there's something strange about the way they're acting."

He made a final effort to induce the dogs to lead the way into the cave, but without success. They only cowered upon their bellies and whined, gazing pleadingly at him with their large, intelligent eyes.

"It's no use," he announced. "Either we'll have to go in without them, or we stay out."

The sheriff gave a hitch to his belt, and stepped almost casually into the cave entrance. "All right," he drawled. "All them that wants, come along. Them that don't can wait where they are."

There was a momentary hesitancy on the part of a few individuals; but eventually everyone followed him into the dark opening.

We advanced about fifty or sixty feet without making any sort of discovery. A few bats, disturbed by the glare of our lanterns, darted blindly about our heads, but that was all. Then suddenly the sheriff stopped.

"Look," he commanded, and pointed downward.

There, in the thin, sticky mould that covered the damp rock of the floor, was a human footprint!

Instantly an excited babbling of speculation broke out among us. It was quite obvious that the footprint had been made within the past twenty-four hours, since as yet none of the microscopic, green algae plants had begun to form within it. Therefore it had almost certainly been made by Dr. Morse.

Further searching revealed more footprints; in fact, two sets of them, the one superimposed upon the other. From the presence of the algae in

the earlier set, it was plain that it had been made at least several days before the second.

"It looks as if Morse and Stanton might both have come this way," I whispered to Chatham as we began to move forward again.

He nodded. In the ruddy glow of the lanterns, his face appeared worried. "That's what I don't like about it, Wilder," he replied. "What could have brought both of those men to this same cave; and why did neither of them come out?"

"It almost seems as if—" A sudden, startled shout from one of the men up ahead interrupted me.

"Look!" he was crying, pointing a trembling arm as he spoke. "Look over there on that ledge!"

We all looked in the direction he indicated, where a ledge of rock, except for a narrow crevice some two feet wide opening into unexploited blackness, formed the back of the cave. Perched facing us upon this ledge, and seeming to stare at us with unblinking, lusterless eyes, were two human figures!

The sheriff took a quick step forward; then almost dropped his lantern. "Merciful God!" he gasped. "It's Ed Stanton and Doctor Morse!"

So it was. The faces of the two men bore no marks of physical change or disfigurement; yet in some subtle way they had altered so that at first glance we had been unable to recognize them.

A number of the men went over and lifted them down. Both bodies were limp and clammy; but to our surprise, *they were not dead*.

"Get them out of here and into the open," the sheriff ordered. "Maybe we can bring them around."

Four men took up the inert burdens, and we started back the way we had come. Two of the younger fellows, however, lingered behind the others.

"I wonder where that crack leads to," I heard one of them mutter to the other. "I'd like—"

But I was too interested in the condition of Morse and Stanton to pay any further attention. I was to wish later that I had.

The two bodies were placed upon the ground at the entrance to the cave, and the local doctor, who fortunately was one of the party, bent over them.

"I can't make it out," he reported after a brief examination. "It looks like catalepsy, except that there's no rigidity. We'd better get them to a hospital at once."

While crude stretchers were being improvised from coats, Chatham drew me aside.

"Wilder, did you ever see a Cretin?" he asked, lowering his voice so that none of the others might overhear.

"No," I answered, wondering why he should bring up such a subject at this time, "I can't say that I have. Why?"

"Well, I have," he went on, "and except for the physical deformation that accompanies cretinism, the faces have the same blank, mindless look that these two have."

"But what—" I never finished my question. From the interior of the cave arose a sudden wild shriek of terror, followed by a hideous mouth-ing and gibbering that was distinctly not human!

I remembered the two men who had lingered behind.

SNATCHING a lantern, I dashed for the mouth of the cave, followed closely by Chatham and one or two others.

It took me almost no time at all to reach the place where we had *found* Morse and Stanton; but in those few minutes the sounds that had summoned us had subsided into a low jabbering like the chattering of a monkey. And they were coming from *beyond* the crevice at the back of the cave!

Holding the lantern high above my head, I started toward the narrow opening. But before I could reach it, a man staggered out and all but collapsed in my arms. He was Jim Lentz, one of the two who had remained behind.

"Something—in there," he muttered thickly. "Got Hellman—no use . . . going in . . . too late. . . ."

Then he fainted.

I do not lay any claims to bravery for actually pressing on into that dark passageway. It was the sheer excitement of the moment that drove me, leaving no room for fear. Still holding the lantern in front of me, I sidled along the crevice for about six feet. Abruptly, I found myself in another cave.

It was much smaller than the first, so that the light of the lantern penetrated into practically all of it at once. As the ruddy rays sent the black shadows scuttling back among the uneven prominences and fissures that marked the walls and ceiling, I experienced a curious sensation which I am wholly unable to describe. Although I realize how ridiculous the words may sound, I can say only that it was as though some overpowering force had collided with my mind.

The impression was only momentary, and was gone with the retreating shadows. But instantly a second shock—this time wholly explicable—took its place. For, groveling upon the middle of the rock floor and mouthing horribly like some mad animal, was the figure of Hellman!

I heard an exclamation behind me, and realized that Chatham had followed me through the narrow passage.

"Merciful God!" he choked. "He's gone mad!"

"Quick!" I ground between clenched teeth. "We must get him out of here!"

I set the lantern upon a projecting rock, and Chatham and I flung ourselves upon Hellman. He had paid no attention to us until he felt our hands upon him; then he began to fight with the strength of a maniac. In the end we were forced to knock him unconscious before we were able to drag him from the cave.

When he came to, he was still in that savage, bestial state; he had to be taken to an asylum.

NEXT day we heard Lentz's story of what had taken place. I set it down here as nearly as I can in his own words:

"We were about to leave the cave

with the rest of you," he told a group of us, "when Hellman suggested that we stay and see where that little opening at the back led to. I wasn't so keen about it; but when he laughed and said I was afraid, I gave in.

"He had the lantern, and so he went first, while I followed close behind. The passage was so narrow that we had to go sideways; and the first thing I knew my coat had caught on a sharp rock, so that I had to stop to get it loose. Hellman must have thought that I wasn't coming, for he made a grab for me. As he did that, he somehow dropped the lantern, and it went out."

He paused, and passed a trembling hand over his face. It was plain that what he had to relate filled him with almost unendurable horror.

"It's hard to explain what happened next," he went on after a minute; "for I don't exactly know myself. All of a sudden, he let go of me and staggered backwards. Then he let out the most awful yell I've ever heard.

"At first I thought he'd fallen into a pit or something; and I called out to him to ask what was wrong. He didn't answer me with words, but he began to make those awful noises, like—like an animal, or something. There were sounds of thrashing about, too; but they weren't so much like two men or even a man and an animal struggling together as like one man fighting with himself.

"I tried to go to help him; but all of a sudden I—I couldn't move. It was as if everything I'd ever been afraid of without giving a name to it, had taken form in there. If any of you fellows were ever scared of the dark when you were kids, you'll know what I mean. It was like that, only a hundred times worse. And all the time Hellman kept making those terrible noises, not so loud as at first, but more and more like an animal.

"Then I heard somebody coming, and I—I managed to get out to them. I guess that's all I know."

That afternoon the sheriff and several others searched both parts of the cave with powerful electric

torches. They found absolutely nothing; but the sheriff, in telling us about it afterwards, concluded with a strange statement.

"I was the last one to leave the inner cave," he said; "and just as I stepped into that narrow passage that connects the two, a funny thing happened. All of a sudden I had the same feeling that Jake Mills had had in the woods the night after Ed Stanton disappeared; the feeling of something staring at the back of my head. It fairly made the chills go over me, for I knew there wasn't a living thing back there. I've a notion to ask the county commissioners either to have that place sealed up; or, better yet, dynamited."

CHAPTER IV

The Gunthorp Theory

WITH the finding of Stanton and Dr. Morse and the insanity of Hellman, the newspapers, which had hitherto given the disappearances only passing notice, now broke out with headlines. Naturally, this resulted in an army of curiosity seekers who had to be kept away from the cave by an armed guard; but it was also indirectly responsible for bringing about the solution to the whole mysterious affair; for it brought back Prof. Gunthorp.

He presented himself unannounced at our shack, sarcastic and snappy as ever.

"Well, I see you've done nothing toward clearing this mess up," he announced abruptly, "so I came myself."

Chatham made some ill-advised remark about not seeing how the happenings at the cave could come under the province of archeology. The professor shot him a withering glance.

"You wouldn't," he snapped. "I suppose you and Wilder are ready to subscribe to Morse's ghost theory. Still," he added as if on second thought, "that man may have been

nearer to the right track than he realized. A shame he didn't make any sort of notes before the thing got him."

"But he did!" I exclaimed, suddenly remembering the notebook that I had promised the sheriff to translate. "Here they are."

He fairly pounced upon the little book. "You blithering idiots!" he cried. "If you had examined this, that last poor devil, Hellman, might not have been sacrificed. Now get out while I see what Morse had to say."

All the rest of that morning he was occupied with laboriously transcribing Dr. Morse's cramped shorthand. By the middle of the afternoon, he had completed the task, and was ready to share what he had learned with Chatham and me.

"We'll skip over the first few pages," he announced, "since they consist of nothing but Morse's idiotic theories. Funny how an otherwise sane man will cling to worn out superstitions when he can find a wholly satisfactory explanation of the facts in the laws of higher physics. But let that go; you probably wouldn't understand it anyway."

He leafed jerkily over one or two more pages. "This next is an hourly record of his first night's vigil," he continued, "and consists mainly of the words, 'Nothing so far;' so we can skip that, too. But here is his record of the second night up to the point where he was attacked."

He cleared his throat, and began to read aloud:

"Eight p.m. It is fairly dark now, so I will begin my record for tonight, although I really cannot hope for any genuine phenomenon for some hours yet. Still, for the sake of science, it is best to be on the safe side. The woods are very still, but no more so than they should be ordinarily. Again I shall endeavor to work without light, since light of any kind seems to be antagonistic to psychic forces.

"Nine p.m. Nothing yet. The trees and bushes on all sides are loud with the voices of night insects. It seems almost impossible that such

tiny creatures can make so much noise. I am beginning to believe that the true intensity of sound is to be measured only by the intensity of the silence that surrounds it.

"Ten p. m. Either some of the insects have gone to sleep, or I am growing accustomed to their miniature racket. I probably did not notice this last night because I was still too new at this type of vigil.

"Ten-thirty. I am making this entry a half hour earlier, because I believe that soon I will have some sort of success. The insects are nearly all quiet now, a circumstance which I am positive did not occur last night. But it is not merely this cessation of ordinary night noises that leads me to believe I am about to experience some kind of psychic phenomenon. There is a decided feeling of tension in the air, such as is noticeable just prior to a severe electrical storm; yet the sky, wherever it is visible through the trees, is entirely cloudless; and my little barometer, which I examined a moment ago with my flashlight, shows no indication of falling weather.

"Ten forty-five. I was right! A force of some sort is gathering outside my tent. As the man, Mills, described, I can feel eyes upon me; but they are not human eyes. I will make my mind receptive to whatever may be coming.

"Eleven p. m. It is here in the tent with me, and I must fight it off! My God! It is horrible! I can neither see it nor hear it, and yet it has taken hold of me! If the cold arm of an octopus could reach into my mind, it would be like that. It is too strong for me. I—"

Gunthorp looked up from the notebook. "The writing breaks off here in a meaningless scrawl," he said. "The Power must have overcome him."

CHATHAM and I had been listening open-mouthed. "But what power?" I asked incredulously. "If it was something he could neither see nor hear—nor, apparently, even feel tangibly—what was it?"

Gunthorp shot me an enigmatic

glance through his thick-lensed spectacles. "Hasn't it dawned upon you—even now?" he asked.

But Chatham was leaning forward, his red hair bristling with excitement. "Professor!" he exclaimed. "That day we opened the box—the feeling of mental shock!"

"Exactly." The professor's bald head nodded. "The box."

He paused to enjoy the little dramatic moment he had created; then he went on:

"It was a theory of the early physicists and pseudo-physicists—Paracelsus in particular—that atoms were of two classes: the heavier and inert composing matter; the lighter and more active composing mind.

"Of course, such an idea went into the discard even before the subdivisions of the atom were discovered; but it is my belief that Paracelsus came nearer to the truth than even he realized.

"If, as Millikan suggests, all matter is merely a form of energy—and my own experiments tend to bear this out—then it is quite possible that the thing which we call mind or mental force is a form of this energy.

"Whether the process of thought is its ordered releasing through the material chemistry of the brain, or whether it is an independent quantity that acts through the brain, need not concern us now. The important point is that such a quantity should be able to exist in the free state, the same as any other of the known elements.

"If I am right, then some sort of entity made up of this pure energy was imprisoned in the box which you found embedded in the meteor. Don't ask me how or by whom, for those are questions beyond our power to answer. But when the box was opened this force was released, to go about preying upon other mental forces, just as we feed our material bodies with other material bodies. Do you follow me?"

We did, after a fashion, although the idea behind his words seemed almost too fantastic for credence.

Chatham was running his fingers through his hair, as if to aid in as-

simulating the professor's startling statement.

"But it isn't logical!" he finally burst out. "If the thing feeds upon mental power, how did it manage to keep alive during all those hundreds of thousands of years that it was imprisoned in the box?"

"Perhaps 'feeds' is an ill-chosen word," Gunthorp admitted. "The entity—if we can call it such—could exist indefinitely without nourishment because it is composed of pure force; and force is indestructible. It may be more accurate to liken it to a large blob of mercury, which when liberated will draw smaller globules into itself."

We considered this in silence; then:

"But if this thing remains at large, it will go about attacking others as it attacked Stanton and Morse, and later Hellman!" I exclaimed, in horror. "Why, if it isn't stopped, it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility that it will eventually absorb into itself all the mental power of the world! Is there no way to stop it or destroy it?"

"Destroy it, no," Gunthorp answered gravely. "However, it is possible that we may be able to transmute it so that it will be rendered harmless; and that is what we must try to do."

"It has long been a tenet of physics that force, or energy, is produced by the destruction of matter. In other words, matter, which is made up of minute particles, may be changed into energy, which is of wave composition. But recent experiment with light, for example, have shown that it possesses the characteristics of both particles and waves. This leads to the conclusion that the two are but different forms of the same thing, and therefore interchangeable."

"But what has all that to do—" Chatham began, but the professor cut him short.

"Think the old man's raving again, do you?" he snapped. "Well, he's not. What I'm getting at, if you had the brains to see it, is that it's as logical to convert energy into matter

as it is to convert matter into energy."

"Your energy transformer!" I exclaimed, remembering his work at the University, and suddenly seeing the light.

"Exactly," he replied. "Of course, I can't guarantee that the thing will work satisfactorily, since it's still largely in the experimental stage. But, at least, we can try. If it fails—"

He shrugged. "Well, we will have to think of something else."

CHAPTER V

The Reversal of Nature

THAT evening Gunthorp sent off a long wire to his assistant, ordering the shipment of several pieces of apparatus from his laboratory.

Two days later the equipment arrived, a whole truck-load of it. Gunthorp did not unpack it, but directed his assistant, who had brought it personally, to drive it down to the mouth of the cave.

"We'll have to carry it piece by piece into the outer cave, and set it up there," he announced. "I'd prefer to have it in the inner cave, but it would be impossible to get it through that narrow passage. The best we can do is coax the entity out to us."

"But how?" I asked practically.

"You leave that to me," was his only answer.

It took us the better part of a week to set the machinery up to his satisfaction. During all of our operations, we kept the cave brightly lighted with a number of kerosene lamps; for, as Gunthorp pointed out, the thing we were fighting struck only in darkness, indicating that there was some property in light that drove it off. But even with the protection of the lamps, it was eerie enough working in that ghostly, bat-hung cavern, knowing that just beyond the narrow passage in the inner chamber something lurked in wait;

something that fed upon men's minds. . . .

I will not attempt to describe the energy transformer, other than to say that it bore a rough resemblance to those elaborate mechanisms used in experiments to smash the atom, but built on a much smaller scale. It worked, Gunthorp explained, by changing the lengthwise undulation of energy waves to sidewise or cross vibration, which would bring about the transformation of pure energy into free atoms.

When at last everything was in readiness, Gunthorp gave Chatham and me our final instructions.

"I want you both to listen carefully, and to do exactly as I tell you," he began. His usual, fussy bumptiousness was gone now, and he seemed unnaturally grave. "When we go into the cave, we will extinguish all the lanterns. Otherwise the thing will not come out where we are. Then you, Wilder, will start the generator, while I go to the entrance of the narrow passage that leads to the inner cave."

"But, Professor," I broke in, "do you realize what that means? You'll be placing yourself in the position of a human decoy to that monstrosity!"

"Yes, yes, I know," he snapped with a momentary return of his old irritability. "But the thing must be lured out somehow, and that's the only way I can think of. However, there will be little danger if Chatham does precisely what I tell him."

"What do you want me to do?" Chatham asked a little uneasily.

"I want you to stand by the projector," Gunthorp explained. "As soon as you hear me utter a sound—either an intelligible word or otherwise—you will release the transformer beam. Leave it on for five minutes. If at the end of that time I have not returned to shut it off, you must both get out of the cave as fast as you can."

"And leave you there?" Chatham exclaimed. "Not if—"

"Be quiet, you young idiot," Gunthorp interrupted testily. "You'll do as I tell you. I know what I'm about."

His tone precluded further argument. We followed him obediently into the cave.

One after another, the lanterns were extinguished until only one remained. Chatham held it until Gunthorp had taken up his position at the entrance to the passage; then it, too, was put out.

For what seemed an eternity, we stood there in the darkness, waiting. Somewhere in that darkness, we knew, a malignant entity lurked; something that fed upon men's minds and cast aside their bodies like discarded husks. To my over-excited imagination, it seemed that this invisible horror was creeping up on me from all sides at once; and I felt myself shrinking as if from a physical contact.

Abruptly Gunthorp's voice came to us out of the blackness:

"Now!" he hissed. "Release the ray!"

With a feeling of relief that the suspense of waiting was over and definite action about to begin, I heard Chatham throw the switch. The next instant—

HOW shall I ever describe what followed? There was no flash, for the condenser ray was invisible; nor was there any sound other than the steady hum of the generator. But suddenly the air around us became charged with the straining tension of a mighty struggle. A force that was intelligent but not tangible had been caught in the grip of a man-made force, against which it was now fighting for its life!

For nearly four minutes by the radium dial of my wrist watch, the battle raged, seeming all the more terrible because it was not physical. The air seemed to boil and swell, like water churned up by the thrashing of a sea-serpent in its death agony.

And then at last, when it seemed that we ourselves must be crushed by the mighty force of the conflict, something snapped. Of a sudden the tension was dissipated, while the relieved atmosphere appeared to collapse, like the sides of a balloon from

which the straining gases have been released. The struggle was over!

Someone was groping toward the projector. It was Gunthorp; I recognized his voice as he stumbled over some piece of apparatus in the darkness.

"Professor, are you all right?" I called anxiously.

"Of course I'm all right," came his tart reply. "Can't one of you idiots make a light before I break my neck?"

"Here, let me," Chatham offered. He struck a match.

There was a burst of flame, accompanied by a terrific explosion. The walls of the cave rocked around us, and rocks and dirt were rained down upon us. One large sized rock struck me upon the head—

When I regained consciousness, I was lying upon my bunk back in Chatham's and my shack. Gunthorp was bending over me. For the first time since I had known him, I surprised an expression almost of tenderness in his eyes.

"Are you all right, boy?" he asked. "How do you feel?"

"Oh, I guess I'll live," I grinned, trying to ignore the pain in my head. "Tell me what happened."

"It was all my fault," Chatham put in. "That match I struck—"

"It was *my* fault for being an old fool," Gunthorp cut him short. "I should have known better than to have used the converter without testing its strength first.

"You see," he explained, "the ray was much stronger than I had anticipated. Thus, instead of converting the energy entity into free electrons, it condensed it into hydrogen atoms, the lowest step in the atomic scale. Then, when at my direction, Chatham struck a match—" He made an expressive gesture.

"The highly inflammable nature of hydrogen did the rest," Chatham finished. "It took the roof off the cave just above where you were standing, and dropped a piece of it down on your head."

With a start, I sat up, unmindful of the dizzying throbbing in my head. "Good Lord!" I cried in alarm. "If the thing was converted into hydrogen and the hydrogen exploded, then it was turned back into energy again!"

"I know," Gunthorp nodded. "But this time, it was scattered by the force of the explosion, and can do no damage. Or at least," he added grimly, "so I hope."

And so far, it seems that he is right. It is more than probable that the entity, torn apart by the explosion, was rendered utterly powerless. Or if it was not, it apparently profited by its bitter experiences in the world of men, and fled back to the distant stars from which it came originally.

But that is something, I suppose, we shall never know. God keep us from such things. We need more mind in the world not less.

NOVELETS AND SHORT STORIES BY MANLY
WADE WELLMAN, ROBERT BLOCH, MORDRED
WEIR, WILL GARTH, NORMAN A. DANIELS,
AUGUST W. DERLETH, HENRY KUTTNER, AND
MANY OTHERS

In the next issue of STRANGE STORIES

Eerie and Flesh-Crawling Revelations Form this Shocking Kaleidoscope of a Mind Crying "Not Guilty"



"That night the flies were worse than usual"

The Dead Woman

By DR. DAVID H. KELLER

Author of "The Thing In The Cellar," "The Human Termites," etc.

HE WAS found in the room with his wife, slightly confused, a trifle bewildered, but otherwise apparently normal. He made no effort to conceal his conduct any more than he did to the knife in his hand or the pieces in the trunk.

Fortunately the inspector was an officer of more than usual intelligence, and there was no effort made to give the third degree or even se-

cure a written confession. Perhaps the Police Department felt it was too plain a case. At least it was handled intelligently and in a most scientific manner. The man was well fed, carefully bedded, and the next morning, after being bathed and shaved was taken to see a psychiatrist.

The specialist in mental diseases had the man comfortably seated. Knowing he smoked, he offered a

cigar, which was accepted. Then, in a quiet, pleasant atmosphere, he made one statement and one request.

"I am sure, Mr. Thompson, that you had an excellent reason for acting as you did the other day. I wish you would tell me all about it."

THE man gazed at the psychiatrist. "Will you believe me if I tell you?"

"I will accept every part of your story with the idea that you are convinced that you are telling me the truth."

"That is all I want," whispered Thompson. "If everyone I talked to in the past had done that, if they had even tried to check up on my story, perhaps this would not have happened. But they always thought that I was the sick one, and there was not one who was willing to accept my statement about the worms."

"I suppose that I was happily married. At least as much so as most men are. You know that there is a good deal of conflict between the sexes, and there were a few differences of opinion between Mrs. Thompson and myself. But not enough to cause serious difficulty. Will you remember that? That we did not quarrel very much?"

"About a year ago my wife's health began to give me considerable cause for worry. She started to fail. If you are a married man, Doctor, you know there is always that anxiety about the wife's health. You become accustomed to living with a woman, having her do things for you, go to places with you and you think about how life would be if she should sicken and die. Perhaps the fact that you are uneasy about the future makes you exaggerate the importance of her symptoms."

"At any rate she became sick, developed a nasty cough and lost weight. I spoke to her about it and even bought a bottle of beef, wine and iron at the drug store and made her take it. She did so to please me, but she never would admit that she was sick. Said it was fashionable to be thin and that the cough was just nervousness."

"She would not go to see a doctor. When I spoke to her mother about it, the old lady just laughed at me; said that if I tried to make Lizzie a little happier she would soon get fat. In fact, none of our family or our friends seemed to feel that there was anything wrong with Mrs. Thompson, so I stopped talking about it."

"Of course it was not easy on me, the way she coughed at night, and her staying awake so much. I work hard in the daytime and it is hard to lose a lot of sleep. At last I was forced to ask her to let me sleep in the spare bedroom."

"Even that did not help much. I could hear her cough, and when she did fall asleep I would have to tip-toe into her room and see if she was all right. Her coughing bothered me so much that when she did not cough it worried me more because I thought something had happened to her."

"One night the thing I was afraid of happened. She had a hard spell of coughing and then she stopped. It was quiet in the house. I could hear the clock on the landing tick, and a mouse gnawing wood in the attic. I thought I could even hear my own heart beat, but there was not a sound of any kind from the other bedroom."

"When I went in there and turned on the light I just knew it was all over. Of course I was not sure. A bookkeeper is not supposed to be an expert in such matters, so I went and telephoned for our doctor. On the way to the phone I wondered just what I should say, for he had always insisted that my wife was in grand health. So I simply told him that Mrs. Thompson was not looking well and would he come over. Just like that I told him, and tried to keep my voice steady."

"It was about an hour before he came. He went into the bedroom but I stopped at the doorway. He spent sometime listening to her heart and feeling her pulse and then he straightened up and said to me:

"She is fine. Just fast asleep. I wish I could sleep as soundly as that. What did you think was wrong?"

"That surprised me so much that all I could do was to stammer some-

thing about not hearing her cough any more. He laughed.

"You worry too much about her, Mr. Thompson."

"Right there my difficulty started. Here was a doctor who was supposed to know his business and he said there was nothing wrong with my wife, and there I was, just a book-keeper, and I just knew what was the matter. What was I to do? Tell him that he was wrong? Send for another physician?"

"It was growing light by that time, so I went down to the kitchen and started the coffee. I often did that. Then I shaved, and made ready to go to the office. But before I went I sat down a while by the wife's bed. It bothered me but I had to keep telling myself that the doctor knew better than I did.

BEFORE leaving the house I phoned to my mother-in-law. Just told her that Lizzie was not feeling well and would she come over and spend the day, and she could get me at the office any time she called. Then I left the house. It felt better out in the sunshine and after working a few hours over the books I almost laughed at myself for being so foolish.

"No telephone calls from the old lady. I arrived home at six and found the house lighted as usual. My wife and mother-in-law were waiting for me in the parlor and told me supper was ready. Naturally, I was surprised to see my wife out of bed.

"At the supper table I watched her just as carefully as I could without making the two of them suspicious of me. Mrs. Thompson ate about as she usually did, just pieced and minced at her food, but I thought when she swallowed that the food went down with a jerk, and there was a stiffness when she moved.

"But her mother did not seem to think there was anything wrong, at least she did not make any comment. Even when I went with her to the front door to say good night to her and we were alone there, she never said a word to show that she thought her daughter was peculiar.

"I started to wash the dishes after that. I often washed the dishes at night while the wife sat in the front parlor watching the people go up and down past the house. After the kitchen was tidy I lit a cigar and went into the parlor and started a little conversation, but Mrs. Thompson never talked back. In fact I do not believe she ever talked to me after that, though I am positive that she talked to the others.

"When the cigar was smoked, I just said good night and went to bed. Later I could hear her moving around in her room, and then all was quiet so she must have gone to bed. She did not cough any more. I congratulated myself on that one thing because the coughing had kept me awake a good deal.

"During the night I lit a candle and, shading it with my hand, tip-toed in to see her. She had her eyes open, but they were rolled back so all you could see was the whites, and she was not breathing. At least I could not tell that she was breathing; and when I held a mirror in front of her mouth there was no vapor on it. My mother had told me the purpose of that when I was a boy.

"The next day was just the same. My mother-in-law came and spent the day. I came home at night and ate supper with them and washed the dishes. The water was hot and it was a pleasure to make them clean. Perhaps I took longer than usual at it because I did not fancy the idea of going into the front parlor where the wife was sitting looking out of the window.

"But I went in, tonight without the usual cigar. I wanted to use my nose. It seemed there was a peculiar odor in the house, like flowers that had been put in a vase of water and then forgotten, for many days. Perhaps you know the odor, Doctor, a heavy one, like lilies of the valley in a small closed room. It was specially strong in the parlor, where Mrs. Thompson was sitting, and it seemed to come from her. I had to light the cigar after a while, and by and by I said good night, and went to bed. She

never spoke to me, in fact she did not seem to pay any attention to me.

"About two that morning I took the candle and went in to look at her. Her eyelids were open and her eyeballs were rolled back just like they had been the night before but now her jaw was dropped and her cheeks sunk in. I just could not do anything but telephone for a doctor and this time I picked out a total stranger, just picked his name out of the telephone book haphazard.

"What good did it do? None at all. He came, he examined Mrs. Thompson very carefully and he simply said that he did not see anything wrong with her; and then down in the front hall he turned on me and asked me just why I had sent for him and what I thought was the matter with her? Of course I just could not tell him the truth, with his being a doctor and I being just a bookkeeper.

"MY mother-in-law went to the mountains next day for the summer and that left us alone. Breakfast as usual and to the office and not a word all day from the house. When I came back at night the house was lit and supper was on the table and the wife at her end as usual and the food served and on the plates. She ate, but her movements were slower, and when she swallowed you could see the food go down by jerks, and her eyes were sunken into the sockets and seemed shiny and—well, like the eyes of a fish on the stalls.

"There were flowers on the table, but the smell was something different, it was sweeter and when I took a deep breath it was just hard for me to go on eating the pork chops and potatoes. You see it was summer time and warm, and in spite of the screens there was a fly or two in the house, and when I saw one walking around on her lip and she not making any effort to brush it off, I just couldn't keep on eating. Had to go and start washing the dishes. Perhaps you can understand how I felt, Doctor. Things looked rather odd.

"The next day I phoned to the

office that I would not be there and I sent for a taxi and took Mrs. Thompson to a first class specialist. He must have been good because he charged me twenty-five dollars just for the office call. I went in first and told him just exactly what I was afraid of, and I did not mince my words, and then we had the wife in.

"He examined her, even her blood, and all the satisfaction I got was that she seemed a trifle anaemic, but that I had better take a nerve tonic and a vacation or I would be sick.

"Things looked rather twisted after that. Either I was right and everybody else wrong, or they were right and I was just about as wrong mentally as a man could be. But I had to believe my senses. A man just has to believe what he sees and hears and feels, and when I thought over that office visit, and the wife smiling and the doctor sticking her finger for the blood to examine, it just seemed impossible. Anaemic! Why—that was a simple word to describe her condition.

"That night the flies were worse than usual. I went to the corner store and bought a fly spray and used it in her bedroom but they kept coming in, the big blue ones, you know. Seemed as though they just had to come in and I could not keep them off her face so at last, in desperation, I covered her head up with a towel and went to sleep. I had to work, the interest on the mortgage was due and the man wanted something on the principal, and it was a good house and all I had in the world to show for twenty years of hard work keeping books.

"The next day was just like all the days had been, except that I made more mistakes with the books and my boss spoke to me about it. And when I arrived home supper was not ready though Mrs. Thompson was in the parlor and the lights on. The heavy odor was worse than usual and there were a lot of flies. You could hear them buzz and strike against the electric lights. I got my own supper but I couldn't eat much, thinking of her in the parlor and the flies settling on her open mouth.

"She just sat there that night in the parlor till I went to her and took her arm to lead her up the stairs. She was cold and on each cheek there was a heavy purple blotch forming. Once she was in her room she seemed to move around so I left her alone and when I went into her room later on she was in bed.

"It had been a hard week for me, so I sat down by her bed and tried to think, but the more I thought the worse things seemed. The night was hot and the flies kept buzzing; just thinking of the past and how we used to go to the movies together and laugh and sometimes come near crying, and how we used to bluff about the fact that perhaps it was just as well we didn't have a child so long as we had each other, knowing all the time that she was eating her heart out for longing to be a mother and blaming me for her loneliness.

"The thinking was too much for me so I thought I might as well smoke another cigar and go to bed and try to keep better books the next day and hold my job—and then I saw the little worm crawl out.

"Right then and there, I knew that something had to be done. It didn't make any difference what the doctors or her mother said, something had to be done and I was the one who had to do it.

"I telephoned for an undertaker.

"Met him downstairs.

"'It will be a private funeral,' I told him, 'and no publicity, and I think after you are through you will have no trouble obtaining a physician's certificate.'

"He went up stairs. In about five minutes he came down stairs.

"'I must have gone to the wrong room,' he said.

"'The second story front bedroom,' I replied.

"'But the woman there is not dead,' he said.

"I paid him for his trouble and shut the door in his face. Was I helpless? Doctor, you have to believe me. I was at the end of my rope. I had tried every way I knew and there was not anything left to do. No one believed me. No one

agreed with me. It seemed more and more as though they thought I was insane.

"IT WAS impossible to keep her in the house longer. My health was giving way. Working all day at figures that were going wrong all the time and coming back night after night cooking my supper and sleeping in a room next to the thing that had been my wife. What with the smell of lilies of the valley and the buzz of flies and the constant dread in my mind of how things would be the next day and the next week, and the mortgage due. I had to do something.

"And it seemed to me that she wanted me to. It seemed that she recognized that things were not right, that she was entitled to a different kind of an ending. I tried to put myself in her place and I knew what I would want done with me if things were reversed.

"So I brought the trunk up from the cellar. We had used that trunk on our wedding trip and every summer since on our vacations and I thought that she would be more at peace in that trunk than in a new one. But when I had the trunk by her bed, I saw at once that it was too small unless I used a knife.

"That seemed to be the proper thing to do, and I was sure that it would not hurt her. For days she had been past hurting. I told her I was sorry but it just had to be done and if people had just believed me things could have been arranged in a nicer way. Then I started.

"Things were confused after that.

"I seem to remember a scream and blood spurting, and the next thing there were a lot of people in the house and they arrested me.

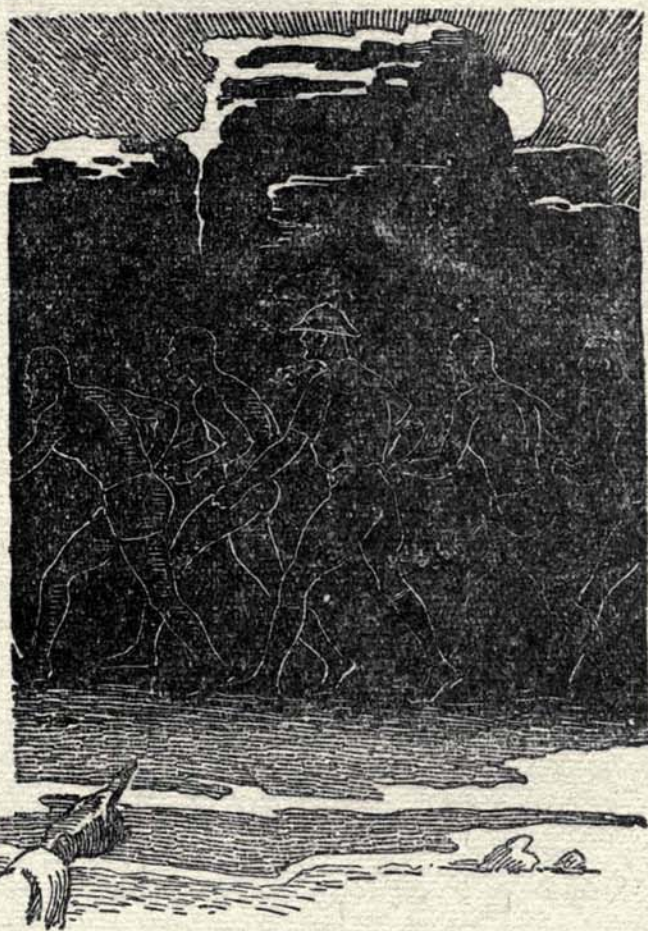
"And that is the peculiar part of it all, Doctor. Perhaps you do not know it but I am accused of murdering my wife. Now I have told you all about it, Doctor, and I just want to ask you one question. If you had been in my place, day after day, and night after night, what would you have done, Doctor? What would any man have done who loved his wife?"

The Vengeance of Ai

*The Ancient Goddess of the
Chaldeans Still Exacts
Tribute in the Valley
of the Moon!*

By
MARK SCHORER

*Author of
"Portrait of Ladies," etc.*



"Do you see them, running, running—"

WHEN Margaret Levering left me in London, she said, "There is something that can't wait out there, Peter."

I knew that whatever she implied had to do with her father, then four months dead, but Margaret would tell me nothing more. She went on to Cairo alone, as she wished. But when six weeks passed, with only the brief and strained notes from her, I knew something was wrong, and followed her.

At the Hotel Continental in Cairo late one afternoon in October, I had barely finished bathing when a boy appeared with a sealed note for me, although I had informed no one of my arrival. I ripped it open and read:

Dear Mr. Harris:

I understand you have just come from London, and I assume you are led here by your interest in the welfare of Margaret Levering, the now Lady Warrender, who

is in Cairo at the Hotel Memphis, and who has more than once spoken of you. Please be so good as not to refer in any way to her father, the late Lord Warrender, nor to his recent excavations and unfortunate death in the Valley of the Moon.

I should be glad to talk this unusual request over with you, as between mutual friends of Lady Warrender, if you should so desire. May I respectfully urge you to see me before you see Lady Warrender? You will find me in Room 77 of this hotel. Ask for

Ernest Lumsden.

Ernest Lumsden? I had never heard of him.

Be so good as not to refer in any way to her father, he had written. Why not? Margaret was perfectly aware of her father's excavations, and knew almost as much of archeology, anthropology, and Egyptology, as he had known himself. Why make no mention of something that had been headlined in every newspaper and journal in the English speaking world?

Lord Warrender had been crushed to death by a falling statue in the temple-tomb of Ai, Goddess of the Moon. I remembered again in my hotel room how bravely Margaret had taken his death. They were adventurers, those two, and the true adventurer is always ready to meet what Providence may have in store for him.

I knocked loudly at number 77.

The door opened almost immediately, and I found myself confronted by an elderly gentleman, whose not unkind face was lined with wrinkles. His hair was sparse and white, yet he could not have been much over fifty.

"May I see Mr. Lumsden?" I inquired.

"I am Mr. Lumsden. Come in."

"Thank you." I walked past him into the room.

When he had closed the door again, he turned to me. "Peter Harris?" he asked.

I nodded curtly.

"It was good of you to come." He turned slightly and indicated a youngish man whom I had not noticed before. "Allow me to present the Sheikh Al-Jubal, Mr. Peter Har-

ris." The Egyptian wore a white drill suit and carried a cane; except for the turban binding his swarthy head, he might easily have been mistaken for an Englishman browned by the hot African sun. The Sheikh Al-Jubal bowed.

I TURNED to Lumsden again. "I confess that I found your note surprising," I said. "May I know its meaning?"

"Lord Warrender was my best friend," Lumsden began quietly, his eyes steadily on me. "Had I so much as set foot in London in the past twenty years, you would no doubt have known of me before this. As a dear friend of her late father, I am naturally interested in Lady Warrender."

I nodded.

"The Sheikh Al-Jubal," he went on, indicating once more the silent Egyptian, "also knew her father well. His intimate acquaintance with the history and present state of the Valley of the Moon proved invaluable to Lord Warrender in his work here. During an acquaintance that was at first a matter of convenience, these two came to regard each other with deep respect and friendship." He paused. "I hope you can see, Harris, that in us you have two friends, interested only in Lady Warrender's welfare."

The old man's manner and speech convinced me of his integrity. "I appreciate that," I said.

"Good," he said, nodding abruptly. "Do you know the history of the tombs in the Valley of the Moon?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I don't. My knowledge of Egyptology is practically nil, and in these more unusual matters, I confess I know nothing at all."

Lumsden turned to the Sheikh. "Tell him, Al-Jubal."

The Sheikh addressed me for the first time since our introduction. I looked at this dark man with the heavy black beard, the beetling brows, the thin lips. He spoke in a low, pleasant voice.

"Ai, the Moon Goddess, is not

Egyptian, yet she is the goddess of that accursed valley, worshiped and revered by many of our natives even today."

He paused, as if searching for a point at which to begin, and presently went on.

"Long years ago, a wealthy Chaldean merchant left his native land for Egypt. He came personally to barter his finest wares with Egypt's princes, and his stay was climaxed by his fortunate marriage to an Egyptian lady of quality.

"The family founded by that marriage was one of the richest and most influential during that whole period, and the wealthy merchant found Egypt so to his liking that he made his home here, as many others have done since. When he died, the question of burial arose. Despite his family and his importance, he was not Egyptian. He desired burial under the protection of his own gods.

"So, a tomb was built in what has since been called the Valley of the Moon. There his mummy was laid. And though he was the only foreigner in that resting place, Ai, Chaldean Goddess of the Moon, continued as the protecting deity of the valley and of the people buried there.

"In the innermost chamber of that first tomb in the valley there is a colossal statue of Ai. Around her neck is suspended a giant pectoral of gold, an eight-rayed disk, symbol of the divine power of Ai. These facts were brought to light by Lord Warrender. His labor had brought him to this inner chamber, and it was there that his work was so unfortunately cut short."

The Egyptian ceased abruptly and settled back.

"Was it that statue that crushed him?" I asked.

Lumsden nodded. "Yes, it was the great statue of Ai that toppled from its base and killed Lord Warrender in its fall. The accident occurred when he attempted to remove the golden amulet from the neck of the colossus."

"Isn't it odd that a statue of that size should topple?" I asked.

"No one thought of that until the Sheikh and I got to looking into the matter," said Lumsden. "Lord Warrender had spoken of the statue to us, pointing out that it was attached very firmly to its base. So firmly, indeed, that he made much of the fact that it would be extremely difficult to do anything with it. Yet, the next day it fell, crushing him."

"Could Lord Warrender have been deceived? Perhaps it only *seemed* firmly attached?" I ventured.

LUMSDEN shrugged his shoulders, but the look on his face showed his scorn for my suggestion that Lord Warrender might have been in error.

"Perhaps you will think that we too were deceived when the Sheikh and I found the statue of Ai restored to its base when we visited the tomb after Warrender's burial!"

Before I could reply, the Sheikh Al-Jubal cut in suddenly, "There were other things. Do not forget them, Lumsden. Mr. Harris perhaps thinks that worshiping natives crept into the temple-tomb at night and righted the statue."

Lumsden spread his hands. "Yes," he said, "perhaps he does." As a matter of fact, that was exactly what I had been thinking. But Lumsden went on:

"I'd almost forgotten—there were other things. The terror of the natives when they saw the statue of Ai and the eight-rayed moon-disk, and their subsequent flight. They were afraid of something—screamed out something about a curse, and went positively frantic when Lord Warrender suggested removing the amulet from about the neck of the statue.

"When Lord Warrender went down into the crypt to take the amulet, only two white aides were with him. The natives would not go near the tomb, nor can any of them be induced to enter the tomb even now. Only the two white men saw the statue topple and fall just as Lord Warrender was about to remove the golden disk—and since then, one of those two men has

died a mysterious and unaccountable death!"

"What are you implying?" I asked.

The Sheikh Al-Jubal interposed. "It is not a time to beat about the bush," he said. "The matter is clear for those who wish to see. The desecrator of Ai's temple-tomb is cursed; nothing can save him from death."

I smiled half-heartedly, with an insolent superiority which I did not quite feel. "Am I expected to take this seriously?" I asked.

Al-Jubal frowned impatiently, and Lumsden looked irritated. Then the Sheikh spoke again, with a scornful gesture in my direction.

"Perhaps Mr. Harris will consider more seriously the as yet unexplained death of Lord Warrender's successor, Herbert Lanseer? He was found just outside the temple-tomb of Ai. He seemed to have been beaten or crushed to death. There were strange marks—the marks of the guardians of Ai, those invisible spirits who have been set to guard the Valley of the Moon and those sleeping there."

A GAIN I felt uneasy. If it was this sort of nonsense. . . .

"Well, what has all this got to do with Lady Warrender?" I demanded.

"Everything in the world," said Lumsden quietly. "Lady Warrender is somewhat less skeptical than you."

I was astounded. "Do you mean to say that Margaret, scientist that she is, actually believes her father to have been killed by the vengeance of Ai—and that other man, Lanseer, I think you called him?"

Lumsden looked away, sighing gently. "Yes," he said, "she believes that—and more. She believes much more. There is another native belief which might interest you."

"And that?" I asked, finding it somewhat difficult to keep the scorn I felt from my voice.

The Sheikh spoke again. "As Ai cursed her father's life, so has Ai cursed his death. As she avenged herself on his body, so she still avenges herself on his invisible soul. She has condemned his spirit by the power of her curse to run always with the guardians of the valley when they go from

tomb to tomb on the night of the full moon. Sometimes, Mr. Harris, *they have been seen!*"

"Have you seen them?" I asked sharply.

"No," said Lumsden at once, "but it is not always necessary to see."

I came to my feet. I took my hat from the table. "Thank you," I said, "for your kind intentions. But this sounds like pretty tall stuff to me. I'm sorry." I walked toward the door.

But before I reached it, the door swung open, and a native garbed in conventional English clothes burst into the room. Something had happened that concerned the two men to whom I had been speaking, for both stared at the stranger with apprehensive faces. After a quick glance at me, he addressed Lumsden and the Sheikh.

"Lattal has been found. Near the tomb, where you thought. His head is beaten in—like the others—Lanseer and Weatherbee."

Lumsden and the Sheikh looked at me. I felt my confident superiority crumbling. I turned from the door, looking from Lumsden to the Sheikh. "Who is Lattal?" I asked, but already a premonition was forming in my mind.

"Lattal," said Lumsden, "was the other of the two men who saw the statue crush Lord Warrender. Weatherbee was the first. Both of them left their hotel at dead of night, without a word to anyone. Lattal went as if in a daze—as if some power outside himself was drawing him away from the city. Is it asking too much of you to believe that Lattal's death is linked to the other three by the power of Ai's curse? Or do you think these deaths a series of remarkable coincidences, Mr. Harris?"

It was with a confidence I was far from feeling that I hedged. "Stranger coincidences have happened." I turned to the door again with an effort.

Lumsden was there before me. "Listen, Harris," he said, not unkindly, "I know how difficult belief must be for you. I understand your attitude. But remember Margaret. You don't realize the nervous condition this has brought her to. Go to her if you must, but do not mention her father. If she

chooses to bring him up herself, there is nothing to be done about it. We're trying to keep her mind off it. We're urging her to go back to London. You've got to help."

I put out my hand and took his. "There's nothing I'd like better than to see Lady Warrender back in London," I said. "Nothing. You may count on me—but as for this supernatural business, that's out, absolutely."

"I understand. But Margaret will not return until she is convinced that her father's spirit is not bound to run with the guardians of the temple-tomb of Ai."

"Then you yourself do not believe?" I asked quickly.

"You misunderstand me, Harris. I do," he replied quietly. "But the important thing is to convince Margaret that the legend is untrue."

He bowed slightly, and opened the door. The Sheikh Al-Jubal raised his hand in a farewell gesture. I heard Lumsden sigh as I walked past him into the hall.

I went out into the bright streets of Cairo heading for the Hotel Memphis and Margaret. I admit that my confidence was severely shaken, something I had not cared to show Lumsden and the Sheikh. Yet I could not wholly believe in a mythical curse. Nor could I believe that Margaret, so sure of herself and her science—Margaret, so serene, so rational and urbane—could credit the existence of such a curse. I brushed the suggestion aside, looking forward to seeing her again, and thought that by Christmas we could be married.

I looked for Margaret on the green terrace of the Hotel Memphis. In a moment I saw her, sitting alone by a table just under the wall. Her face was pressed into her hands, and her attitude was strangely dejected. I walked quickly to where she sat and stopped beside her. She was not aware of me until I said, "Hello."

Then she lifted her head slowly and looked up at me. She smiled, and came to her feet. "Peter, you surprised me," she cried, but her voice was listless.

"Is that your only welcome?" I asked, gently chiding.

"I'm glad you came, Peter, so glad. I need you!" For a moment there was intensity in her voice, and an unusual emphasis. Perhaps Lumsden had been right, after all.

"I've come to take you back to London," I said, watching her closely, hopefully.

She looked at me, her face expressionless. "I don't know when I can go back."

I watched her face. Under her large hat I saw her heavily shadowed eyes, the line of strain across her forehead, the frightened expression of her lips. "There's something wrong with you, my dear," I said. "Can't you tell me what it is?"

FOR a time she said nothing. Yes, I thought, Lumsden was right. She is going to tell about it now. I had the uneasy belief that she was going to reiterate everything Lumsden and the Sheikh Al-Jubal had already told me.

"You remember Asid, my father's servant, who stayed here in Cairo after his death?"

I nodded.

"He was very dear to us. He had always been utterly faithful, scrupulously honest. About a week before I left London, I had a letter from him. In it he said that there were strange things happening about the tomb of Ai in the Valley of the Moon. There were stories of weird, ghostly figures, running each night the moon rose full; Asid had seen them, he wrote. *And one of them was my father!*"

She trembled a little.

"At first I didn't believe it. But it worked on me, it grew on me. The idea of the spirit of my father haunting the Valley of the Moon together with the native guardian spirits became so terrible that I had to come, and I will not return to London until I have seen with my own eyes that my father is not there."

I said, "You don't believe that, Margaret."

She looked at me. "I don't know," she said. "There are strange things here in Egypt, stories of weird, unbelievable curses."

I brushed this aside, impatiently. She broke into speech again.

"On the night of the last full moon, I went out there with Asid. He insisted that I come. An old friend of my father's went along, Ernest Lumsden. I went because I wanted to prove to him that there was nothing, could be nothing. Mr. Lumsden did not want me to go. But I went. I don't know what it was I saw. I think it was my father. There was something, yes. But perhaps it was because of Asid believing in it so strongly. We stood a little way from the tomb of Ai. Suddenly, he clutched my wrist in his hand, pressed it hard in his excitement, and said, 'There! Do you see them, Lady, running, running—' And I thought I did—naked natives, and my father, dressed as he was when he died.

"Peter, I've got to see it through. Tomorrow is another full moon. I'm going out there again, without Asid. This time I'll make sure. Tomorrow morning, early. Ernest Lumsden and the Sheikh Al-Jubal are going, too. And I want you to come. I need you with me."

"And if there is nothing?" I said. "Will you go back to London with me?"

She nodded.

I imagine that our cavalcade, starting slowly out of Cairo before dawn the next morning, would have seemed an ordinary tourist's expedition to the casual observer. He would have seen a lady and three men, the lady's maid, and two guides.

Our horses took us out of the gray city and into the shadowed desert. Lumsden went ahead with a motor-lorry carrying a searchlight and tenting equipment. We hoped to reach the Valley of the Moon before the hottest part of the day, though it was a good seventy miles out of Cairo. In the desert, with Cairo already disappearing under the dunes behind us, the first glimmerings of dawn breaking in the sky, our purpose seemed vague and faraway to me.

Once at the Valley of the Moon, the guides helped us throw up the tents. Water was drawn under the palms that sheltered the tombs, and rugs were spread. Then, with the guides on guard, the rest of us retired to the

shelter of our tents, and there we rested until the sun had set that night. In the shadowy evening we ate a light supper, and the guides prepared rugs before the tents for the watch. A camp chair was put in place for Margaret to rest on.

The sudden night of the desert came down with startling abruptness. Our camp was enshrouded in blackness, with the dying campfire flickering near the tents. Sitting there, I heard the Sheikh Al-Jubal call to Lumsden, "Is the searchlight in order?"

Lumsden called back, "Yes. I'll take care of it."

I began to wonder suddenly why a searchlight had been brought, but my thoughts were diverted by the faint yellow light that came suddenly into being above the edge of the desert, and then the rim of the round moon began its slow climb over the horizon. We waited tensely, saying little, watching for the moment when the moon would be wholly above the sand, when the faint reddish glow would strike the entrance to the great tomb of Ai. Margaret strained forward, her eyes fixed on the now hazily lighted row of tombs. There was not a sound in the night. I felt uneasy.

"Are you all right, dear?" I whispered.

SHE did not turn, but I felt her hand on mine. She nodded quickly not wanting to speak. Then suddenly she started forward. "Listen!" she murmured, tensely. The moon had topped the desert. I looked into her face.

At that moment the Sheikh shouted. "The light, Lumsden! The light!" And before Margaret's eyes were focused on the tomb of Ai again, the great white light was trained there, moving slowly across the face of the tomb, then away down the line of tombs in the Valley of the Moon. A sudden wind had come up, a rushing sound in the night. Slowly the ray moved from tomb to tomb. Margaret leaning forward tensely watching its path. But there was nothing living in its light. Back came the ray again to the great tomb of Ai, and once more it descried a circle. There was nothing,

and the sudden strange wind died as suddenly as it came.

Margaret fell back in her chair. "Nothing," she murmured. "Peter, there was nothing."

"Of course not," I exulted. "Of course not."

"It was Asid, wishing so intensely to believe in his native legends," she went on. She turned radiant eyes on me, "We'll start for England this week, tomorrow!"

We turned in, to get what sleep we could before our early trek back. But I could not sleep. I lay for what seemed a long time awake in the stillness. And then abruptly I heard the sound of hushed voices and the peculiar padding of feet in the sand. I rose on my elbow and listened. Then I crept stealthily to the opening in the tent and peered out. Lumsden and the Sheikh were walking rapidly toward the tomb of Ai. In a moment I was out of the tent and had joined them.

I ASSUMED readily enough that these two were likewise unable to sleep. I wanted to jibe at them for their belief in the legend which I had seen disproved, yet I could not come directly out and speak.

"Tell me," I asked, after whispered greetings had been exchanged, "why did you move that searchlight so slowly?"

"It was necessary for me to approximate the speed of running men," replied Lumsden without a moment's hesitation. "I had to keep them in that blinding light, so that she wouldn't see. . . ."

"Good God, Lumsden, don't tell me you still believe—"

Both he and the Sheikh smiled gently. Together we came to a stop. Lumsden's stick was pointing downward, and both Lumsden and Al-Jubal were looking at the sand. We were standing just outside the great tomb of Ai.

I looked down. There, in the sand I knew unmolested by wind, for there had been very little wind all that night, were little pits, as if many feet had been running there. Then a cry escaped me.

Before me, in the center of that running line, I saw a single track, a deeper

track, a track that showed clear and distinct on the wet sand under the overhanging palm trees—the track of feet wearing shoes!

Even as I looked, the Sheikh Al-Jubal began methodically to scuff away the traces, following the wide circle, while Lumsden went back along the trail. All my cocksure confidence had left me. I understood that these two were obliterating this definite proof of the curse of Ai so that Margaret might not see in the morning.

Lumsden turned to me. "The first part of the task I have set for myself is finished, Harris. Margaret will return to London now—and you must go with her. Before I leave the Valley of the Moon in the morning, I am going to try to break the curse that binds Warrender's spirit to the tomb of Ai."

"Then I will help you," I said rashly.

A quick glance flashed between the Sheikh and Lumsden. I detected approval in the Sheikh's eyes, and felt strengthened in my resolve. Lumsden did not protest, and in consequence I witnessed a phenomenon which has immeasurably strengthened my belief in the powers of light and darkness.

Lumsden and the Sheikh had come prepared.

A large circle was first drawn in the sand a short distance away from the temple-tomb of Ai, and both Lumsden and the Sheikh stepped within. But when I made as if to follow them, they waved me back.

"You can help best, Harris, by mounting guard over Lady Warrender's tent," said Lumsden. "You will be able to watch quite clearly, and should anything approach the tent, you will be there."

I did not argue, but returned at once to the tent. Nevertheless, I went back with a sharp feeling of disappointment. I took my stand near the opening of Margaret's tent, and watched the strange ceremony that took place within the circle the Sheikh had drawn in the sand.

It was the Sheikh who began the ceremony, murmuring a cryptic incantation in his native language. Presently the great door of the tomb of Ai began to glow, a weird, reddish fire

seeming to spread over it, outlining it.

Then suddenly, a group of strange, lifeless figures began to drift from the closed door—naked natives padding automatically outward toward the circle occupied by Lumsden and Al-Jubal. They moved toward the circle, white and ghostly, stretching out their arms toward the two who sat there, yet unable to break into the circle.

They passed around it, billowing forward and back like a wave, a silent sea of ghastly horror. A feeling of terror crept into me; I dared not think what might happen should these figures from the tomb turn toward Margaret's tent.

MY attention was attracted to the tomb, for from it emerged a single figure, white and still—Lord Warrender. His diaphanous shape was clear and distinct. His rugged face was drawn tight, emotionless. He came forward slowly toward the circle. I glanced hastily toward the Sheikh and Lumsden. They were leaning excitedly forward, and Lumsden had moved to the very edge of the circle, oblivious to the hands stretched out toward him, held back only by that invisible wall created in some manner by the strange magic known to the Sheikh.

The shadowy Lord Warrender approached the circle, and as he arrived at its outer edge, the Sheikh rose up, and thundered forth a sentence that scattered the native spirits reaching toward the two in the circle. At that moment, Lumsden broke the circle and Lord Warrender's vague form drifted through. At once, Lumsden closed the circle again.

Then a strange thing happened. The ghostly shadow of Lord Warrender began to collapse, sinking into the ground.

Only when it had completely disappeared did the Sheikh turn his attention again to the guardian spirits of the tomb of Ai. He began now to drive them back into the tomb. They fought

silently to reach beyond the circle, then gradually their ghastly intent weakened, they turned reluctantly, and shuffled in weird procession back to the tomb, through the door of which they returned as they had come. The glow began to fade away from the tomb, and in a few moments the Sheikh and Lumsden left the circle and came wearily over to me. I went forward to meet them.

"He will run no more, Harris," said Lumsden. Then he looked gently at the tent which hid Margaret from us, shook his head a little, and said, "Take care of her, and get her away at once in the morning. I don't want her here, if anything should happen. It is not always easy to break a curse, and sometimes there is a penalty."

I disregarded his enigmatic words then. But a month later a letter came from Lumsden. It was a letter of farewell. He wrote at some length, rambling on for pages, but the point of his letter lay in his last pathetic paragraph:

Al-Jubal was found today—near the tomb. He went from the hotel in the night—like the others—drawn by a power we are unable to combat. Soon I must go, too. I have been given a short period of grace, I feel—but the end is in sight. I told you that it is not easy for mere man to break an ancient curse as we did that night on the desert—and I foresaw what might happen. That is why I did not let you come into the circle with us—so that the vengeance of Ai might not pursue you as it has pursued Al-Jubal, and as it must pursue me—soon. We must pay with our lives for breaking the curse of Ai. Good-by.

The letter I sent in answer was returned marked "Cannot be found." Inquiries I set on foot brought forward little. Ernest Lumsden had been seen walking from his hotel one night shortly after twelve. That was the last seen of him. Yet I know what happened. I have spared Margaret, now my wife, this knowledge, and hope that no hint of the fate of Lumsden and the Sheikh Al-Jubal ever reaches her. I do not think it will.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE DOUBLE RING

A Story of an Egyptian Curse, by WILL GARTH

*A Man Routs Hell, His Lesson Learned, In Salem Town
Where Witches Burned*



The little baroque was clinging to his chest, its tiny hands buried wrist-deep in his flesh

The Creeper in Darkness

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

Author of "Mind Out of Time," "The Black Vortex," etc.

Familiar—The tiny, demoniac attendant
of a witch or warlock.

Crabb's English Dictionary.

IT WAS a very old house indeed. Dale Eliot, notebook in hand, ice-blue eyes intently absorbed, moved almost reverently over the dust-strewn floor, stopping here and there to examine articles of furniture

which dated back to the late seventeenth century. Some pieces even antedated this.

Dale Eliot was a professional antiquarian. He lived and breathed and had his being in the past. His emotions were so completely out of harmony with the modern world that he frightened people. All men have roots deep

in the past and when Dale Eliot talked he brought the past to life.

There was something ghostly about him. He seemed to have stepped from the past into the present, a frozen swimmer emerging from the River of Time near its dim beginnings, with the hoary foam of centuries clinging to his garments.

But in this old witch house Dale Eliot was in his element.

The witch house had been converted into a museum for the edification of summer tourists. It was the third oldest house in Salem, and it stood on a high, wind-swept bluff overlooking Salem harbor.

It did not attract tourists as the House of Seven Gables did. It was a drab, squat little house with a gambrel roof that did not jut out as gambrel roofs should. Bleakly it faced the harbor, presenting to the town merely a windowless expanse of weather-eroded wood which impressed antiquarians, but left normal people cold.

Dale Eliot was in all respects the exact opposite of a normal person. He moved about in a kind of trance, examining objects which were unique in the annals of Salem. A spinning wheel which had once belonged to a notorious witch; a dog-eared prayer book annotated in the curious, cramped calligraphy of the Reverend Increase Mather, dour son of a grim and relentless father, dour father of a son who had left red thumb prints on the darkest pages of New England history.

All of the treasured antiques were roped off, but Eliot was contemptuous of the "Do not touch" signs scattered about the room. When he saw an object which attracted him he approached it, crept under the ropes and examined it with his hands. He liked the feel of old things.

Now he was examining a cabinet of drawers which stood under a small-paned window on the north side of the room. Examining it all over, running his hands over it in critical appraisal and even pulling the drawers in and out as he crouched in the gloom.

"Too bad, too bad," he murmured. "The panels are badly warped."

He was tugging at the lowermost drawer and balancing himself precariously on his instep when the little figure emerged.

It emerged so unobtrusively that he did not notice it until it was standing almost directly beneath his hand, blinking up at him in the dim yellow light which suffused the ancient room weirdly.

The figure was scarcely three inches in height—a tiny, shriveled human baroque with pointed ears and a thin, hairy tail. Peaked and dun-colored, it stood very still on the top of the cabinet and stared malignly up at him, its tiny face repulsively puckered, its shoulders hunched and misshapen.

Eliot's flesh congealed. Instinctively he retreated a pace, his pupils dilating, his breath hissing from between his teeth.

"Do not be alarmed, Dale Eliot," shrilled the little horror. "I am your familiar. I have waited here for you throughout the years."

"Familiar?" gasped Eliot, his face corpse white.

"Yes. Your family familiar. Your great-great-grandfather was a member of a coven in good standing. I attached myself to all of your ancestors. You were born in this house. Don't you remember, Dale Eliot?"

Eliot passed a trembling hand across his brow. "I knew that I was born in Salem," he said. "But I did not remember the house. My mother died when I was a child. I was brought up by relatives in Boston."

The little figure nodded grimly. "Well, Dale, we are together again. I remember you as an infant, rosy-cheeked, smiling, but with the mark of his Satanic Majesty already upon you."

"You mean—my ancestors were witches?" Eliot asked in a small voice.

THE figure nodded. "Yes, Dale. Witches and warlocks. Your entire family attached themselves to his Satanic Majesty far back in the seventeenth century."

Before Eliot could protest or cry out the little figure leaped upon him! Tiny, clawlike hands fastened on his clothes and clung. With a cry, Eliot

staggered back across the room, his fingers clutching at his chest.

The little horror was burrowing under his shirt when the guard rushed angrily into the room. The guard was a big, heavy-set man of Portuguese extraction, dressed in summer linens.

"Look here, sir," he exclaimed. "You can't yell like that in here. This is a private house which is only open for 'antickarians'."

Eliot did not reply. He was backed up against the wall, his fingers clawing at his chest. The little figure was burrowing into his flesh. He could feel it squirming about under his clothes.

The guard said: "Drunk, eh? A fine thing. And you a grown man."

He jerked a thumb toward the doorway of the room. "Out," he said. "If you don't get out under your own steam, I'll help you out."

Eliot got out. He staggered blindly out of the room and down a winding flight of stairs to the street. The sunlight was clear and bright over Salem when he emerged on the high, wind-swept hill overlooking the harbor.

But when he reached his lodgings a half-mile away the sun, westering, was spilling down like blood, splashingly ensanguining the gambrel roofs and red brick chimney pots of the old houses and turning the waters of Salem harbor a deep, rosy pink.

Eliot's room was on the top floor of a three-story frame house on a winding, waterfront street where hollyhocks bloomed. He was trembling uncontrollably when he crossed a well-kept lawn and ascended a porch which creaked beneath his tread.

HIS blue eyes a mixture of stupefaction and terror, he fumbled for his keys, let himself into the house and mounted three flights of stairs to his attic room.

He locked the door of the room before he crossed to the window and sat down on a narrow, cotlike bed. He sat down on the edge of the bed and removed his coat. He was wearing a soft linen shirt and black bow tie. He ripped off the tie, unbuttoned the shirt and removed it, ripped off his undershirt.

The little baroque was clinging to his chest. Its tiny hands were buried wrist-deep in his flesh. All about it there was a glistening crimson circle, a halo of bright blood. For an instant he stared down in silence at the tiny shriveled form. So great were his horror and revulsion that for an instant the room swayed about him. For an instant he thought he was going to faint.

The tiny shape was staring maliciously up at him in the red sunlight which poured in through the open window, crimsoning the sheets of the bed. From its narrow, sloping skull two tiny black horns sprouted. In the dim light of the old house Eliot had failed to notice the horns.

Utter horror engulfed him as he stared.

The little baroque said: "It will take three days. When I have firmly attached myself I will never leave you."

Eliot spoke to it then. He scarcely recognized his own voice. It seemed like a whisper from the grave.

"You mean your hands will grow into my flesh?"

"Yes, Dale. The wounds will heal and your flesh will become covin flesh and will obey the commands of his Satanic Majesty. See, I have made grooves for my hands. Eventually the wounds will heal."

The little horror leaped suddenly from his chest to the sun-reddened windowsill and stood perilously poised in the crimson glow, mocking him.

The two deep grooves where its hands had rested were welling redly.

The little baroque said: "Night is falling. I must sleep."

Eliot went perfectly white when the little horror leaped back upon him, inserted its hands into the encrimsoned grooves and coiled up in an attitude of repose.

"Sleep, Dale," it murmured, as its eyelids flickered shut. "You will not resent me so much tomorrow. And in the months and years to come, you will not resent me at all."

How Eliot passed the night he never knew. His thoughts were feverish, delirious. He twisted and turned, a dark ferment in his brain. Twisted and

turned until the dawn broke in the east outside the window of his room.

When he awoke, sunlight was flooding the attic room. A confused and merciful forgetfulness pervaded his faculties. Slowly his drowsy eyes took in the familiar contours of the room, the sloping rafters of the ceiling that came to a triangular focus high above his head, the oaken chest where his clothes lay, a dresser with a photograph of his mother and a brush, comb, and hand-mirror familiarly arranged upon it.

Then he glanced down at the sheet which covered him and the horror came rushing back, filling him with unutterable terror and loathing.

Across the white sheet there stretched a long trail of tiny, bloody footprints.

With a despairing cry he threw the sheets off and glanced down at his naked torso. The little shape was stirring restlessly in his flesh. Suddenly it opened its eyes and stared up at him.

"Good morning, Dale," it said.

He made no attempt to dislodge it. He could not bring himself to touch it. Shaking in every limb, he arose from the bed and put on his clothes. He dressed swiftly while the little horror mocked him.

THE wounds in Eliot's flesh were of a deep, violaceous hue. The blood had darkened, coagulated. Slowly, the little malign baroque withdrew its hands and leaped to the windowsill. It watched mockingly while Eliot struggled into his shirt and drew on his coat.

The big clock in the hall outside was ticking slowly when Eliot descended the stairs to the street. The little horror was squirming in his flesh again, twisting about restlessly under his shirt.

Eliot usually glanced at the morning paper before he let himself out. But now he simply pulled the paper from beneath the door and stuffed it in his coat pocket, going down the steps of the porch and crossing the lawn with the swaying gait of a drunken man.

His one thought was to escape from

the horror by seeking the companionship of normal people. To escape for an instant from his terror by mingling with normal men and women. Perhaps it was all a mad illusion. Perhaps he was entirely mad.

He must find out. When he arrived at the little restaurant where he usually had breakfast, he had reached a momentous decision. He would enter the restaurant, sit down and tear the horror from his flesh. He would expose it to the gaze of the people about him.

He had to share the horror. It was driving him mad. At the little restaurant where he usually had breakfast he would meet people he knew. Kindly, sympathetic people. He must find out.

The restaurant was less crowded than usual. Unsteadily, he crossed to a table in a far corner, picked up a menu and glanced furtively about him.

None of his acquaintances was having breakfast at the restaurant this morning. The people who were sitting there were complete strangers to him. Nevertheless, he was determined to bring the horror into view.

He could imagine what they would say.

"God, what a ghastly thing!"

"What can it be?"

"It's like a little man!"

He could see the patrons of the restaurant rising in sudden terror, upsetting their coffee-cups, sending plates crashing to the floor. But he had to have human sympathy and understanding. He had to know.

He was fumbling with the buttons of his shirt when he heard the man at the adjoining table say:

"No, they can't explain it. He was found in his shop with his head bitten off. Chewed off. The medical examiner said it looked like a rat had chewed through the flesh of his throat."

There were two men at the adjoining table. Now the second man was speaking. "And they found little red footprints all over the shop. Human footprints a tenth of an inch in length. Now that's a puzzler for you."

"Ghastly," said the first man. He raised a cup of coffee to his lips. Eliot

saw his Adam's apple rise and fall, rise and fall. He was drinking all the scalding coffee at a single draught, as though the scalding horror in his mind was so unbearable that he had to scald his throat to keep from thinking of it.

"Suppose we talk about something else," said the second man.

"Yeah, let's. It's all in the papers, anyway. We can read about it later on."

With trembling fingers Eliot ripped the *Salem Morning Chronicle* from his pocket and spread it out on the table before him.

The headlines fairly screamed at him: "Antiquarian found murdered." And in smaller type beneath: "Joseph Taylor, prominent antiquarian of this city, was found gruesomely murdered this morning in his antique shop at 13 Elm Street. Mr. Taylor, who has living quarters at the rear of the shop, was found at 2 a.m. by—"

Eliot rose from the table. Choking, his face livid, he staggered out of the restaurant into the blinding sunlight. The sunlight smote his eyes, dazzling and half-blinding him.

Indifferent to the glare, clutching at his throat, he reeled drunkenly down the street.

Disturbed by his reeling gait, the little baroque crept from beneath his shirt and stared coldly up at him.

"Well, what is the matter now? What is the matter with you, Dale Eliot?"

"You killed him," Eliot choked. "Joseph Taylor, my friend. Yesterday afternoon, when I left his shop, he was alive and well."

The little baroque shrilled: "Yes, I know. You were furiously angry with him when you left the shop. He tried to cheat you. He attempted to sell you a spurious antique. You swore to get even with him, Dale."

"But I didn't really mean it," Eliot choked. "I didn't know—"

"Dale, listen to me. I killed him because you hated him. I am your faithful familiar. A familiar is pledged to execute its master's wishes. All wizards, magicians and warlocks have evil wishes."

Eliot screamed: "You murderous little devil!" His fingers went out and

raked across his chest. Agilely the little horror leaped aside and climbed to Eliot's shoulder, where it leered up into his face in malign derision.

"Of course I am a devil. A demon, a little devil."

Eliot groaned. "I will crush you to death. I will strangle you with my hands."

The little shape shrilled: "You cannot destroy me, Dale. I would slip from your grasp. I am elastic, indestructible."

"Then I will destroy myself."

"No, Dale. I will grow into your flesh and you will cease to hate me."

A child ran so swiftly past him that Eliot did not at first realize that he was not alone with the horror on the sun-dappled pavement. He did not know that a little girl on her way to school had been watching him with wide, wondering eyes, and had now run swiftly by.

The child had seen the little figure perched on his shoulder and was running screaming away from him, her school books clutched tightly in her arms, her pigtails flying. Suddenly she dashed out into the street.

ELIOT was so immersed in horror that he saw the child merely as a white blur moving swiftly through the sunlight.

The street climbed steeply to a bluff overlooking the bay. The child was running up the street, but the automobile was coming down. It was coming down with a screeching of brakes, and although the man in the car was trying desperately to avoid running down the child he had seen her too late to swerve aside.

The screeching brakes jarred Eliot from his daze. His vision cleared. He saw the child clearly; saw the careening car.

The car was less than twenty feet from the running child when he leaped with a cry from the pavement.

He leaped toward the child and gave her a violent push, sending her sprawling across the street to safety.

The car was traveling at thirty miles when it struck him. It smashed into

him and hurled him thirty feet through the air. With a grinding scream it jolted to a halt, turning completely about on the steep gradient.

Eliot thudded to the pavement and lay still, blood trickling from his face. Sobbing with terror, the child picked herself up and stared at the little form that was running from Eliot's sprawling body across the pavement.

Three feet from the curb the fleeing baroque staggered, swayed. Its tiny hands went to his throat. It screamed in shrill agony. It whirled about like a top. Then it tottered sideways; and collapsed in a heap in the dust of the gutter.

WHEN he who had nearly run down the child emerged white-lipped and trembling from the car, the little shape was as unmoving as Eliot's big bulk spread out on the pavement.

Eliot awoke in a world of whiteness. He was lying on a soft mattress between white sheets, and the walls of the room were white and so was the ceiling above him. When he moved white-hot shafts of searing pain shot through him.

The girl who was bending above him and smiling down at him was dressed entirely in white.

She laid a soft, white hand on his forehead. "You must rest now," she said. "You must get some sleep. You've been unconscious for hours."

"Who—who are you?" gasped Eliot. "And where, where—"

"You are in the Salem General Hospital," said the girl. "I am your night nurse."

"But what happened?"

"You were struck by an automobile this morning. You saved the life of a little girl."

Eliot remembered then. He started so violently that the nurse was compelled to admonish him. "You must try not to think about that. Later, if you wish, but not now. You must get some sleep."

Eliot groaned. "Sleep, sleep? How can I rest when that little monster—"

The girl said: "You mean your good luck piece. We've all been admiring it. You haven't lost it. It is quite safe. They found it in the dust of the road-

way, a few feet from where you were lying."

Eliot stared at her, white-lipped. "What do you mean? What did you find?"

The girl smiled and left him. When she returned she was holding a small, flat object that glittered in the palm of her hand.

"Here it is," she said. "Would you like it near you?"

Tremulously Eliot took the little baroque. It was cold and metallic and very flat now—a tiny, rigid figurine of bronze.

The nurse said: "What an ugly little horror. Wherever did you get it? I have seen some unusual good luck charms—my uncle collects them—but this little bronze is unique. I've never seen a duplicate."

She smiled. "It is a little too large to wear on a watch chain. You just carry it loose in your pocket, I suppose. It certainly brought you luck this morning."

Eliot remembered then. Remembered a passage from an old book which he had read somewhere in the course of his antiquarian browsings and witchcraft studies.

"Even warlocks may be saved. Even witches and black sorcerers. By heroism and sacrifice and repentance may warlocks be saved. And each demon that cannot abide goodness will shrivel and *become as bronze*, forsaking its warlock when its warlock forsakes the Evil One, dying in agony, shriveling and dying."

Eliot's eyes were shining strangely when he took the nurse's hand and deposited the little metallic figure on her palm.

"You say your uncle collects charms?"

The girl nodded.

"Then give this to him with my blessings."

The nurse gasped. "You—you don't want it?"

Eliot smiled wanly. "I never want to see it again," he said. "I have lived too long among antiques. I shall live henceforth among people—talk with them, laugh with them, work with them—yes, people are better than antiques . . . people are best. . . ."

Photography and Sound Recording Are Bound by a
Man-made Limit—and Beyond that Lies Madness!



The illusion was marvelous

Miracle in Three Dimensions

By C. L. MOORE

Author of "Tryst in Time," "Greater than Gods," etc.

"I'VE got it, Abe! It's as near to life itself as the movies will ever come. I've done it!" Blair O'Byrne's haunted black eyes were bright with triumph.

Abe Silvers, gaunt and dark and weary-eyed, shifted the cigar to the other side of his mouth and stepped

in under the doorway that made sharp division between the glare of California sunlight outside and the lofty shadows of O'Byrne's long, dim studio.

"I hope you're right," he said around the cigar. "I've waited a long time for it. And God knows you've

spent more years than you ought, and more money than even you could afford. Why have you done it, Blair? A man with your money, your background, shutting yourself up here in the dark, sweating over shadows?"

"I haven't been shut up away from life—I've been shut in with it!" O'Byrne's smile spread across the pallor of his delicate face. "It's life itself I've been groping after all these years, and I've found it, Abe. I've got it!"

"Got the illusion of it, maybe. A little better than Metro-Cosmic has been filming for the last few years. And if it's as good as you say we'll buy it—and so what?"

O'Byrne turned to him fiercely, his dream-haunted eyes suddenly blazing.

"I tell you this is life! As near as shadows can come—too near, perhaps. 'Moving pictures'! They'll have to find a new name for what I've got. It isn't pictures—it's breathing, living reality. I've worked over it until nothing else seemed to matter, nothing else seemed real. I've got it, Abe. It's—life."

ABE SILVERS shifted the cigar back across his mouth, and if his eyes were understanding, his voice was only patient. He had heard such words before, from many fiercely sincere inventors. That he had known O'Byrne for many years did not alter his accustomed attitude toward such things.

"All right," he murmured. "Show me. Where's the projection room, Blair?"

"Here." O'Byrne waved a thin, unsteady hand toward the center of the big studio where under a battery of high-hung lights a U-shaped bar of dull silver rose from a low platform to the height of a man's waist. Beyond it against the wall bulked a big rectangular arrangement of chromium and glass, behind whose face bulbs were dimly visible. Silvers snorted.

"There? That thing looks like a radio—that doubled-over pipe? But the screen, man—the seats—the—"

"I'm telling you this is utterly new, Abe. You'll have to clear your mind of all your preconceived ideas

of what a moving picture should be. All that is obsolete, from this minute on. The 'moving picture' is as dead as the magic lantern. This is the new thing. These batteries of lights, that 'radio' as you call it, the platform and bar, one for each individual spectator—"

"But what is it? What happens?"

"I can't explain it to you now," said O'Byrne impatiently. "For one thing, you wouldn't believe me until after you've seen it. And it would take weeks to give you enough ground-work to understand the principles. The thing's too complex for anyone to explain in words. I can't even explain the appearance except in metaphors—there's never been anything like it before."

"Roughly, though, it's the projection of the illusion of life on a three-dimensional screen composed of fogged light. Other men are just beginning to fumble around with the principles of three-dimensional movies projected on a flat screen, giving the appearance of a stage with depth. That's going at it clumsily. I've approached the problem from a much newer angle. My screen itself is three-dimensional—the light that bathes you when the batteries of arcs are on. You're in the midst of it, the action is projected on the light all around you from double films taken from slightly different angles, on the stereoscopic principle. I'll show you later."

"And there is in that bar you're to hold on to, sufficient current to stimulate very selectively the nerves which carry tactile impression to the brain. You'll feel, as well as hear and see. You'll even smell. On occasion you may actually taste—it's close enough to the sensations of smelling to work out. Only that doesn't figure so much in this case, for you as a spectator will not enter into the action. You'll simply witness it from closer quarters than any audience has ever dreamed of doing before."

"Here, step up on the platform and take hold of the rod there, at the curve. That's it. Now hold tight, and don't be surprised. Remember,

nothing like this has ever been done before. Ready?"

Abruptly the great banks of lights blazed into radiance that closed the dazzled Silvers about in soft, pouring brightness. There was a quality of mistiness about it that made even his own hands invisible before him on the bar. It was as if the light poured upon innumerable motes in the air, so refracting from their infinitesimal surfaces that nothing was visible but that shimmer of bright blindness. Silvers gripped the bar and waited.

Through the bright fog a voice as smooth as cream spoke in vast, clear echoes, rolling in from all around him at once, filling the little artificial world of mist wherein he stood lost. Mellowly the deep tones said:

"You are about to enter an enchanted wood outside Athens on a midsummer night, to share in a dream that Shakespeare dreamed over three hundred years ago. Titania, Queen of Faeryland, will be played by Anne Acton. Oberon, the King, is Philip Graves—"

Abe Silvers clutched the bar in amazement as that unctuous voice rolled on. Anne Acton and Philip Graves were under contract to his own Metro-Cosmic, and every one of the other names were stars of the first magnitude. The greatest actors of the day were playing in this incredible fragment of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. What it had cost O'Byrne he shuddered to think.

The creamy voice died away. The mist began to clear. Silvers' hands closed hard on the bar and he stared in blankest incredulity about the dim blue glades of forest stretching around him, silvery in the light of a high-riding moon. A breeze whispered through the leaves, blowing cool on his face. Save that it did not stir a hair of his head he could have believed it an actual breeze sighing through the moonlit dark.

He looked down. He was himself invisible, disembodied, no longer standing on a bare floor but in the midst of a flowering meadow whose grasses were faintly fragrant at his

feet. There was no flicker, no visible light-and-shadow composition of the projection upon this incredible three-dimensional screen that surrounded him. The glade stretched away into actual distances much deeper than the studio's walls could possibly contain; the illusion of deep, starry sky overhead was perfect; the flowers in the grass were so real he thought he could have knelt and gathered them in his hands.

Then, under the trees, the mists parted like a curtain and the Queen of Faeryland came splendidly into the moonlit glade. Anne Acton had never looked so lovely. The long veil of her silver-pale hair streamed like gossamer behind her, and every curve and shadowy roundness was as real as life itself. Yet there hovered about her a hint of unreality, so that she blended perfectly the illusion of fantasy and reality as she moved over the unbending grass, the bright wings streaming from her shoulders.

THERE was a blast of silvery challenge from elfin horns and into the moonlight strode Oberon, his lean features wrathful. The famous deep tones of Philip Graves resounded angrily through the moonlight. Titania answered in silvery defiance.

Then came full, rich human voices ringing through the wood. Phoebe Templeton in *Hermia's* rustling satin came radiantly into the glade, brushing so close by the watching Silvers that he caught a whiff of her perfume, felt the touch of her satin skirts. And he knew—almost he *knew*—that he could put out a hand and stop her, so warmly real was she at that close range. Her lovely throaty voice called to Lysander behind her.

And then somehow the forest was slipping away past Abe Silvers' face—somehow he had the illusion of walking as if in a dream down an enchanted forest aisle, the dim air quivering with starlight, and Helena came running and weeping through the trees, stumbling, sobbing the name of Demetrius.

She passed. Silvers started involuntarily as from a swaying branch

above him pealed the wild, half-human laughter of Puck, delicate as the chatter of a squirrel, and down through the air over his very shoulder, the breeze of his passing fanning Silvers' face, the lithe little goblin sprang.

The scene clouded over as if a mist had been drawn across the moon. Silvers blinked involuntarily, and when he looked again Titania lay exquisitely asleep on the dew-spangled bank where the wild thyme grew.

Then through the magic-haunted wood suddenly shrilled a bell. Insistently, metallically it rang. Silvers glanced about the glades of the forest, trying to locate among the dew-shimmering leaves the source of that irritating noise. And suddenly the Athenian woods melted like smoke about him. Incredulously he stared around a big bare studio. It was like waking in bewilderment from a dream so vivid that reality itself paled beside its memory.

"The studio wants you on the telephone, Abe," said O'Byrne's voice. "Here, wake up! Didn't you hear the bell?"

SILVERS shook himself, laughed sheepishly.

"I'm still in Athens," he admitted, blinking. "That's the damndest thing I ever—studio, did you say? Where's the phone?"

Thinly over the wire came a worried voice.

"Hate to bother you, chief, but I think you ought to know. Anne Acton's been mumbling around in a sort of daze for half an hour. The doctor can't do a thing with her. And Philip Graves passed out on set and is just kind of whispering to himself—poetry, it sounds like."

Silvers blinked. "D-don't let the papers get it. I'll be right over."

He slammed the telephone back on its cradle and turned blankly to O'Byrne.

"Something's gone wrong with a couple of our actors you stole," he said. "I've got to get back right away. But listen, Blair—you've got something! How long will it take

you to have some more of these bar and platform arrangements rigged up? Say a dozen for a starter. I'd like to have our board see it as soon as possible. This is going to be the most tremendous thing that ever happened in motion pictures. When can you have things ready to show the board?"

"I—I don't know, Abe. Somehow—I'm a little afraid of it."

"Afraid? Good God, man, what do you mean?"

"I don't know, exactly—but did you have a feeling, as you watched the action, that somehow it came—too near—to life?"

"Blair—I'm afraid you've been working too hard on this. Let me handle it from now on, will you? And stop thinking about it. I've got to get back to the studio now and see what's happened to my actors—attack of temperament, probably—but I'll see you tonight about quantity production. Until then, you won't let anyone else in on this, will you?"

"You know I won't, Abe. It's yours if you want it."

All the way back to the studio Silvers' mind was spinning with the magnitude of what lay before him. He had dared to let the inventor know how enormously impressed he was, how anxious to have the new process, because he knew O'Byrne so well. The man was wealthy in his own right, indifferent to fame, to everything but the deep need to create which had driven him so hard for so many years toward the completion of his miracle. Miracle in three dimension! It seemed like a dream, what he had just seen, but behind it lay the prospect for a fortune vaster than any movie magnate had ever dared to hope for. To control this was to control the whole world. Silvers clenched his cigar tighter and dreamed magnificent dreams.

Anne Acton lay on a low couch in her lavish little dressing bungalow, staring up with conscious pathos into the doctor's face as Silvers came into the room. Somehow, illogically, it was a shock to him to see her here when he had so short a time before

left that perfect illusion of herself in the enchanted wood outside Athens, asleep on the bank of wild thyme.

"How are you, Anne?" he demanded anxiously, for she represented a fabulous sum to the company and an illness now, in the midst of her latest picture, would be ruinous. "Is she all right, Doc? When did she come out of it?"

"While they were phoning you, Abe," said Acton herself in a faint, pathetic voice, moving her head uneasily so that the great slipping rope of silver-pale hair moved across the brocade. "It—it was all so queer. Suddenly I felt too tired to move, as if all the strength had drained right out of me. And I must have fainted, but I wasn't really out. Kept having sort of dreams—I don't remember now—woods, somewhere, and music. And suddenly it all ended and I opened my eyes here. I'm all right now, only I feel as weak as a kitten. Look." She held up an exquisite hand to show it quivering.

"What is it, Doc?" demanded Silvers anxiously.

"Um-m-m—overwork, perhaps, general exhaustion—it's impossible to say definitely without further examination."

"Will she be okay now?"

"I see no reason why, with rest and care, she shouldn't be."

"I'll send for your car, Anne," said Silvers authoritatively. "You're going home to bed. I'll see you later."

Philip Graves, in the braid-bedecked finery of a movie caballero, was sitting up on his couch and holding a cigarette in unsteady fingers when Silvers pushed through the little knot of attendants that surrounded him.

"Feeling better, Phil?" he demanded. "What was it?"

"Nothing—nothing," said the actor impatiently. "I'm okay now. Just passed out for a few minutes. I'll be all right."

Abe Silvers lost no time in calling a meeting of the board. The twelve members of Metro-Cosmic stood about in twos and threes, murmuring

incredulously in the shadows of the O'Byrne studio on the night when the first dozen bar-platforms were erected. Silvers had not dared to describe fully this modern miracle.

"It's like nothing you ever saw before," he warned them as rather sheepishly they allowed themselves to be herded forward to the platforms. When they were all at their stations and Silvers signaled O'Byrne to begin, he glanced once around the little company before the lights blazed on. Doubtfully they returned his stare with a murmur or two of protest rising.

"Feel so damn' silly," an official said, "standing here. Mean to say there isn't any screen? What are we supposed to look at?"

AND then like a wall of brilliant blindness the foggy light closed down upon them and every man was cut off from his fellows so that he stood alone and disembodied in the heart of that soft, misty blaze. Startled exclamations sounded through the mist, murmurs that died away as Silvers heard for the second time the creamy smoothness of the announcer's voice rolling through the dimming brightness.

"You are now about to enter an enchanted wood outside Athens on a midsummer night, to share in a dream that Shakespeare dreamed..."

Somehow, as the play went on, Abe Silvers began to wonder a little uneasily at the violence of the quarrel between Titania and Oberon that flamed almost tangibly through the clear dim air. Had they fought before so fiercely? Had they—

A gibber of wild inhuman laughter, the long leap of Puck over his shoulder, broke the queer thought half-formed, just as a bell began to shrill through the forest. He knew a moment of unreality. He remembered that in the previous performance the bell had not rung until Titania lay down to sleep on the bank where the wild thyme grew. But with shocking completeness the forest vanished. Silvers stared blankly around the studio's reaches that had so suddenly

replaced the glades of faeryland, blinking at the circle of dazed men in amazement.

"Telephone for you, Abe," O'Byrne's voice called through the fading mists of the dream that had so strongly gripped him. He grinned sheepishly and stepped down from the platform.

"Listen, chief," babbled a distressed voice over the wire, shrill above the rising babble of delight behind Silvers, "Acton's out like a light at the Grove!"

"Is she plastered?"

"I don't think so—but try to tell the papers that! She—wait—oh, she's just coming out of it. What'll we do?"

"Send her home," sighed Silvers. "I'll get onto the papers right away. What a life!"

HE turned back to O'Byrne with a shrug. "Acton's passed out again," he murmured unhappily. "I wonder if she—well, if she folds now in the middle of 'Never Tomorrow' we'll lose our shirts on it. I'm going to get a doctor to—"

"Abe," said O'Byrne in a voice so quiet that the other man turned to him in surprise, "Abe, do you realize that every time we run this picture Anne Acton faints? I wonder if the other actors feel the same reaction?"

"Why—what do you mean? Why should they? Blair, are you going crazy?"

Silvers' voice was stoutly confident, but despite himself an uneasy little flicker woke in his mind. Philip Graves, who played Oberon, had been dazed and out of his head too that other time. And—yes, hadn't he noticed an item in a gossip column saying that Phoebe Templeton had collapsed at a tea in New York? Was it the same day? Rather terrifyingly, he thought it was. But of course all this was the most flagrant nonsense. His job now was to keep Acton out of the papers. She had not endeared herself to reporters, and he knew they would make the story sound as bad as possible. They—the phone rang again.

"A wire from Philip Graves' man has just come in, Abe," his wife's voice told him worriedly. "Philip's been taken terribly sick on shipboard. His man says it will be in all the papers tomorrow, and he wants your advice."

Silvers ran a hand distractedly through his hair. "Thanks," he said a little blankly. "I'll take care of it. Be home later."

He turned to the men still grouped around the bar-platforms in their babble of amazed delight. They had not heard his low-voiced conversations at the desk.

"We've got this fellow under contract, haven't we?" said someone anxiously at his elbow. "Ought to get going on production right away. This is the most tremendous thing that ever happened."

"Yes—he'll let us have it," Silvers told him abstractedly. "Blair, how's the production on the first hundred bar-platforms coming? We've got to give a larger showing right away."

"A hundred and fifty will be ready in about a week," O'Byrne admitted reluctantly. "But Abe—Abe, do you think we ought to do it?"

Silvers pulled him aside. "Look, Blair," he said gently, "you mustn't let your imagination run away with you. What possible connection can there be between the showing of this picture and the fact that a few overworked, nervous people have fainting spells? I'll admit it's a coincidence, but we've got to be sensible. We can't let the biggest thing that ever happened in pictures slip through our fingers just because some dizzy actress passes out once or twice."

O'Byrne shrugged a little. "I wonder," he murmured, as if thinking aloud, "how long people have been trying to create life? Something's always prevented it—no one's been allowed to succeed. This thing of mine isn't life, but it's too near it to leave me at peace with myself. I think there's a penalty for usurping the powers of godhead—for coming too close to success. I'm afraid, Abe."

"Blair, will you do me a favor?" demanded Silvers. "Will you go to

bed and forget all about this until morning? I'll see you tomorrow. Right now I'm up to my neck in trouble."

O'Byrne smiled ghostily. "All right," he said. . . .

TEMPLETON-FREDERICKS ELOPEMENT!

That was the headline the newsboys were yelling when Silvers stepped out of his car the next day. He looked twice at the headline to be sure, for the romance of Phoebe Templeton, not with Bill Fredericks but with Manfield Drake, had kept screen magazines in ecstasies for the past six months. The wedding was to have been this week, but—he bought a paper hastily, a wild thought flashing through his mind. Templeton and Fredericks had played the *lovers* in O'Byrne's photoplay!

"Bill and I have known one another for about six months," Phoebe Templeton was quoted as saying, "but we never realized until last night how much we meant to each other. It happened rather miraculously. I was on my way west and Bill was here in Hollywood. And suddenly in Denver it came over me that I simply must talk to him. I phoned long distance and—well, it's all pretty hazy to look back on, but I chartered a plane and met him in Yuma, and we were married this morning. Of course I feel badly about Manfield, but really, this was too big to fight against. We've known since ten o'clock last night that we were meant for each other."

Silvers tucked the paper under his arm and bit down hard on his cigar. It was at ten last night that they had watched Hermia and Lysander, in the actual, breathing presences of Templeton and Fredericks, murmuring passionate love under a high-floating moon. For a moment a fantastic wonder crossed his mind. "I must be going nuts," he murmured to himself.

A week later an audience of a hundred and fifty people gathered for the real preview of O'Byrne's "Midsummer Night's Dream." The bar-

platforms had been set up in the big studio that had seen the first running of the miraculous illusion. It was crowded now with murmurous and skeptical people—officers and directors of Metro-Cosmic, a sprinkling of wives. Silvers conquered an inexplicable uneasiness as he sought O'Byrne in a corner near the controls. Blair was sitting on a heavy stool before the machine, and the face he turned to his friend was full of a queer, strained tension. He said, his voice a thread of sound:

"Abe—I've had the maddest notion that every time I show this the figures come back realer than before into the scenes they play. Maybe they don't always hold to the action we photographed—maybe the plot carries them on beyond what Shakespeare wrote—more violently than—"

SILVERS' fingers gripped the other man's shoulders hard. Sharply he shook him, an absurd uneasiness darkening his memory of that impression of fiercer violence in the quarrel between Oberon and Titania the last time he saw the play, even as he said firmly:

"Snap out of it, Blair! You've been working too hard. Maybe someone else could run the picture tonight—you need rest."

O'Byrne looked up at him apathetically, his alarm gone suddenly flat.

"No, I'll do it. If you're really determined to run the thing, maybe I'd better. Maybe I can control them better than an assistant could. After all, I created them. . . ."

Silvers looked down at him for a moment in frowning silence. Then he shrugged and turned toward the last empty bar-platform where the audience waited the beginning of the show. O'Byrne was dangerously overworked, he told himself. After this was over he must go to a sanatorium for a long rest. His mind was cracking. . . .

Misty radiance closed down about him, veiling the hundred and fifty from his vision. There was a moment of murmurous wonder, punctuated by small, half-frightened screams

from a few of the women as each spectator was shut off into a little world of silence and solitude.

Into the silvery mist that familiar rich voice rolled smoothly. For the third time Silvers saw the broad gray glades of faeryland, hedged with immemorial forest, opening magically up about him. For the third time Titania trailed her streaming wings into the moonlight. Oberon strode with a jingle of mail from among the trees, and they met in fury halfway down the glade, their feet pressing the bending grass with elfin lightness. But there was no lightness in their anger. That ancient quarrel flared up in violence between them, and the breezes shivered with their wrath.

Again Hermia and Lysander came half laughing, half fearful into the woods. Again Helena sobbed Demetrius' name among the unanswering trees. Puck flitted in goblin glee about his business of enchantment and Titania lay down to sleep on the spangled grass among the wild thyme.

THIS time no telephone bell broke into the magic of the dream.

And again these were living people who moved so tangibly before the audience, the wind of their passing brushing them, the sound of their breathing in their ears when they stood near, going about their magic-haunted ways as obviously as if the spectators were the phantoms, not they. Their loves and hates and heartbreak were vividly real under that incredibly real moon.

Once or twice Silvers thought vaguely that here and there in the action things happened not exactly as he remembered them. Had Titania actually slapped Oberon's dark, angry face before she swept out of the glade? Had Hermia and Lysander kissed quite so lingeringly under that deep-shadowed oak? But as the play went on Silvers lost all thought of times that had gone before, and sank fathoms deep in the reality of the scene before him.

Puck lured the spell-bewildered

lovers into the fastnesses of the forest. They went stumbling through the fog, quarreling, blinded by mist and magic and their own troubled hearts. Swords flashed in the moonlight. Lysander and Demetrius were fighting among the veiled trees. Puck laughed, shrill and high and inhuman, and swept his brown arm down. And from Lysander came a choked gasp, the clatter of a fallen sword.

Demetrius bent fiercely above him. Silvers watched the bright blood bubbling from his side, saw the blade drip darkly, smelled the acrid sharpness of that spreading stain. The illusion was marvelous. Lysander's death was a miracle of artistry from the first choked gasp of pain to the last bubbling of blood in his throat, the last twist of handsome silk-sheathed limbs. Lysander's death—

Something troubled Silvers' memory, but before he could capture it a woman's voice cried hysterically somewhere in the misty forest, "He's dead—he's dead!" and suddenly, blankly, the forest was gone from about them and he was staring into dazed, half-dreaming faces where an instant before faeryland had stretched depth upon depth of moonlit dimness, where Lysander had lain dying on the moss. Somewhere in the crowd a woman was sobbing hysterically.

"He's dead, I tell you! Lysander's dead, and he doesn't really die in the play! Someone's killed him! That was real blood—I smelled it! Oh, get me out of this awful place!"

Silvers brushed the fog of dreamland from his eyes and was halfway across the floor to the projection machine before the scream had ended, for he remembered now that tug of memory as Lysander fell. Shakespeare's play was romance, not tragedy. Lysander should not have died.

O'Byrne clung to his high stool, his fingers white-knuckled as he stared into Silvers' eyes.

"You see?" he said in a strained monotone. "You see what mass hypnotism will do? They couldn't help it—poor things—they must be half alive—wandering in the fog. . . ."

"Blair!" Silvers' voice rang sharply.

"Blair, snap out of it! What are you raving about? Are you mad?"

The staring eyes turned to his almost apathetically.

"I was afraid," said O'Byrne, in that whispering monotone as if he spoke in a dream. "I was afraid to run it before this many people—I should have guessed what would happen when Acton and Graves and—"

"Are you still harping on that coincidence?" demanded Silvers in a fierce undertone. "Can't you see how foolish it is, Blair? What earthly

African savages, Tibetan nomads, Chinese peasants, South American Indians. Even the ancient Egyptians, highly civilized as they were, deliberately made their drawings angular and unlikelike. All of them declared and believed that too good a likeness would draw the soul out into the picture."

"Well, yes—everybody's heard of such things—but you're not suggesting—"

"After the Templeton elopement—after Anne Acton's fainting-spells

THE PRISONER OF MARS

*A Complete Book-Length Novel of a
War Between Worlds*

By

EDMOND HAMILTON



*—and Many Other Unusual Stories and Features Coming
in the May Issue of Our Companion
Scientifiction Magazine*

STARTLING STORIES

15c AT ALL STANDS

connection can there be between pictures on a screen and living people, some of them half the world away? I'll admit what happened tonight was—"

"Did you ever hear—" broke in Blair softly, as if he were following some private train of thought and had not heeded a word of Silvers' harangue—"of savages covering their faces when explorers bring out their cameras? They think a photograph will steal their souls. It's an idea so widespread that it can't have originated in mere local superstition. Tribes all over the world have it.

and Philip Graves' illness—yes, after what happened tonight, how can you deny it, Abe? No, the Egyptians, the modern savages, were closer to the truth than we. Only before now no likeness has been perfect enough to absorb sufficient personality so that people could notice it. But these illusions of mine—they're real, living, breathing. While you watch you can't believe the actual men and women aren't standing in front of you.

"It had an effect on Acton and Graves when only you were watching—enough of their personality was

drained out of them into the illusion by your own temporary conviction that they were there, so that they went into vague dreams of woodland and music. I don't know how the other actors were affected—I do know that several of them were sick and dizzy that day. I haven't checked—maybe I've been afraid to. . . .

"When the twelve board-members were watching, the drain was stronger; so that Graves was really ill on shipboard and Acton couldn't be roused from her faint until the telephone call to you broke the illusion here. It affected Templeton and Bill Fredericks another way—hypnotized them into believing what the audience was believing, that they were really in love—"

RECOLLECTION flooded into Silvers' mind. He remembered what he had felt when he read the headlines of the elopement. He said:

"*Could* it happen that way, Blair? How greatly could a mass mind affect the reactions of the people it concentrates on? I thought of it before—if twelve individuals, each convinced for a time that he saw two people desperately in love, might really work a sort of persuasion on those two—No, that's crazy! It couldn't happen!"

"You saw it happen," murmured Blair quietly. "You saw what happened when a hundred and fifty people joined in that fierce concentration—that utter conviction that they saw a man's sword poised, aimed, descending—mass hypnotism, it was! For a majority of them that sword really struck—their imagination outran the actual fact and they thought they saw Lysander spitted on Demetrius' blade. They thought they saw him die."

"Well, he didn't, did he? I mean, nothing happened this time or they'd have called me."

A thin smile twisted up O'Byrne's strained mouth. He reached behind him. Silvers heard a click and realized that the telephone had been lying out of its cradle on the desk ever since he reached Blair's side.

"I wanted you to understand before they broke the news to you," O'Byrne was explaining gently. "And I knew the telephone would interrupt me unless I—"

Shrill buzzing whirled from the desk. With a little spurt of terror for what he had yet to learn, Silvers snatched it up. A voice shouted thinly in his ear:

"Silvers? Is that you, chief? My God, I've been trying to get you all evening! Acton's been in a coma for over an hour—doctor can't rouse her. And a call just came in from London that Phil Graves is out too—can't be waked! And—what's that? *What?* Chief! Word's just come in that Templeton's passed out too, and Bill Fredericks has dropped dead! What's the matter with this town? It's like the end of the world—"

"Abe—" O'Byrne's voice behind him twisted Silvers around like a hand on his shoulder. The receiver shrilled unnoticed as their eyes met. O'Byrne's face was almost serene—knowledge of what the telephone was crying showed in his eyes. He said:

"Do you believe me now? Do you understand? Do you realize how much of life itself I've woven into this damnable thing I've made? Yes—it's like two-dimensional pictures that carry a shadow of the third—enough dark to give a feeling of depth. In my three-dimensional picture I've somehow got a shadow of the fourth—life, maybe, or something too near it. Maybe that's what the fourth dimension is—life itself. But it won't kill men again—not again!"

THE crash of glass shattered into the hysterical buzz of the crowd. Silence like death fell over the confusion of the murmurous throng among the bar-platforms as they turned white faces toward the corner. O'Byrne's frail arms swung his heavy stool with desperate strength, crunching and smashing and crashing among the delicate intricacies of his projector. Silvers clutched the still shrilling telephone and watched him, not moving.



A Question of Identity

No Pang of Hunger nor Torment of Thirst Can Stifle the Questions of Who, Where and What!

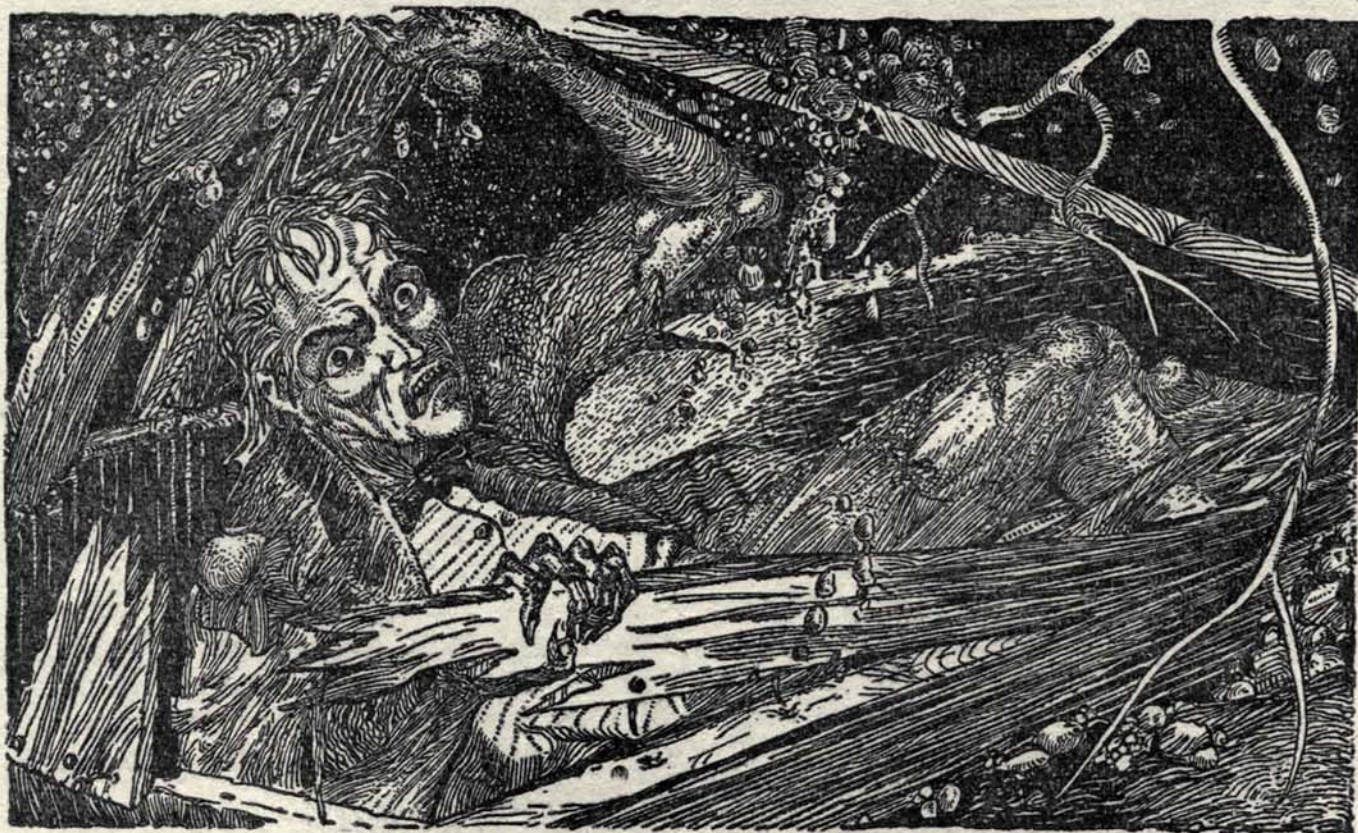
By TARLETON FISKE

Author of "The Sorcerer's Jewel," etc.

MY LIMBS were lead. My heart was a great coiled clock that throbbed rather than ticked, ever so slowly. My lungs were metal sponges, my head a bronze bowl filled with molted lava

that moved like sluggish quicksilver, back and forth, in burning waves. Back and forth—consciousness and unconsciousness interplaying against a background of slow, dark pain.

I felt just that, nothing more. I



I was in a coffin, in a wooden coffin.

had a heart, lungs, body, head—but I felt nothing external; that is, my body did not *impinge* on anything. I was not sitting or standing or walking or lying or doing anything that I could feel. I was just heart, lungs, body, head alone in darkness that was filled with the pulsing of a muted agony. This was myself.

But who was I?

The thought came; the first real thought, for before that had been only an awareness of being. Now I wondered as to the nature of my being. Who was I?

I was a man.

The word *man* aroused certain associations which struggled through the pain, through the thumping heart and gasping lung sensation. If I was a man, what was I doing? Where was I?

AS IF in response to the thought, awareness increased. I had a body, and therefore I possessed hands, ears, eyes. I must try to feel, hear, see.

But I could not. My arms were lumps of immovable iron. My ears knew only the sound of silence and the throbbing that came from within my tortured body. My eyes were sealed by the leaden weight of enormous eyelids. This I knew, and felt panic.

What had happened? What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I feel and hear and see?

I had been in an accident, and I was lying on a hospital bed under ether. That was one explanation. Perhaps I had been crippled; blinded, deafened, maimed. Only my soul existed faintly, like a whispering that rustles through the ruins of an old, old house.

But what accident? Where had I been before this? I must have lived. What was my name?

I resigned myself to the darkness as I strove to grapple with these problems, and the darkness was kind. My body and the darkness seemed to be equally detached so that they mingled. It was peaceful—too peaceful for the thoughts that throbbed through my brain. The thoughts fought and clamored and finally

screamed, until I felt myself awaken.

It was the sensation, I vaguely recalled, of finding one's foot "asleep." It spread over my body, so that a pleasant tingling made me aware, bit by bit, of having definite arms and hands, definite chest and pelvis, definite legs and feet.

Their outlines *emerged*, and were defined by that tingling. A burring droned in my spine, as though a dentist's drill had bit into it. Simultaneously I became aware that my heart was a Congo drum within my chest, my lungs great gourds swelling and sinking in frantic rhythm. I exulted in the pain, for through it I felt myself. That sensation of detachment faded, and I knew that I—complete, intact—lay against softness.

But where?

That was the next question, and sudden energy seemed ready to solve it. My eyes opened. They encountered nothing but a continuation of the blackness which lurks behind the curtains of closed lids. If anything, the blackness was deeper, richer. I could see nothing of myself, and yet my eyes were open. Was I blind?

My ears still heard no sound other than the mysterious inspiration of my own breath.

My hands moved ever so slowly at my sides, rustling against cloth which told me that my limbs were clothed, and yet unblanketed. They moved upward, outward. An inch, two inches, three—and then they encountered hard, unyielding surfaces on either side. They rose upward, prompted by fear. Six inches, and another unyielding surface of wood. My feet thrust out as I stretched, and through shoe-leather the tips of my toes encountered wood. My mouth opened, and a sound poured forth. It was only a rattle, though I had meant to scream.

For my thoughts whirled around one name—one name that somehow groped through a haze and loomed as the symbol of my unreasoning fear. I knew a name, and I wanted to scream.

Edgar Allan Poe.

And then my rattling voice whis-

pered, unprompted, that which I so feared in connection with this name.

"*The Premature Burial*," I whispered. "Poe wrote it. I am—living it!"

I was in a coffin, in a wooden coffin, with the hot stale air of my own corruption reeking in my nostrils, burning in my lungs. I was in a coffin, locked in earth, and yet I was alive.

Then I found strength. My hands had been frantically scratching and clawing at the surface above my head. Now they gripped the sides of my prison and thrust outward with all strength, my legs braced at the foot of the box. My legs, then, kicked. New vigor, the vigor of a madman, rushed through my boiling blood. In sheer frenzy, in an agony born of the fact that I could not scream and give expression to it, I lashed out with both feet at the bottom of the coffin, felt it splinter and give way.

Then the sides cracked, my bleeding fingers clutched at the earth beyond, and I rolled over, burrowing and scrabbling at the moist, soft-packed earth. I dug upwards, wheezing in a sort of mindless desperation as I worked. Instinct alone combatted the insane horror which gripped my being and transformed it into the activity which alone could save me.

They must have buried me in a hurry. The earth above my grave was shallow. Choking and half suffocated, I clawed my way to the top after endless eons of utter delirium during which the dust of the grave covered me and I wriggled like a worm through the dark ground. My hands reached up to form a cavity; then I lunged upward with full strength and burst through to the surface.

I crawled out into silvery moonlight flooding down upon a world of marble toadstools which sprouted richly from the mounds of grass all about me. Some of the fantastic stone growths were cross-shaped, others bore heads or great urnlike mouths. They were the headstones of graves, naturally, but I saw only

toadstools—fat, bloated toadstools of dead-white pallor, reaching unthinkable roots into the ground below to draw forth nourishment.

I lay staring at them, staring back at the pit through which I had come up out of death into life once again. I did not, could not, think. The words "Edgar Allan Poe," and "*Premature Burial*" had come unbidden to my brain, and now for some reason I found myself whispering in a hoarse, dreadful voice, then crooning more loudly, "Lazarus. Lazarus. Lazarus."

GRADUALLY my panting subsided, and I drew fresh strength from the air that sang through my lungs. I stared at the grave again—my grave. It bore no headstone. It was a poor grave, in a poor section of the cemetery; probably a Potter's Field. Nearly on the outskirts of the necropolis it was, and weeds writhed over the poor graves. There was no headstones, and it made me remember my question.

Who was I? It was a unique problem. I had been someone before I died, but who? Surely this was a novel case of amnesia; to return to a new life in the actual sense of the phrase. Who was I?

Funny I could think of words like "amnesia" and yet could not in the least associate them with anything personal in my past. My mind was utterly blank. Did death do this to me?

Was it permanent, or would my mind awaken in a few hours, just as my body had? If not I was in sore straits. I didn't know my name, or my station, what I had been. For that matter, on reflection, I didn't even know where I was. The names of cities flooded foolishly through my brain. Chicago, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Washington, Bombay, Shanghai, Cleveland, Chichen Itza, Pernambuco, Angkor Wat, Rome, Omsk, Carthage. I could not associate a single one with myself, or for that matter, explain how I knew those names.

I thought of streets, of Mariposa Boulevard and Michigan Avenue and

Broadway and Center Street and Park Lane and the Champs Elysées. They meant nothing to me.

I thought of proper names. Felix Kennaston, Ben Blue, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Studs Lonigan, Arthur Gordon Pym, James Gordon Bennett, Samuel Butler, Igor Stravinsky—and they represented no image of myself.

I could see all those streets, visualize all those people, picture all those cities; but myself I could not associate with any of them.

Comedy, tragedy, drama; it was a mad scene to play in a cemetery at nightfall. I had crawled out of a grave without a headstone, and all I know was that I was a man. And yet who?

My eyes roved over my person, lying in the grass. Beneath mud and dirt I saw a dark suit, torn in places, and discolored. It covered the body of a tall man; a thin body, poorly muscled and flat-chested. My hands, rustling over my person, were long and leanly muscular; they were not the hands of a labourer. Of my face I knew nothing, though I passed my hand over each feature in turn. One thing I felt certain of: whatever the cause of my apparent "death," I was not physically maimed.

STRENGTH prompted me to rise. I rose to my feet, stumbled over the grass. For a few minutes I had that drunken floating sensation, but gradually the ground became solid under my feet, I knew awareness of the cool night wind on my forehead, heard with indescribable joy the chirping of crickets from a swamp afar. I walked around the tombstones, gazed at the clouding sky, felt dew and dampness fall.

But my brain was aloof, detached, wrestling with invisible demons of doubt. Who was I? What was I to do? I could not wander strange streets in my disheveled condition. If I presented myself to authorities I would be put away as a madman. Besides, I did not want to see anyone. This fact I realized quite suddenly.

I did not wish to see lights, or people. I was—different.

It was the feeling of death. Was I still—?

Unable to bear the thought, I frantically groped for clues. I tried every means of awakening dormant memories. Walking endlessly the night through, combatting chaos and confusion, fighting the gray clouds that clung to my brain, I wandered up and down the deserted corner of the cemetery.

Exhausted I stared at a lightened sky. And then my thoughts fled away, even the confused ones. I knew only one thing—the need for rest, and peace, and forgetfulness. *Was it the death-urge? Had I risen from the grave only to return?*

I neither knew nor cared. Actuated by a compulsion as inexplicable as it was overpowering, I stumbled toward the ruins of my grave and crept inside, burrowing like a mole into the grateful darkness, whilst the earth tumbled in behind me. There was enough air, the thought came, to enable me to breathe while I lay back in the shattered coffin.

My head fell back and I settled in my coffin, to sleep. . . .

The muttering and rumbling died away from dreams I could not remember. They died away from dreams and grew in reality until I sat up, pushing wet earth so that it fell around me. I was in the grave!

Again, terror. Somehow the hope had lurked that this was a dream, and awakening might bring me to grateful reality. But I was in the grave, and a storm howled above. I crawled upward.

It was still night—or rather, instinct prompted me to believe that it was night again. I must have slept the clock around. This storm had kept people from the graveyard, kept them from discovering the torn earth and its inmate. I rose to the surface and the rain lashed me from skies wild with anger.

And yet I was happy; happy for the life I knew. I drank the rain; the thunder enraptured me as though it were a symphony; I marvelled at the lightning's emerald beauty. I was alive!

All about me corpses rotted and

sloughed, nor could all the fury of the unleashed elements imbue them with one spark of existence or of memory. My own poor thoughts, my own poor life, were infinitely precious in comparison to the lot of those below. I had cheated worm and maggot; let the storm howl! I would howl with it, share in the cosmic jest.

Vitalized in the truest sense of the word, I began to walk. The rain washed the earth-stains from my garments and body. Singularly, I felt no cold, no especial dampness. I was aware of these things, but they did not seem to penetrate. For the first time I realized another odd thing; I was not hungry or thirsty. At least I did not seem to be. Had appetite died with memory? I wondered.

Memory—the problem of identity still pressed. I walked along, impelled by the storm. Still pondering, my feet carried me past the confines of the cemetery. The gale leading me seemed to guide my footsteps out onto the stone sidewalk of a deserted street. I walked, almost without heeding.

Who was I? How had I died? How revived?

I walked through the rain, down the dark street, alone in the wet velvet of the night.

Who was I? How had I died? How revived?

I crossed a block, entered a narrower street, still stumbling alone with the wind and the laugh of thunder from clouds mocking my bewilderment.

Who was—

I knew. My name—the street told me. Summit Street. Who lived on Summit Street? Arthur Derwin, myself. I was Arthur Derwin, of Summit Street. I used to be—something, I couldn't remember. I had lived, lived for years, and yet all I could recall was my name.

How had I died?

I had been to the séance, and the lights were out, and Mrs. Price was calling to someone. She had screamed something about evil influences, and then the lights had gone on.

They hadn't gone on.

But they *must* have.

They had, but *I* wasn't there.

I had died. Died in the darkness at the séance. What killed me? Shock, perhaps? And then what happened? Mrs. Price had hushed it up. I was alone in the city; I had been buried hurriedly, in a pauper's grave. "Heart failure," the coroner had probably called it. I was laid away. That was it. And yet I was Arthur Derwin, and surely somebody had cared.

Bramin Street said the sign in the lightning.

Bramin Street—someone had cared—Viola.

Viola had been my fiancée. She had loved Arthur Derwin. What was her last name? Where had I met her? What did she look like?

Bramin Street.

Again the sign. Unconsciously my feet seemed to have led me down this way. I was walking down Bramin Street without thinking in the storm.

Very well. I would let my feet lead the way. I wouldn't think. My feet would take me to Viola's home through habit. There I would learn. No thinking, now. Just walk through the storm.

I WALKED, my eyes closed to the blackness through which thunder beat. I walked out of death, and I was hungry now. I was hungry and thirsty here in the night, and I was hungry to see Viola and thirsty for her lips. I had come back from death for her—or was that too poetic?

I came from the grave and went back to sleep in it and rose again and sought the world without memory. It was gruesome and grim and macabre. I died at a séance.

My feet plodded, slopping through rain. I felt no cold, no wet. I was warm inside, warm with the memory of Viola, her lips, her hair. She was a blonde, I remembered. Her hair was coiled sunlight, her eyes blue and deep as the sea, her skin the milky whiteness of a unicorn's flanks. I had told her so, I recalled, when I had held her in my arms. I knew her mouth as a

scarlet gate to ecstasy. She was the hunger within me, she the burning beacon of desire that led me back through mists of memory to her door.

I was panting, and did not know it. Within me revolved a wheel that had once been my brain and was now just a grinding round screen flashing kaleidoscopic images of Viola, of the grave, of a séance and evil presences and inexplicable death. Viola had been interested in mysticism, I had been interested in the occult. We went to the séance. Mrs. Price was a famous medium. I died at the séance and woke up in a grave. I came back to see Viola. I came back to find out about myself. I knew now what I was, how I had died. But how revived?

But how revived? Bramin Street. Feet plodding.

And then instinct turned my feet up the pathway to the porch. It was instinct which caused my hand to fumble for the familiar door-knob without knocking, instinct which led me across the threshold.

I STOOD in a hallway, a deserted hallway. There was a mirror there, and for the first time I could see myself. Perhaps that would shock me into complete remembrance and recognition. I looked, but the mirror faded before my gaze into a blur. I felt weak, dazed. But it was due to the hunger within me; the hunger which burned. It was late. Viola wouldn't be downstairs. She would be in her bedroom at this hour.

I went up the stairs, dripping water at every step, walking quite silently aside from the little dripping patter of rills running down to the stair below.

All at once giddiness left me again and I felt strong. I had the feeling that I was ascending the stairs to Destiny; as though once I reached the top I would know the truth of my fate.

Something had brought me from the grave here. Something lay behind this mysterious resurrection. The answer lay above.

I reached the top, turned down the dark, familiar hall. The bedroom door opened beneath my hand. A candle burned at the bedside, nothing more.

And I saw Viola lying there. She

slept, incarnate beauty, slept. She was very young and lovely at that moment, and I felt pity for her at what she must know upon awakening. I called softly.

"Viola."

I called softly, and while I did so my brain said the last of the three questions over and over.

"And how revived?" said my brain.

"Viola!" called my voice.

She opened her eyes, allowed life to flood them. She saw me.

"Arthur—" she gasped. "You're dead!" It was a scream, that last.

"Yes," I said softly.

Why did I say "Yes"? I wondered. And my brain whispered, "And how revived?"

She rose up, shuddering. "You're dead—a ghost. We buried you. Mrs. Price was afraid. You died at the séance. Go away, Arthur—you're dead!"

She moaned it over and over. I looked at her beauty and knew hunger. A thousand memories of that last evening came to me. The séance, and Mrs. Price warning of evil spirits; the coldness which had gripped me in the darkness and my sudden sinking into oblivion. Then this wakening, and my search for Viola to appease my hunger.

Not for food. Not for drink. Not for love. A new hunger. A new hunger known only at night. A new hunger that made me shun men and forget my former self. A new hunger that hated mirrors.

A hunger—for Viola.

I moved toward her very slowly, and my wet grave-clothes rustled as I reached out my hands reassuringly and took her in my arms. I was sorry for her just for an instant; then the hunger came stronger and I bent my head.

The last question rang in my brain once again. "And how revived?" The séance, the threat of evil spirits, answered that question. I answered it myself.

I knew why I had risen from the grave, and who and what I was, as I took Viola in my arms. I took Viola in my arms, and my teeth met in her throat. That answered the question.

I was a Vampire.

The Bottomless Pool

What the Fisher, What the Bait—? Martin Aylethorp Plumbs the Depths!

By
**RALPH MILNE
FARLEY**

*Author of "Liquid Life,"
"Major McCrary's Vision," etc.*

IT WOULD be stupid of me to write this with the intention of saving my life. Of course I shall be threatened with a murder charge, but they shall never be able to produce the body. Consequently they must eventually set me free.

But there is a possibility that I may be held for a sanity hearing. For that reason I must pen this account, and attach it to the other papers. It may serve to convince the officials at the investigation. And those officials *must* be convinced.

They must be convinced, because there is a deed which they must do. It is imperative that they heed my plea and board up the bottomless pool in the swamp beyond Prichard's Woods. They must board up the pool and drain the bog-land; fence it off if they cannot destroy it. Otherwise there will be further tragedies—this I swear is true. And until that black pool is boarded over I shall never find the solace of sound sleep, but will con-

*I slid feet foremost in-
to the stygian waters*



tinued to dream of that thing in the swamp—the dark thing that took the life of my friend, Martin Aylethorp.

There was a time when I knew peace. That's the mockery. My friend Martin had been in a "slump period"—he wrote for a living—and I invited him East for the sole reason that I thought we'd find a soothing tranquility at my home.

My cottage is near Mill Brook, just outside of Concord. Martin, I reasoned, would enjoy tramping in Prichard's Woods, and in the fall the New England countryside takes on a mellow beauty most conducive to easing shattered nerves.

AS I recall my preparation for his coming, it seems like a grim joke. I was so careful in rigging up his room to insure its quiet—I even sent into town for a noiseless portable to replace my regular typewriter.

For when Martin arrived in late August he was a sick man. His tall, normally lean figure was now emaciated; his eyes were sunken behind his spectacles, and the smile I had remembered as habitual upon his countenance seemed drowned by inward melancholy. He smoked too much, and when he held a cigarette the gray spirals rose from the tip unevenly because of the trembling of his hand.

I did my best to conceal my concern over his changed appearance. He had been working on a novel and trying to hold down a librarian's job during the day. I gathered that he was completely done in, and had lately found it impossible to continue with his short story work. It is amazing what creative effort can do to a man of Martin's peculiar temperament. He was drained dry—sucked of all vitality as though his nights had been given over to visits from a vampire or succubus, rather than writing.

It isn't a bad comparison, for Martin Aylethorp wrote weird fiction. He wrote it intensely; and it was his theory, not mine, that writing fantasy took more out of an author than work in any other field. His own person certainly seemed to be good proof of this contention.

I did my best for him. I carefully

avoided all topics of conversation which might relate to his work. I did not show him any of my recent stuff. I locked away all my reference books and magazines. And I did not allow him to speak of his book.

I coaxed him into resting, argued and bullied him with the notion of getting outdoor exercise interspersed with plenty of sleep. After a week or so I gradually augmented the menu at meal time and encouraged him to eat.

It worked. By the time September had passed, he had regained his normal attitude, and his health was once more back to par. Incidentally, I myself had gained six pounds.

Soon I proposed a series of daily hikes in and about the local woods. Martin took to the idea, and for the first time I learned that as a boy he had often spent the summer with relatives in Concord. He seemed eager, as his health improved, to re-visit familiar landmarks. Although I had been at my cottage for over a year, I was amazed at the unsuspected secrets of the countryside he uncovered. Soon he was acting as my guide and I played the meekly following visitor to local shrines.

As his physical well-being increased, his normal interests were correspondingly re-aroused. Within several weeks he was talking stories and plots to me again, and by the end of the month he was literally champing at the bit, eager to get back into harness and do a few tales. Although I held out as long as I could, he insisted that he be allowed the use of my typewriter, and our daily jaunts were now filled with his talk of proposed work and plans for stories.

And then our hikes and his interest converged—disastrously.

One morning after breakfast he came into my room and yanked me out of my chair.

"Come on," he urged. "The sun's high and we're going for a little exploring jaunt."

"Where to?" I asked. "Haven't we covered all the local show-places yet?"

"This is no show-place," he replied, smiling. "It's a secret. I'll wager there's a spot you've never seen, and only a mile away from here, too."

"I doubt that," I said. "What kind of place is it?"

Martin assumed a look of melodramatic grimness.

"It's called 'The Bottomless Pool,'" he whispered.

"What's the gag?"

"I'm serious. It's in the swamp south of Prichard's Woods. I remember my gang explored it during one of the summers I stayed here as a kid. It's a strange place—George Graves warned us to stay away from it when we told him we'd been there. He was the only grown-up we ever spoke to about it, and it was he who called the place 'The Bottomless Pool.'

"He mentioned Walden Pond in Concord—the place where Thoreau wrote his nature studies, you know—and said that it was bottomless, too. It lies in a hollow in the hills; has neither inlet nor outlet, yet the water is always fresh. Springs and a subterranean river cause that, no doubt; the glacier created some queer freaks hereabouts. But he said that Government engineers once came to Walden to take soundings, and there were spots in that pond that were deeper than their longest sounding-wires. That's what he meant by a 'bottomless' pool, and he said that the one in Prichard's Woods was similar.

"Well, his warning just whetted our interest in the spot, you see. Kids are like that, I guess. We got together all the fishline the gang could lay their hands on and tied it all together with a lead weight on one end. Then we lowered it down into that sluggish black pool in the swamp.

"We never struck bottom! Well, that sort of scared us—it's a creepy place—and we took the warning more seriously.

"I never have gone back. That was my last summer at Concord—and I gradually lost track of the boys. But I did hear something in a letter once about Sam Dewey disappearing in the swamp the following year. Sam was the lad who suggested we take soundings. Of course I don't think his disappearance had anything to do with his interest in the Bottomless Pool; although it might have at that. He

was foolhardy and George Graves, when warning us, hinted something about people who had fallen in."

I listened to all this with a sort of tepid interest. But Martin seemed genuinely enthusiastic.

"Let's go take a look at the place," he urged. "It's really a weird spot, and I've got a hunch there's a story there somewhere."

I rose and obediently put on my boots. In my own solitary wanderings I had avoided the mucky, wooded depths of the old swamp, and it was only to humor my guest that I acceded to his request. We struck out to the south and soon reached the swamp edge.

THE swamp was awful. The limbs of dead trees interred the sunlight, and only the wan ghosts of its beams haunted the murky avenues of the morass. Rotten logs and slimy creepers covered a slough of quicksand and bog through which I floundered at Martin's heels. The instincts of boyhood guided him aright, so that he avoided the gray, bubbling patches of deeper ooze. He remarked over this, voicing his amazement that after all these years the place seemed to be unchanged.

At first it was the physical difficulties we encountered which impressed me. Gradually, however, as we waded deeper into the dark swamp, I became more aware of other, less tangible things. The place looked like death, and smelled of death's rottenness and decay. Moss and fungoid growths clung to the gray tree-trunks; bloated toadstools reared pulpy death's heads on fat, stemmed necks rising from the ooze.

The bubbling of the swamp-juices beneath our boots was a silent kind of sound, or rather a noise that seemed to intensify the silence and at the same time to be a part of it. There was no wind in the hanging branches, and we saw neither bird nor animal in these depths.

Still, there had been life here once, for we soon struck a rickety old fence which wound in a seemingly haphazard manner through the lower swamp.

Martin, beckoning to me, turned and followed the meandering wooden out-lines until he came to the willow tree that bent over the ground before it. And there, in the deep, dark shade of the ancient boughs, lay the Bottomless Pool.

It was small—barely six feet across—and black. Jet black water, motionless. The pool was like a large, unblinking eye, with an odious green scum filming its pupil.

That's a highly fantastic comparison—but something about the pool's appearance inspired such thoughts in me. It was strange, and somehow unnatural. It wasn't right for this small pool to be here in the swamp, and certainly the thing looked as evil as any natural formation I've ever seen.

MARTIN stood looking into the depths for a few moments. "The water's black, too," he murmured—strange how in the presence of silence the human voice is always hushed. "The water's black as ink," he said. And he dipped one hand into the pool, brushing off the scummy froth and cupping ebony drops for me to see. The water was black, and the decayed matter in it gave it a veined appearance; it was striated with dark green rills.

"Place eery enough for you?" asked Martin. I nodded.

"Scared us when we were kids," he observed. "And I wouldn't be too sure of my reactions now. But what a setting for a story."

"Perhaps." I had been staring into the silent water, and now I wondered what was generating the impulse in me to turn and run away.

Were my own nerves bad? I hastily averted my gaze.

"Look!" Martin shouted. He really spoke in a normal tone of voice, but in contrast to our previous hushed murmurs, it was a shout.

"Look at the lizard," he exclaimed. Sure enough, the surface of the black water had parted with a widening ripple, and a small dark lizard of some sort appeared. It floated on its back, as though dead. I reached down and grabbed it; yanked it out.

"Why, there's a wire attached to it!" I gasped. The wire led down into the water.

Just then there came a pull on the line from within the pool. It yanked the little dead reptile right out of my hands, but something attached to it caught in my coat, cut right through it, and dug painfully into my side. A hook!

"I'm caught!" I cried, as I stepped toward the pool to ease the pain of the barb in my side. But now the wire line had tightened, was drawing me in short jerks toward the brink of the black pool. I grabbed the line with both hands, braced my feet at the very edge, and leaned backward. But the sod on which I was standing crumbled, and I slid feet foremost into the stygian water.

"Help!" I cried.

Martin leaped forward and grabbed me. With a tremendous tug he hurled me back on the bank. Water coursed down my body, and warm blood scalded the deep wound in my side. I felt faint.

Martin swore softly as he daubed iodine on the cut beneath my shirt, and I swore loudly at the pain. Neither of us were ready to comment, but suddenly Martin turned his head and darted again to the edge of the pool. He pointed, speechless.

Another lizard, larger than the first, now rose to the surface of the pool. It bobbed, and seemed to beckon.

Martin scowled deeply, pointed to my hook-gashed side, and growled out a single word:

"Bait!"

Bait? What bait? The lizard? I snorted disgustedly.

But all the way home we marveled at the incident. We argued as I changed into dry garments; debated as I bandaged my side; mused during luncheon, and speculated wildly all the long afternoon.

Martin, ever the imaginative, had a dozen fantastic theories.

Who fished at the depths of the bottomless pool? And with hooks? Something lived in the pool. Maybe *some-things*. The *some-things* fished for men. As a boy, hadn't George Graves

hinted about disappearances? And hadn't Sam Dewey vanished near the swamp?

SOMETHING in the pool set traps for men—putting lizards on hooks and using a wire line. The Bottomless Pool led to inner earth, and there was life below. Thus Martin, expressed himself, half-seriously.

To which I offered the obvious replies. The hook and line had been used by some fisherman. It had fallen into the water. Perhaps the lizard had been accidentally impaled upon the hook, risen to the surface as it died, and brought the line up. I grabbed it, got hooked, and a snag, entangling the line's end under water, had pulled me into the pool.

"But what about the second lizard we saw?" Martin insinuated, gently.

I was silent.

Martin was grave for a moment before continuing. "I remember, as a boy, fishing for pickerel up Assabet. The boat rocked. I was only about nine at the time, but I was a smart fisherman. I hooked a big pickerel that day—and the pickerel hooked me."

I gave him an uncomprehending glance. "How?" I asked.

"Line got wrapped around my foot and the fish pulled me out of the boat," he laughed. Then, in graver tones, he went on: "If I were a fish, and I wanted to catch a fisherman, I'd tangle him up in a line. Take the Bottomless Pool, for example. If I meant to capture whoever or whatever is fishing for me from below, I'd grab that lizard bait and allow it to drag me in toward the pool. Then I'd pull up more line and attach the wire to a windlass rope. And then I'd let go of the hook. The sudden release might precipitate the fisherman below overboard into the water and tangle him up. Then, by quickly winding in the windlass, I'd haul the fellow up to the surface."

"But that's absurd," I began. "There's no fisherman in the Bottomless Pool—there can't be, and besides—"

"How does your hooked side feel this evening?" interjected Martin sarcastically.

"Oh, let's forget it," I grumbled.

But I didn't forget. I dreamed that night. And Martin did not forget, either. He spent the midnight hours at the typewriter, taking notes for a story. Neither of us, however, spoke again of the Bottomless Pool.

The next day I awoke with a slight fever. The wound in my side was a little inflamed, and I lay abed, bathing it with hot cloths to reduce the swelling. Martin, after assuring himself that I was not utterly helpless, announced that he was going for a walk.

"I'd like to interview a few old-timers around here about that place," he told me. "There should be myths."

I forget what remark I made, but I know that I tried to laugh him out of his interest. Secretly, I was very much disturbed. My dreams had not been pleasant, and the Bottomless Pool had figured rather too prominently in them. For a moment I had the wild notion that Martin was going off to try out his fishing theory. He seemed almost unnaturally interested; a person of his temperament can be greatly influenced by imaginative concepts.

He left on his purported mission of investigation, and I spent a long day in dozing and dreaming. It was late afternoon when he returned, greeted me brusquely, and went in to the other room. In a few moments I heard the vibration of the noiseless typewriter.

Rising, I got supper together. We ate but little; fever had banished my own appetite, and excitement seemed to grip Martin so that food could not interest him.

Almost as soon as he sat down he launched into a long babble of gossip he had picked up during the day. Old Bert Pickens down near the Causeway had known Martin's parents; he had filled my friend up with old Colonial tales and even some Indian lore he'd heard as a boy back in the seventies.

There were stories about the swamp south of the woods; specific cases of disappearances dating way back as far as community memory went.

Visiting Granny Mercer's cottage later in the day, Martin had persuaded the always garrulous old woman to re-

count her own family history. It was a point of pride with the crone that her pure blood had at one time produced a martyr during the Salem witchcraft hysteria, and she warned Martin most gravely about the old pool. It was from her that he picked up his tale of the Indian rites in the swamp, where the braves sometimes offered up sacrifices to the pit-god they believed dwelt in the pool—casting bodies into the orifice.

I could see that Martin was more impressed with this lore than even he admitted; he was very glib in patching together his yarn so that it formed an almost recognizable story sequence. He quoted from memory the words of Cotton Mather concerning "gateways to Hell and openings in earth which lead to the Regions of the Damned." Indeed, he weaved a fine romance about the pool, and did it so deftly that I was forced to the conclusion that he half-believed some of it.

"I'll write it all up tonight," he told me. "Then I must have another look at the place. You know, there's something fascinating about all this—it's a real mystery. Wouldn't it be remarkable if there is some truth about my theories concerning the fishing? After all, those lizards don't manufacture hook and wire. And some of these old wives' tales are very definite."

I made no comment. I went to bed early, leaving Martin to type away in the next room as he had planned. My sleep was troubled, and it must have been about midnight when I woke in a cold sweat and stumbled into the kitchen for water. The house was dark and still. I passed through Martin's room, and noticed with a start that his bed was empty.

Fever left me. I knew, with an inexplicable dread, that Martin had gone. And I knew, too, where he had gone.

My first thought was that I had over-estimated his recovery. He might still be mentally ill; the pool in the swamp had exercised a morbid fascination on his mind. Poor judgment might have led him to see the thing by moonlight, for the sake of capturing story "atmosphere."

I went back to bed, but I did not sleep. I kept waiting for him to return. The night was long. I trembled with fever, and with secret fear. It was not a good thing to wander alone in the swamp by night. Quick-sand and fog, to say nothing of the possibilities of running into some prowler, made the stunt dangerous.

But after an hour had passed, I found that it was not this spectacle of actual, apparent dangers which disturbed me. I began to think only of the pool itself, and of the bait upon its black surface.

Then it was that unreasoning panic gripped me. I rose and bundled up, tugged on my boots. I snatched up my belt flashlight and ran out.

I SWEAR I had no sense of time passing on my nocturnal trek in the woods. It seemed only a fever-filled instant before I was already wading into that black jungle fringing the swamp; only a mist-wrapped moment before I darted from hummock to hummock in the rising fog, calling Martin's name. Only the frogs croaked an answer.

Then I was following the fence-rail and finally grasped the willow trunk as I stared down at the bank of the pool—the bank of wet mud in which were implanted the fresh boot-prints of human feet. They faced one way only—toward the pool. And as they neared the edge they slurred into a sort of sliding, scooped-out impression, as though the wearer had been dragged. . . .

Dragged into the black, silent water, from which the tiny bubbles now arose, slowly, slowly. . . .

I screamed and ran back into the night.

Fever held me the next day. But I was glad, for it kept me from thinking too much—thinking about what had happened, and also about what I planned to do.

I didn't consider the possibility of suicide—not when I read the typed notes Martin had written the night before. The whole story of his belief lay there, and there were incredible hints of what he expected to bring

forth from the pool depths. At the last he spoke of the urge to re-visit the scene and capture a lizard for examination—to see if it were of a recognizable species, and also to determine just how it had been killed. He wanted some wire, also, and one of the hooks. Then he would go ahead and try his plan.

For he quite definitely had intended to use the windlass trick. I learned that before the morning was over—the delivery truck brought the order from the city.

I went sick as I signed Martin's name for the shipment. I had a sudden vision of him on the night before, standing by the pool as he waited for the appearance of the bait, then stooping to remove the reptile and being caught, dragged. . . .

No, it was not suicide. It was murder.

But by what means?

Through burning delirium came the answer—pictures conjured up from Indian legends and witchcraft whisperings. A Dweller beneath the waters, fishing for humankind, and snaring the curious. A fissure in the earth's crust, leading to some hellish subterranean cavern. And Martin going down, down into the inky waters on the end of a hook, to be seized by—what?

I would find out. The windlass and Martin's scheme—he would be avenged with his own plan, his own instrument.

I must have been a little mad. I talked and laughed to myself a great deal as the day sped. I gathered the equipment together at dusk, and started for the swamp. An unhealthy night-fog was already rising when I left Prichard's Woods, but though fever coursed through my veins I plodded on. I walked through nightmare.

The unseen frogs croaked a dismal litany as I stumbled through the bog. Tapers of fog rose dimly on all sides, and smoky mist hung about my head. I floundered through the gray darkness, lugging the windlass. Often I sank ankle-deep into puddles of bubbling slime.

All about me in the night was rotteness and decay and death, and I recall thinking that this putrescent swamp was but a frame; a background, a setting for the black jewel of the bottomless pit. But the fog and the fever in my temples accounted for such wild fancies.

Fog and fever conspired toward my feeling of unutterable loathing when first I caught sight of the ebon waters upon the inky chasm in the center of the swamp.

Fog and fever addled me so that I monotonously cursed as I anchored the windlass to a big log set upon the firm higher ground of the bank. A short rope from the drum of the windlass ran to the edge of the pool and ended in a quick-settling clamp. There was a detached part of me that carried out these operations with methodical precision, and yet another part that inspired my cursings as I crouched there in the forest darkness of the heaving, breathing swamp.

BENEATH my feet the quicksand thrummed and groaned, and I recall that a wild picture rose in my mind. I had a fantastic image of myself crouching upon the epidermis of some gigantic monster—as though the swamp itself were just the skin of a vast beast, and the bottomless black pit a tiny pin-prick in the flesh. But that, too, was fog and fever.

The preparations were made. I had not even glanced at the scummy surface of the pool; so sure was I of what my eyes must encounter. Now, with the drum ready for use and the windlass securely placed, I gazed into the dark depths and jerked on the flashlight I wore at my belt.

Its rays disclosed the floating blue body of a tiny lizard, bobbing monotonously upon the surface of the cryptic waters. There it lay in death, rising and sinking upon water that did not move. And that fact inspired me with the terrible fear of a corroboration for poor Martin's story.

I stared at the creature, fighting the fog and fever that created gray mist upon my brain until the only thought distinguishable was a panic impulse to

flee the spot. I rocked on my heels when I wished to run screaming back across the bog to a spot where Nature is sane and friendly.

And then I felt in my pocket for the wire-clipper I had found on Martin's desk. For some absurd reason, the cold feel of the prosaic, factory-cut metal reassured me. And with my free hand I reached out and snatched at the blue lizard.

I tugged the body from the water in the beam of the flashlight on the bank—and the clear yellow beam was cut by a black line. The lizard was wired! Seizing the clamp next to me, I quickly clipped the wire to the windlass rope.

Then I yanked on the wire with both hands. I tugged. A shudder ran through me, for I felt a dreadful, unmistakable *response* from the other end of the line! Through the water it tightened, jerked.

SOMEONE below was pulling on the rope. *Someone was fishing!*

But who? And from how far below?

The tugger was strong. In sudden desperation I felt my heels slide along the bank. Powerful jerks were drawing me close to the black brink of that dark, still pool. With a gasp, I let go.

The line whipped back into the water. In my mind's eye I formed a silly, senseless picture of a fisherman standing on his wharf; then falling over backwards as the catch released his line. An idiotic picture it was, for there could be no fisherman at the bottom of a bottomless pool. Or could there be?

I would soon know. The line fell back, then reached the spot where I had clamped it to the windlass rope. There it snapped—taut.

The fisherman had fallen overboard. He had been hooked. I laughed without mirth at the insane thought.

And then I gripped the windlass handle and turned the drum, and I felt a terrific threshing tauten the line until it stood straight in the flashlight's beam again. The wire began to snap back and forth in the black waters of the pool. I turned and turned; a hundred, a thousand revolu-

tions were made in augmenting frenzy—for now I desperately realized that each crank was bringing me closer and closer to the secret of the bottomless pool.

Suddenly the winch jammed. I stared in dismay, then saw that the drum was full. Then I leapt in front of the windlass and grabbed the remaining wire in my hands.

It took a second, but I experienced a year. Through fever and fog came images of what I might expect to find at the end of my line. Martin's bloated corpse, blue and swollen, with the line gripped between death-clenched teeth . . . the shapeless body of a child long mired in the slime of the pit . . . sea-monster. . . .

But no, it could not be. There was a fisher down there—a fisher that baited cunningly this hook and sent a wire line upwards to entrap children, and wanderers, and curious men. And the fisher had taken Martin, and was now entangled in this line. A fisher in a black and bottomless pool; I was drawing in a fisher from Below.

The rays of the flashlight on the bank now gleamed upon the surface of the scummy waters, but they were still no longer. In oozing eddies they bubbled and swirled, and black slime was tossed upwards as I drew the cutting wire through my hands. A terrific force was pulling against me, and fright alone conspired to intensify the strength of my grip. At that moment, I would gladly have released my hold but sheer hysteria made my muscles rigid. Slowly, inexorably, I drew the final length of the wire from the water in the yellow light.

The Fisher emerged. . . .

I cannot remember if I screamed aloud, but there was the sound made by utter fear ringing and crashing against my brain. For I saw the creature of the pit—saw the strangled neck about which the tangling wire had wound and allowed me to pull the Fisher upwards. I saw what filled the six-foot surface of the pool as it emerged.

It was a head shaped by horror's dreams alone. Not human, not reptilian, not frog-like—it was neverthe-

less featured with great staring yellow eyes, snouted like a saurian, and covered with a greenish batrachoid skin that glistened slickly against the yellow light.

The monstrous bulging eyes rolled wildly and dilated in agony as the creature opened its great slitted mouth in a soundless, choking gasp. I stared into a red maw that was fanged in a manner unknown to any beast still roaming earth—and as I did so a sickening realization swept over me. This was the Fisher!

An instant only did that gigantic glistening head rise greenly above the waters of the pool—then my clippers were out, the wire snapped with a shrill twang, and the Fisher from Below sank beneath the bubbling black waves with a thunderous splash of slime. I stared down blankly into the depths as the waters quickly became quiescent once again. I could see nothing—but I did not wish to.

I did not wish to learn what manner of horrid life flourished unnaturally at the bottom of this opening—wherever that bottom might be. I did not care to speculate upon the cunning intelligence of a primal entity which even now fished for men from its lair in the black deep. I did not think I could endure surmises which now clamored for consideration.

Was this the only creature of its kind, or were there more down there? What inversion of sane natural laws allowed existence in nighted depths, and what manner of ghastly intelligence prompted prehistoric beasts to set bait for men? Were there other such openings in the earth's concealing crust through which the madness below had access to humanity?

But what I most devoutly tried to keep from thinking about was the scraped sides of the pool-bank, and the reasons for it. Only the *head* of the monster had emerged, and it had filled the pool. The sides were scraped by the shoulders—and *the six-foot pool had not been wide enough to permit the passage of the body.*

Fog and fever were merciful releases. I know that I dumped the windlass in the pool and it sank like

a plummet, and I dimly remember running back through the swamp.

I WAS ill the next few days, and then the police came, and I told them what I dared. They have seen the pool, but they have said nothing of their opinion to me. I told them more today, and will tell them all I know soon—not to preserve my freedom, but because now I want the spot boarded up. It must be, lest others see the bait. It must be boarded up; for it cannot be *filled up*.

I shall tell them soon, or let them read this. They can think me demented if they like, but I trust they believe enough to act, and act promptly. Perhaps if even then they do not believe, I may show them the hook I have—the hook from the wire in the pool, which I cut off. I hate to reveal it to them, for I detest the very memory of the thing myself.

It is made of some golden metal, harder than pure gold. It is cut, and rudely shaped—and I dislike to conceive of the creatures who deliberately formed it for its horrid purpose and made the wire to which it was attached. I cannot bear to think of the civilization behind such a creative effort. And worst of all is the memory of those designs in the metal.

Those designs, created by what primal artist? There are three of them, cut into the gold surface. They tell all, so that I know only too well why the Fishers seek men with bait from their bottomless pits.

The first design is tiny like the rest, but it unmistakably depicts a creature such as the one whose head I saw. I dare not describe the body which is shown here. But the creature is baiting a hook. . . .

The second little design is a crude representation of a man, falling through water at the end of a line, as Martin must have fallen.

And the third design—but I must not speak of that—tells of what Martin's fate was; tells why the Fishers fish. That third hellish design on the hook!

It shows a feast. . . .

The Bottomless Pool must be boarded up.

FULFILLMENT

*Out of the Piled-Up
Centuries, Comes an
Inexorable Summons
for the Twin of
Isames!*

By WILL GARTH

*Author of "Murder in the Wax Works,"
"King of Voodoo," etc.*

IT WAS not a dream. Despite the fact that she had distinctly remembered going to bed as a last conscious effort after the stormy interview with Artemus Russo, Marjorie Westbrook knew, as she had known about other weird instances in her life, that this was stark and cold reality.

There was no state of transition between the pleasant business of retiring and this instinct awareness of an incredible situation. Simply, she had gone to bed in her lovely chamber at home in Forest Hills as Marjorie Westbrook, heiress to the Westbrook Motor millions, her mind filled with business details over the present policies of the late George Westbrook's automobile factories.

And here she was, wide awake and standing before an altar in front of her, an altar of ancient Egyptian motif with the sacred ibis projecting in relief at the ends like figureheads of ships.

She stood in her bare feet upon a cold floor of tessellated marble. Moreover, the satin nightdress, the last item of dress she remembered donning, was gone. She stood there in complete nudity, but she was conscious of no sense of shame or modesty.

Without seeing it, for she was powerless to turn—she was aware of an immensity of space which ex-



The crystal ball turned inky black

tended in all directions behind her, a space blocked out with intangible green mist that was almost black and almost of the density of velvet drapes

At her right hand was an upright sarcophagus with the lid removed. Within the musty and spicily pungent interior was the wrapped figure of a mummy—a mummy which, queerly enough, was headless.

It was all like closing her eyes upon a scene in a cinema for an instant, to open them upon a sudden change of locale. With this signifi-

cant difference: there was no continuity, no relevance, no congruity, no connection between her life and this grotesque pattern.

None? There were, of course, her previous experiences—those strange, uncanny interludes in her otherwise prosaic life. But there was no tangible connection unless you considered the sarcophagus—which looked exactly like the one she had purchased some months before, even to the headless mummy in the musty interior.

Somehow, and Marjorie could not explain it, that sarcophagus which should have been in her boudoir, was here with her in this other world. That Egyptian sarcophagus—as soon as she had seen it, she had been resolved to possess it. Its fascination for her had been but the apex of an amazing sequence of bizarre occurrences, and it blended as a perfect complement with those experiences. . . .

Marjorie now became aware that just beyond the altar before which she stood was the figure of a man in a cowed crimson robe, his hands busy at a set of dials and buttons before him. And the craziest and most outré part of it all was the monk's face. He was Artemus Russo, general manager of Westbrook Motors. Yet there was a strangeness about him that was not Russo.

Before she had time to cry out, to question him, to demand an explanation, Marjorie noticed the light. She was outlined in a glow of light like a psychic aura, of unbelievable intensity, shading from pure white to garish green, mantling her in a bath of living light. As she stared down at her lovely form, to her horror, she saw the flesh become translucent, transparent, and finally invisible—and the skeletal structure of her body from neck to toe became hideously revealed in glowing pink.

Still bound by invisible chains which kept her motionless but without pain, Marjorie heard the cowed figure speak, and the tones of his voice awakened a thousand memories in her mind, memories which were not of the well-tailored Artemus

Russo who shouted so irately about proxies and assets and common stock of Westbrook Motors, Inc.

"The hour has come, Princess," he said, "to fulfill your destiny."

"Ankhtares!" she gasped, giving him a name which came easily from her lips. "No! No! I am not ready!"

Her own answer startled her profoundly, shook her to the depths of her soul.

That was what made these bizarre occurrences in her life so distressing. It implied knowledge on her part of monstrous things from the womb of time about which she, as Marjorie Westbrook, should have known nothing. But she did know. Even now, answering so easily to the title of "princess," yet aware of herself as Marjorie Westbrook, she remembered similar experiences.

THE first had happened when she was a child of ten. Without warning she had passed from a safely mundane world to a shadowy temple of vast halls and towering pillars. Going to bed, all tired out from a day of happy play—falling quickly asleep—suddenly she was standing before a high altar whose sides were a frieze of jackal-headed dolls of angular lines. Or were they dolls? How was a little girl of ten to know?

Yet they were not strange to her. Without knowing how she knew, she was as familiar with the symbol of Anubis as she was with her own sister, the twin who had always walked beside her. Sister? With a start, she realized that another little girl was standing with her before that forbidding altar with its plume of curling incense. The little companion was an exact duplicate of herself, dressed in archaic headdress and queerly draped robe of costly silk with beaten gold design in the hem. On her ankles and arms bracelets glittered, one in the form of a coiled serpent with eyes of emerald green.

This was Isames. Without being told, Marjorie knew that her own name was Isira. It had always been Isira—for ten years of Egyptian childhood as a princess of the royal

blood. There was no Marjorie Westbrook in this consciousness, and yet she knew she was Marjorie Westbrook and that Sir Gerwain was waiting for her out in her father's kennels. In a way it was terrifying, and Marjorie (Isira) whimpered.

"Be brave, Isira," whispered Isames. "It is our heritage."

Before Marjorie could reply there was movement behind the altar, and Ankhtares, high priest of Ammon, a cold and stern man with the features of Artemus Russo, her father's secretary, swam into view. There was a strange light in his piercing black eyes as he looked out and down upon the two little girls who stood before the altar to the dead, tightly clasping each other's hands.

"Princess Isira and Princess Isames," he spoke in a sonorous voice which echoed hollowly through the great hall of the temple, "in accordance with the rule of your house, blessed under the sign of the crux ansata and dedicated to the service of Ra, you are here to choose your destiny. Are you prepared?"

"We are prepared, O Ankhtares," Marjorie heard herself and her sister reply. That the language was not modern English, she did not even note.

The high priest passed his hand above the curling incense rising from the altar in a cabalistic sign, and blue smoke fairly boiled up in writhing convolutions that had sparks of incandescent red. The figure of the high priest was obscured for a moment, and both little girls trembled. Then he came back into view.

"In this, the third era in the second dynasty of Ptolemy," his compelling voice rolled out, "it is written in the Seventh Book of Anubis that of twin princes or princesses of the direct line of Pharaoh only one can ascend to the throne. Herein lies the parting paths of destiny. For one there is the sceptre of a queen, wealth and glory and power—and death before her youth has faded. For the other there is a timeless void until her spirit shall find life and happiness in a future existence and then she shall grow old before her

time. And in the end the twain shall be reunited by a bond far stronger than that of natal ties. It is so written. Choose well, ye little princesses. Behold, the sacred ibis awaits to carry the word to Ammon, Giver of all."

Both little girls clung together and quivered in wide-eyed fright as they saw the blue smoke take the form of the sacred bird. The words of the high priest were incomprehensible to them, but they stared at the shadowy bird of Ra and spoke bravely.

"I want to be a queen," said Isames.

"I want to be happy," said Isira.

With a puff of smoke the nebulous ibis disappeared.

"So be it!" said the voice of Ankhtares.

There was a flash of blinding light, and little Marjorie Westbrook opened her eyes to find the morning sun streaming in at the window and to hear the excited yelping of Sir Gerwain, her wolfhound, outside.

That had happened when she was ten. Now, at twenty-five, in the very midst of undergoing a similar experience, she was able to recall that earlier one.

SHE stared down in a mounting sort of mental fear as she watched her body entirely disappear from beneath her, leaving only the faintly glowing frame of her bony structure. And as she watched, even that began to fade away in the bath of terrible light, the source of which she could not determine. Soon she would be a disembodied head floating above the strange floor.

"The hour is at hand, Princess Isira," said the cowled priest, "for the fulfillment of your destiny. The sands of time have run their interminable course. Beyond human comprehension is the working, of the Infinite. You behold, on your right, the sarcophagus of Isames, queen of the Nile, taken unto the arms of Anubis and Thoth in her twenty-sixth year. Alas, only her chu (preserved body) remains. Her ka (soul bird with human head) has departed for the sun

temple of Ammon. Her sacred crypt was violated by Vandals and desecrators of the dead, but you can behold her likeness on the lid of the sarcophagus in beaten gold."

Marjorie Westbrook, or the consciousness that was Marjorie Westbrook, stared at the cover of the ornate case and nearly swooned in astonishment. She recalled the face on the lid of her own sarcophagus, the one in her boudoir, and how its haunting familiarity had puzzled and intrigued her. But always it had remained vague and dim. Now, like the sensitized image on a print that has just been withdrawn from developing fluid, the golden features, bathed in that eerie glow, were exact duplicates of her own! It was as though she stared into a burnished mirror of gold. Even the wide, staring eyes seemed alive with the color and expression of her own eyes.

And still this fantastic, this outré and bizarre experience was no dream. Marjorie Westbrook was as thoroughly awake as she would ever be. Never, since that soul-shaking and impossible thing which had happened to her at the age of ten, had she experienced, awake or asleep, any further manifestation which included so much as a mention of the lost Isames. In her nocturnal materializations—and there had been at least one for every year of her life—she had never again seen this strange twin sister or heard of her until now. It came to Marjorie with a dreadful thrill that she was in her own *twenty-sixth* year right now.

Not once during her entire life had she ever mentioned these weird adventures to anyone, not even to her doctor. It was a closed and sealed book from the world, from even Marjorie herself—except in the throes of the fantastic episodes. But it was not a dream life; she knew that. It was some horrible destiny, an actual and solid fate of terrific force and dim, unguessed purpose that stalked her.

And it did not feed solely upon the hours of night, a mere figment of her imagination. There was that

day when she was seventeen, and her father had taken her to the county fair. Normal, happy, light-hearted girl of a modern age, she had clapped her hands in delight when the old Gipsy hag in the gay-colored booth wanted to tell her fortune.

But no sooner had Marjorie seated herself across the table of sand from the woman than the crystal ball thereon turned inky black. The woman started in utter dismay and quickly flung a cloth over the ball. She blanched almost white as she stared with her sharp, black eyes into Marjorie's blue ones.

"Let me see your right hand," she said in a tense whisper.

Obligingly Marjorie stretched out her slim and girlish hand, palm up. Without touching her, the Gipsy stared with bulging eyes, her golden earrings adance with violent agitation.

"No," she whispered. "No, no—I cannot read your destiny, child."

"But that isn't fair," pouted Marjorie. "I've paid you a silver dollar. You must read my fortune."

"Here is your money," said the old woman, beginning to shake all over.

"I won't have it back," declared Marjorie defiantly. "Keep it, and read my fortune."

THE Gipsy groaned.

"I—I cannot," she articulated with difficulty. "I dare not! I see only that you have a double existence. You will grow old before your time—incredibly old."

"How old?" demanded Marjorie, thinking the Gipsy was putting on a very good act.

"Perhaps—perhaps six thousand years," choked out the other, and then, with a wild cry, the woman fled from the booth.

That experience had taken place in broad daylight; had occurred to Marjorie Westbrook without any transition into another entity, another sphere of life. So she knew she was not crazy. And she knew she did not dream these yearly episodes which wove that strange, irrelevant, and inexplicable pattern through her

otherwise normal and sane existence.

"No! No!" she cried out in horror now against a dread of she knew not what as her skeleton completely disappeared.

But her protests were as naught to this high priest of Ammon who was the counterpart of Artemus Russo. And Marjorie became aware of a pair of hands, cold and clammy as early morning fog off the Sound, which gripped her head. She rolled her eyes to see a green-gray figure that had materialized behind her, a disembodied spirit that was human only in outline—an elemental, even an ectoplasmic projection of Ankhtares.

She opened her mouth to scream in terror, but no sound came. She thought she was in a silent world of chimeras. And the creature carried her bodyless head like a football across the intervening space and set it firmly on the shoulders of the linen-wrapped mummy within the sarcophagus!

"Thy destiny has been fulfilled," came the voice of Ankhtares. "At last we shall both have peace."

There was that blinding flash of light which Marjorie Westbrook had come to know so well, and everything went into the oblivion of nothingness. . . .

MARJORIE opened her eyes. The maid was letting in the sunshine. She was safe at home in her own bed in Forest Hills, the covers drawn snugly up to her chin.

"Miss Westbrook," said the maid softly, "it is eleven o'clock. Mr. Russo is waiting to see you in the sitting room. He insisted that I wake you as he has to attend that board meeting. He said he must have your final word."

Marjorie smiled. Her personal relief was so great that she felt in a

most melting mood toward the manager of her affairs.

"Very well," she said. "Tell him I am ready to sign those proxies for him and wind things up. Wait, help me up first." She threw back the silken coverlet, preparatory to sitting up. "Bring over the—"

She broke off in stunned horror. As she moved it sounded like the rattling of parchment and dried bones. As she tossed back the cover, instead of a satin night negligee from Paris upon the lovely body of a twenty-five-year-old beauty, she exposed the gray-brown and dried skin of an Egyptian mummy. Her hands were two shrunken claws, the outline of the bones showing plainly from elbow to fingers.

One terrible shriek Marjorie Westbrook gave ere death overtook her. The horrible episodes of her nocturnal life had finally broken through the barrier that had always surrounded and protected her—had overtaken her at last. The six thousand years were up!

The maid stared, petrified, at the lovely head perfectly joined to that of the six-thousand-year-old mummy of an Egyptian woman. Her eyes rolled wildly to a corner of the room where her mistress' prized sarcophagus stood, and she screamed. The lid was off, and the headless mummy that should have reposed in the case was gone!

"Mr. Russo! Mr. Russo!" she cried as she fled to the outer room. Her voice choked, cut off abruptly as she stared at the couch where she had left the general manager sitting. Lying full-length on the couch was Artemus Russo, his body as still as death and his face parchment yellow and amazingly, horribly wrinkled with lines that told of the passage of centuries.

Around the Solar System in 10 Days! THE JULES VERNE EXPRESS, a Novelet by Eando Binder, is Featured in April THRILLING WONDER STORIES—15c At All Newsstands

The Ancient God,
Zu-che-quon, Enemy
of the Sun, Bringer
of Darkness, Is
Awakened!



*I heard a sickening crunch
and saw one of the bells
smash down on Sarto*

Bells of Horror

By KEITH HAMMOND

Author of "The Hand of Ahrimana," "The Invaders," etc.

Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light;
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight;
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal:
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.

—Swinburne.

A GREAT deal of curiosity has been aroused by the strange affair of the lost bells of Mission San Xavier. Many have wondered

why, when the bells were discovered after remaining hidden for over a hundred and fifty years, they were almost immediately smashed and the fragments buried secretly. In view of the legends of the remarkable tone and quality of the bells, a number of musicians have written angry letters asking why, at least, they were not rung before their destruction and a permanent record made of their music.

As a matter of fact, the bells were rung, and the cataclysmic thing that

happened at that time was the direct reason for their destruction. And when those evil bells were shrieking out their mad summons in the unprecedented blackness that shrouded San Xavier, it was only the quick action of one man that saved the world—yes, I do not hesitate to say it—from chaos and doom.

As secretary of the California Historical Society, I was in a position to witness the entire affair almost from its inception. I was not present, of course, when the bells were unearthed, but Arthur Todd, the president of the society, telephoned me at my home in Los Angeles soon after that ill-fated discovery.

He was almost too excited to speak coherently. "We've found them!" he kept shouting. "The bells, Ross! Found them last night, back in the Pinos Range. It's the most remarkable discovery since—since the Rosetta Stone!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, groping in a fog of drowsiness. The call had brought me from my warm bed.

"The San Xavier bells, of course," he explained jubilantly. "I've seen them myself. Just where Junipero Serra buried them in 1775. A hiker found a cave in the Pinos, and explored it—and there was a rotting wooden cross at the end, with carving on it. I brought—"

"What did the carving say?" I broke in.

"Eh? Oh—just a minute, I have it here. Listen: 'Let no man hang the evil bells of the Mutsunes which lie buried here, lest the terror of the night rise again in Nueva California.' The Mutsunes, you know, were supposed to have had a hand in casting the bells."

"I know," I said into the transmitter. "Their shamans were supposed to have put a magic spell on them."

"I'm—I'm wondering about that," Todd said. "There have been some very unusual things happening up here. I've only got two of the bells out of the cave. There's another, you know, but the Mexicans won't go in the cave any more. They say—well, they're afraid of something. But I'll

get that bell if I have to dig it up myself."

"Want me to come up there?"

"If you will," Todd said eagerly. "I'm phoning from a cabin in Coyote Canyon. I left Denton—my assistant—in charge. Suppose I send a boy down to San Xavier to guide you to the cave?"

"All right," I assented. "Send him to the Xavier Hotel. I'll be there in a few hours."

SAN XAVIER is perhaps a hundred miles from Los Angeles. I raced along the coast and within two hours I had reached the little mission town, hemmed in by the Pinos Range, drowsing sleepily on the edge of the Pacific. I found my guide at the hotel, but he was oddly reluctant to return to Todd's camp.

"I can tell you how to go, *Senor*. You will not get lost." The boy's dark face was unnaturally pale beneath its heavy tan, and there was a lurking disquiet in his brown eyes. "I don't want to go back—"

I jingled some coins. "It's not as bad as all that, is it?" I asked. "Afraid of the dark?"

He flinched. "*Si*, the—the dark—it's very dark in that cave, *Senor*."

The upshot was that I had to go alone, trusting to his directions and my own ability in the open.

Dawn was breaking as I started up the canyon trail, but it was a strangely dark dawn. The sky was not overcast, but it held a curious gloom. I have seen such oppressively dark days during dust storms, but the air seemed clear enough. And it was very cold, although even from my height I could see no fog on the Pacific.

I kept on climbing. Presently I found myself threading the gloomy, chill recesses of Coyote Canyon. I shivered with cold. The sky was a dull, leaden color, and I found myself breathing heavily. In good physical condition, the climb had tired me unduly.

Yet I was not physically tired—it was rather an aching, oppressive lethargy of mind. My eyes were watering, and I found myself shutting them occasionally to relieve the strain. I

wished the sun would come over the top of the mountain.

Then I saw something extraordinary—and horrible. It was a toad—gray, fat, ugly. It was squatting beside a rock at the side of the trail, rubbing itself against the rough stone. One eye was turned toward me—or, rather, the place where the eye should have been. There was no eye—there was only a slimy little hollow.

The toad moved its ungainly body back and forth, sawing its head against the rock. It kept uttering harsh little croaks of pain—and in a moment it had withdrawn from the stone and was dragging itself across the trail at my feet.

I stood looking at the stone, nauseated. The gray surface of rock was bedaubed with whitish streaks of feter, and the shredded bits of the toad's eye. Apparently the toad had deliberately ground out its protruding eyes against the rock.

It crept out of sight beneath a bush, leaving a track of slime in the dust of the trail. I involuntarily shut my eyes and rubbed them—and suddenly jerked down my hands, startled at the roughness with which my fists had been digging into my eye-sockets. Lancing pain shot through my temples. Remembering the itching, burning sensation in my eyes, I shuddered a little. Had the same sort of torture caused the toad deliberately to blind itself? My God!

I RAN on up the trail. Presently I passed a cabin—probably the one from which Todd had telephoned, for I saw wires running from the roof to a tall pine. I knocked at the door. No answer. I continued my ascent.

Suddenly there came an agonized scream, knife-edged and shrill, and the rapid thudding of footsteps. I stopped, listening. Someone was running down the trail toward me—and behind him I could hear others racing, shouting as they ran. Around a bend in the trail a man came plunging.

He was a Mexican, and his black-stubbed face was set in lines of terror and agony. His mouth was open in a square of agony, and insane screams burst horribly from his throat.

But it wasn't that that sent me staggering back out of his path, cold sweat bursting out on my body.

His eyes had been gouged out, and twin trickles of blood dripped down his face from black, gaping hollows.

As it happened, there was no need for me to halt the blinded man's frantic rush. At the curve of the trail he smashed into a tree with frightful force, and momentarily stood upright against the trunk. Then very slowly he sagged down and collapsed in a limp huddle. There was a great splotch of blood on the rough bark. I went over to him quickly.

Four men came running toward me. I recognized Arthur Todd and Denton, his assistant. The other two were obviously laborers. Todd jerked to a halt.

"Ross! Good God—is he dead?"

Swiftly he bent over to examine the unconscious man. Denton and I stared at each other. Denton was a tall, strongly-built man, with a shock of black hair and a broad mouth that was generally expanded in a grin. Now his face bore a look of horrified disbelief.

"God, Ross—he did it right before our eyes," Denton said through pale lips. "He just let out a scream, threw up his hands and tore his eyes out of their sockets." He shut his own eyes at the memory.

Todd got up slowly. Unlike Denton, he was small, wiry, nervously energetic, with a lean, brown face and amazingly alert eyes. "Dead," he said.

"What's happened?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "What's wrong, Todd? Was the man insane?"

And all the while I had a picture of that fat toad tearing out its eyes against a rock.

Todd shook his head, his brows drawn together in a frown. "I don't know. Ross, do your eyes feel—odd?"

A shiver ran through me. "Damned odd. Burning and itching. I've been rubbing them continually on the way up."

"So have the men," Denton told me. "So have we. See?" He pointed to his eyes, and I saw that they were red-rimmed and inflamed.

The two laborers—Mexicans—came over to us. One of them said some-

thing in Spanish. Todd barked a sharp order, and they fell back, hesitating.

Then, without further parley, they took to their heels down the trail. Denton started forward with an angry shout, but Todd caught his arm. "No use," he said quickly. "We'll have to get the bells out ourselves."

"You found the last one?" I asked, as he turned back up the trail.

"We found them—all three," Todd said somberly. "Denton and I dug up the last one ourselves. And we found this, too."

HE drew a dirt-encrusted, greenish metal tube from his pocket and gave it to me. Within the cylinder was a sheet of parchment in a remarkably good state of preservation. I puzzled over the archaic Spanish script.

"Let me," Todd said, taking it carefully. He translated expertly.

"On the twenty-first of June, by the favor of God, the attack by the pagan Mutsunes having been repulsed, the three bells cast a month ago were buried in this secret cave and the entrance sealed—but a landslide obviously opened it up again recently," Todd broke off to explain.

"Inasmuch as evil witchcraft was practiced by the Indians, when we suspended and rang the bells, the evil demon whom the Mutsunes call *Zuche-quon* was called from his dwelling beneath the mountains and brought the black night and the cold death among us. The large cross was overthrown, and many of the people were possessed of the evil demon, so that the few of us who retained our senses were hard put to it to overcome their fiend-inspired attack and remove the bells.

"Afterward we gave thanks to God for our preservation, and gave aid to those who were injured in the fray. The souls of those who perished were commended to God, and we prayed that the *San Antonio* would soon arrive to relieve us from this cruel solitude. I charge whomever may find these bells, should it not please God to allow me to fulfill this duty, to send them to Rome, in the name of our master the king. May God guard him."

Todd paused, and carefully returned

the parchment to its case. "Junipero Serra signed it," he said quietly.

"Lord, what a find!" I exulted. "But—surely you don't think there's anything—"

"Who said I did?" Todd snapped in a voice that betrayed his nervous tension. "There's some logical explanation—superstition and auto-suggestion are a bad combination. I—"

"Where's Sarto?" Denton asked with a note of apprehension in his voice. We were standing at the edge of a little clearing, bare and rocky.

"Sarto?" I asked.

"He has the cabin down the trail," Todd said. "You must have passed it. I left him here with the bells when Jose had his seizure."

"Hadn't we better get Jose's body to town?" I asked.

Todd frowned. "Don't think me brutal," he said. "But these bells—I can't leave them here. The man's dead. We can't help him, and it'll take all three of us to get the bells to town. It's too bad the poor chap didn't have Denton's sense of direction," he finished with a grim smile. "He wouldn't have run into the tree then."

He was right. I believe that Denton could have traversed the entire trail blindfolded after having once ascended it. He had a remarkable memory and sense of direction, like those Indians who could unerringly find their way to their wigwams across hundreds of miles of wilderness. Later this trait of Denton's was to be of vital importance, but no premonition of this came to us at the time.

We had climbed the rocky mountain slope above the clearing and had come out in a little glade among the pines. Nearby was a gaping hollow in the ground—around it evidence of a recent landslide.

"Where the devil!" Todd said, staring around. "How—"

"He's gone," Denton said in amazement. "And the bells with him—"

Then we heard it—a faint, hollow musical note, the sound of a bell hitting wood. It came from above us, and glancing up the slope we saw an odd sight. A man, gaunt, bearded, with a blazing thatch of red hair, was tugging at a rope he had stretched over the

branch of a pine. At the other end of the rope—

Slowly they rose, silhouetted against the sky, the lost bells of San Xavier. Gracefully curved, they glowed bronze even beneath their stains and verdigris—and they were silent, for they had no clappers. Once or twice they swung against the trunk of the pine and sent out a hollow, mournful note. How the man could lift that great weight was inexplicable; I could see the muscles cord and knot on his bare arms as he strained. His eyes were bulging, and his teeth clenched in a grinning mouth.

"Sarto!" Denton cried, starting to clamber up the slope. "What are you doing?"

STARTLED, the man jerked his head around and stared at us. The rope slipped through his fingers, and we saw the bells plunge down. With a frightful effort he clutched the rope and halted their descent momentarily, but the strain threw him off balance. He tottered, overbalanced, and came crashing down the slope—and behind him, overtaking him, rolled and bounded the bells, throbbing and booming as they clashed against rocks.

"God!" I heard Todd whisper. "The mad fool!"

There was a maelstrom of dust and flying shale on the slope above. I heard a sickening crunch and Denton threw himself desperately aside. Through the dust I saw one of the bells smash down on the sliding body of Sarto, and then I was stumbling away, scrubbing furiously at my eyes, blinded by the flying particles of dirt. The rattle and roar subsided slowly as I clung to a tree. I blinked, glanced around.

Almost at my feet was one of the bells. There was a great crimson stain upon it. The body of Sarto was visible, jammed into a bush on the slope above.

And a few feet below it, propped upright against a jagged rock, was Sarto's battered, gory head!

Thus ended the first act of the drama I was to witness.

The bells were to be hung two weeks later. There was some stir in the newspapers, and considerable more among historians. Pilgrimages of various his-

(Continued on page 120)

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(Continued from page 119)

torical societies to San Xavier from all over the world were planned.

In the cold daylight of logic, outside the eerie atmosphere of the Pinos Mountains, the unusual occurrences during the unearthing of the bells were easily explained. A virulent kind of poisoning, perhaps similar to poison oak—or some fungus hidden in the cave with the relics—had been responsible for our optical irritation and the madness of Sarto and the Mexican. Neither Denton, Todd, nor I denied this explanation, but we discussed the matter at length among ourselves.

Denton went so far as to drive down to the Huntington Library to view the forbidden Johann Negus translation of the *Book of Iod*, that abhorrent and monstrous volume of ancient esoteric formulae about which curious legends still cling. Only a single copy of the original volume, written in the pre-human Ancient Tongue, is said to exist. Certainly few even know of the expurgated Johann Negus translation, but Denton had heard vague rumors about a passage in the book which he declared might be connected with the legends of the San Xavier bells.

When he returned from Los Angeles he brought a sheet of foolscap paper covered with his execrable penmanship. The passage he had copied from the *Book of Iod* was this:

The Dark Silent One dwelleth deep beneath the earth on the shore of the Western Ocean. Not one of those potent Old Ones from hidden worlds and other stars is He, for in earth's hidden blackness He hath always dwelt. No name hath He, for He is the ultimate doom and the undying emptiness and silence of Old Night.

When earth is dead and lifeless and the stars pass into the blackness, He will rise again and spread His dominion over all. For He hath naught to do with life and sunlight, but loveth the blackness and the eternal silence of the abyss. Yet can He be called to earth's surface before His time, and the brown ones who dwell on the shore of the Western Ocean have power to do this by ancient spells and certain deep-toned sounds which reach His dwelling-place far below.

But there is great danger in such a summoning, lest He spread death and night before His time. For He bringeth darkness within the day, and blackness within the light; all life, all sound, all movement passeth away at His coming. He cometh

sometimes within the eclipse, and although He hath no name, the brown ones know Him as Zushakon.

"There was a deletion at that point," Denton said, as I glanced up from the excerpt. "The book's expurgated, you know."

"It's very odd," Todd said, picking up the paper and running his eyes over it. "But of course it's merely a coincidence. Certainly, since folklore is based on natural phenomena, one can generally find modern parallels. The thunderbolts of Jove and Apollo's arrows are merely lightning and sun-stroke."

"Never on them does the shining sun look down with his beams," Denton quoted softly. "'But deadly night is spread abroad over these hapless men.' Remember Odysseus' visit to the Land of the Dead?"

TODD'S mouth twisted wryly. "Well, what of it? I don't expect Pluto to come up from Tartarus when the bells are hung. Do you! This is the twentieth century, such things don't happen—in fact, never did happen."

"Are you sure?" Denton asked. "Surely you don't pretend to believe this cold weather we're having is normal."

I glanced up quickly. I had been wondering when someone would mention the abnormal chill in the air.

"It's been cold before," Todd said with a sort of desperate assurance. "And overcast, too. Just because we're having some muggy weather is no reason for you to let your imagination get the upper hand. It's—good God!"

We went staggering across the room. "Earthquake!" Denton gasped, and we headed for the door. We didn't race for the stairs, but remained just beneath the lintel of the doorway. During an earthquake it's the safest place in any building, on account of the nature and strength of its construction.

But there were no more shocks. Denton moved back into the room and hurried to the window.

"Look," he said breathlessly, beckoning. "They're hanging the bells."

We followed him to the window. From it we could see the Mission San

Xavier two blocks away, and in the arches in the bell tower figures were toiling over the three bells.

"They say when the bells were cast the Indians threw the body of a living girl into the boiling metal," Denton said, apropos of nothing.

"I know it," Todd answered snappishly. "And the shamans enchanted the bell with their magic. Don't be a fool!"

"Why shouldn't some peculiar vibration—like the sound of a bell—create certain unusual conditions?" Denton asked hotly, and I thought I detected a note of fear in his voice. "We don't know all there is to know about life, Todd. It may take strange forms—or even—"

Clang-g-g!

The booming, ominous note of a bell rang out. It was strangely deep, thrilling through my ear-drums and sending its eerie vibration along my nerves. Denton caught his breath in a gasp.

Clang-g-g!

A deeper note—throbbing, sending a curious pain through my head. Somehow urgent, summoning!

Clang-g-g—clang-g-g . . . thundering, fantastic music, such as might issue from the throat of a god, or from the heart-strings of the dark angel Israfel. . . .

Was it growing darker? Was a shadow creeping over San Xavier? Was the Pacific darkening from sparkling blue to leaden gray, to cold blackness?

Clang-g-g!

Then I felt it—a premonitory tremble of the floor beneath my feet. The window rattled in its casing. I felt the room sway sickeningly, tilt and drop while the horizon see-sawed slowly, madly, back and forth. I heard a crashing from below, and a picture dropped from the wall to smash against the floor.

Denton, Todd and I were swaying and tottering drunkenly toward the door. Somehow I felt that the building wouldn't stand much more. It seemed to be growing darker. The room was filled with a hazy, tenebrous gloom. Someone screamed shrilly. Glass smashed and shattered. I saw a

(Continued on page 122)

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(Continued from page 121)

spurt of dust spray out from the wall, and a bit of plaster dropped away.

And suddenly I went blind!

At my side Denton cried out abruptly, and I felt a hand grip my arm. "That you, Ross?" I heard Todd ask in his calm voice, precise as ever. "Is it dark?"

"That's it," Denton said from somewhere in the blackness. "I'm not blind, then! Where are you? Where's the door?"

A violent lurch of the building broke Todd's clutch on my arm and I was flung against the wall. "Over here," I shouted above the crashing and roaring. "Follow my voice."

In a moment I felt someone fumbling against my shoulder. It was Denton, and soon Todd joined him.

"God! What's happening?" I jerked out.

"Those damned bells," Denton shouted in my ear. "The *Book of Iod* was right. He bringeth darkness—within the day—"

"You're mad!" Todd cried sharply. But punctuating his words came the furious, ear-splitting dinning of the bells, clanging madly through the blackness. "Why do they keep ringing them?" Denton asked, and answered his own question, "The earthquake's doing it—the quake's ringing the bells!"

Clang-g-g! Clang-g-g!

Something struck my cheek, and putting up my hand I felt the warm stickiness of blood. Plaster smashed somewhere. Still the earthquake shocks kept up. Denton shouted something which I did not catch.

"What?" Todd and I cried simultaneously.

"Bells—we've got to stop them! They're causing this darkness—perhaps the earthquake, too. It's vibration—can't you feel it? Something in the vibration of those bells is blanket-ing the sun's light-waves. For light's a vibration, you know. If we can stop them—"

"It would be a fool's errand," Todd cried. "You're talking nonsense—"

"Then stay here. I can find my way—will you come, Ross?"

For a second I did not answer. All

the monstrous references gleaned from our study of the lost bells were flooding back into my mind: the ancient god *Zu-che-quon* whom the Mutsunes were supposed to have the power of summoning "by certain deep-toned sounds"—"He cometh sometimes within the eclipse," "All life passeth away at his coming," "Yet can He be called to earth's surface before His time—"

"I'm with you, Denton," I said.

"Then, damn it, so am I!" Todd snapped. "I'll see the end of this. If there is anything—"

H E DID not finish, but I felt hands groping for mine. "I'll lead," Denton told us. "Take it easy, now."

I wondered how Denton could find his way in that enveloping shroud of jet blackness. Then I remembered his uncanny memory and sense of direction. No homing pigeon could make a straighter way to its destination than he.

It was a mad Odyssey through a black hell of shrieking ruin! Flying objects screamed past us, unseen walls and chimneys toppled and smashed nearby. Frightened, hysterical men and women blundered into us in the dark and went shouting away, vainly searching for escape from this stygian death-trap.

And it was cold—cold! A frigid and icy chill pervaded the air, and my fingers and ears were already numbed and aching. The icy air sent knife-edged pains slashing through my throat and lungs as I breathed. I heard Denton and Todd wheezing and gasping curses as they stumbled along beside me.

How Denton ever found his way through that chaotic maelstrom I shall never understand.

"Here!" Denton shouted. "The Mission!"

Somehow we mounted the steps. How the Mission managed to stand through the grinding shocks I do not know. What probably saved it was the curious regularity of the temblors—the quakes were more of a rhythmic, slow swaying of the earth than the usual abrupt, wrenching shocks.

From nearby came a low chanting, incongruous in the madness around us.

"Gloria Patri Filio Spiritui Sancto...."

The Franciscans were praying. But what availed their prayers while in the tower the bells were sending out their blasphemous summons? Luckily we had often visited the mission, and Denton knew his way to the tower.

On that incredible climb up the stairs to the bell tower I shall not dwell, although every moment we were in danger of being dashed down to instant death. But at last we won to the loft, where the bells were shrieking their thunder through the blackness almost in our ears. Denton released my hand and shouted something I could not distinguish. There was an agony of pain in my head, and my flesh ached with the cold. I felt an overpowering impulse to sink down into black oblivion and leave this hellish chaos. My eyes were hot, burning, aching....

For a moment I thought I had lifted my hands unconsciously to rub my eyes. Then I felt two arms constrict about my neck and vicious thumbs dug cruelly into my eye-sockets. I shrieked with the blinding agony of it.

Clang-g-g—clang-g-g!

I battled desperately in the darkness, battling not only my unknown assailant, but fighting back a mad, perverse impulse to allow him to gouge out my eyes! Within my brain a voice seemed to whisper: "Why do you need eyes? Blackness is better—light brings pain! Blackness is best...."

But I fought, fiercely, silently, rolling across the swaying floor of the bell-tower, smashing against the walls, tearing those grinding thumbs away from my eyes only to feel them come fumbling back. And still within my brain that horrible, urgent whisper grew stronger: "You need no eyes! Eternal blackness is best...."

I was conscious of a different note in the clamor of the bells. What was it? There were only two notes now—one of the bells had been silenced. Somehow the cold was not so oppressive. And—was a grayish radiance beginning to pervade the blackness?

Certainly the temblors were less violent, and as I strained to break away
(Continued on page 124)

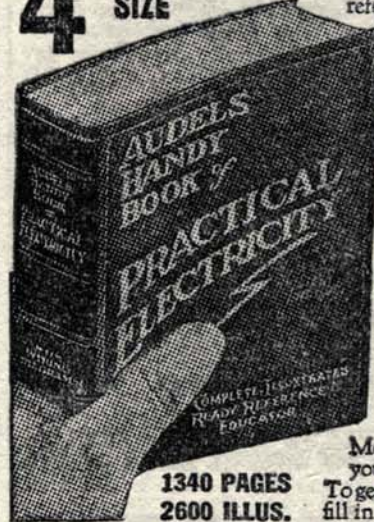
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10c AT ALL STANDS

(Continued from page 123)

from my shadowy opponent I felt the racking shocks subside, grow gentler, die away altogether. The harsh clangor of the two bells stopped.

My opponent suddenly shuddered and stiffened. I rolled away, sprang up in the grayness, alert for a renewal of the attack. It did not come.

Very slowly, very gradually, the darkness lifted from San Xavier.

Grayness first, like a pearly, opalescent dawn; then yellowish fingers of sunlight, and finally the hot blaze of a summer afternoon! From the bell-tower I could see the street below, where men and women stared up unbelievably at the blue sky. At my feet was the clapper from one of the bells.

Denton was swaying drunkenly, his white face splotted with blood, his clothing torn and smeared with dust. "That did it," he whispered. "Only one combination of sounds could summon—the Thing. When I silenced one bell—"

He was silent, staring down. At our feet lay Todd, his clothing dishevelled, his face scratched and bleeding. As we watched, he got weakly to his feet, a look of monstrous horror growing in his eyes. Involuntarily I shrank back, my hands going up protectingly.

HE flinched. "Ross," he whispered through white lips. "My God, Ross—I—I couldn't help it! I couldn't help it, I tell you! Something kept telling me to put out your eyes—and Denton's too—and then to gouge out my own! A voice—in my head—"

And abruptly I understood, remembering that horrible whisper within my brain while I struggled with poor Todd. That malignant horror—he whom the *Book of Iod* called Zushakon and whom the Mutsunes knew as *Zu-che-quon*—had sent his evil, potent command into our brains—commanding us to blind ourselves. And we had nearly obeyed that voiceless, dreadful command!

But all was well now. Or was it?

I had hoped to close the doors of my memory forever on the entire horrible affair, for it is best not to dwell too closely upon such things. And, despite the storm of adverse criticism

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

and curiosity that was aroused by the smashing of the bells the next day, with the full permission of Father Bernard of the Mission, I had fully determined never to reveal the truth of the matter.

It was my hope that only three men—Denton, Todd, and myself—might hold the key to the horror, and that it would die with us. Yet something has occurred which forces me to break my silence and place before the world the facts of the case. Denton agrees with me that perhaps thus mystics and occultists, who have knowledge of such things, may be enabled to utilize their knowledge more effectually if what we fear ever comes to pass.

Two months after the affair at San Xavier an eclipse of the sun occurred. At that time I was at my home in Los Angeles, Denton was at the headquarters of the Historical Society in San Francisco, and Arthur Todd was occupying his apartment in Hollywood.

The eclipse began at 2:17 p. m., and within a few moments of the beginning of the obscuration I felt a strange sensation creeping over me. A dreadfully familiar itching manifested itself in my eyes, and I began to rub them fiercely. Then, remembering, I jerked down my hands and thrust them hastily into my pockets. But the burning sensation persisted.

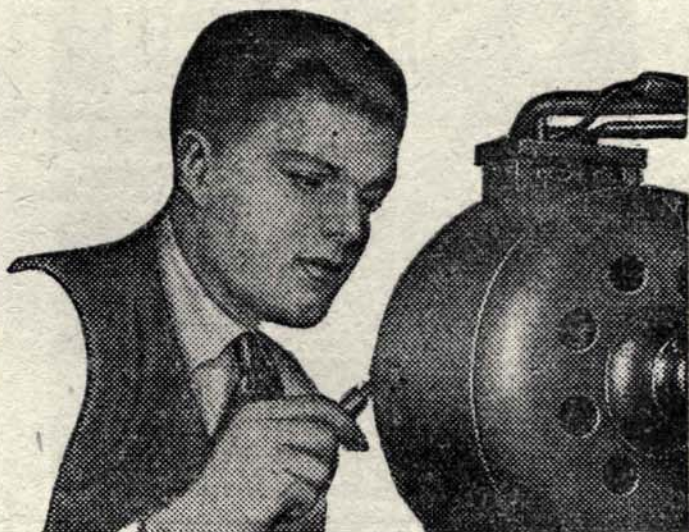
The telephone rang. Grateful for the distraction, I went to it hurriedly. It was Todd.

He gave me no chance to speak. "Ross! Ross—it's back!" he cried into the transmitter. "Ever since the eclipse began I've been fighting. Its power was stronger over me, you know. It wants me to—help me, Ross! I can't keep—" Then silence!

"Todd!" I cried. "Wait—hold on, just for a few moments! I'll be there!"

No answer. I hesitated, then hung up and raced out to my car. It was a normal twenty-minute drive to Todd's apartment, but I covered it in seven, with my lights glowing through the gloom of the eclipse and mad thoughts crawling horribly in my brain. A motorcycle officer overtook me at my destination, but a few hurried words brought him into the apartment house

(Concluded on page 126)



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(Concluded from page 125)
at my side. Todd's door was locked. After a few fruitless shouts, we burst it open. The electric lights were blazing.

What cosmic abominations may be summoned to dreadful life by age-old spells—and sounds—is a question I dare not contemplate, for I have a horrible feeling that when the lost bells of San Xavier were rung, an unearthly and terrible chain of consequences was set in motion; and I believe, too, that the summoning of those evil bells was more effective than we then realized.

Ancient evils when roused to life may not easily return to their brooding sleep, and I have a curious horror of what may happen at the next eclipse of the sun. Somehow the words of the hellish *Book of Iod* keep recurring to me—"Yet can He be called to earth's surface before His time," "He bringeth darkness," "All life, all sound, all movement passeth away at His coming"—and, worst of all, that horribly significant phrase, "He cometh sometimes within the eclipse."

Just what had happened in Todd's apartment I do not know. The telephone receiver was dangling from the wall, and a gun was lying beside my friend's prostrate form. But it was not the scarlet stain on the left breast of his dressing-gown that riveted my horror-blasted stare—it was the hollow, empty eye-sockets that glared up sightlessly from the contorted face—that, and the crimson-stained thumbs of Arthur Todd!

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THE BLACK ARTS

(Continued from page 12)

But there was no blood! The flesh was rancid, like the body of a dead man long buried.

Later, the corporal would have been court-martialed for causing the death of the soldiers who had responded to his false signal, were it not for the testimony of the private, and also the sworn statements by Chinese merchants of the village, that Zombies had long worked in the grain fields beyond the village.

This Chinese gunner was a Zombie. He had been placed at this gun and ordered by the satanic will of his master, to pull the trigger whenever soldiers appeared before him. Like an automaton he had responded until blown to bits, removing what demonic power had been able to control his bloodless corpse.

Zombies? Bodies of dead men housing the magic of the devil? Who can tell? At least, give the devil his due!—LUCIFER.

LETTERS FROM READERS

SPEAKING of the devil and his due, we think it only fair to do the same for those disciples of Lucifer who have some diabolical (or praiseworthy!) comments to make about **STRANGE STORIES**. We can't possibly include the thousands who responded so nobly to our request for letters, but we can dip into the brew at random and ladle out extracts from as many letters as we have room for. To all, however, who wrote in, we are grateful, as even devils can be, and we invite you to continue your personal dissections of our attempts to present the uncanny and strange.

Here goes then with our brew. A cupful from Robt. A. Madle, Phila., Pa.:

I was indeed pleased to note the appearance of the first issue of **STRANGE STORIES**.

The cover picture does not typify the type of stories published. Please have a real fantastic cover on the next issue—many of your interior artists are quite capable of painting excellent covers. Thanks for the variety of artists—they're all good, with Wesso and Paul doing the best work. It would be a good idea to have several drawings each issue by Virgil Finlay; he is unsurpassable when it comes to illustrating weird fiction.

The stories themselves were either good or fair, with **THE SORCERER'S JEWEL** by Tarleton Fiske and **MAJOR McCRARY'S VISION**, by Ralph Farley, the most outstanding. It might be a good idea to print stories of pure fantasy in future issues—and please, subordinate the "dead man rising from his grave to wreak vengeance on his killer," etc. For this reason, I didn't care for Henry Kuttner's **THE FROG**. Kuttner usually writes very excellent fantasy, but he fell down this time. . . . Wellman's **CHANGELING** was a nice little piece of fantasy. Can't say I've read anything similar to it before. On the whole, the first issue of **STRANGE STORIES** was fairly good, but there is plenty room for improvement.

Of course, there's room for improvement
(Continued on page 128)

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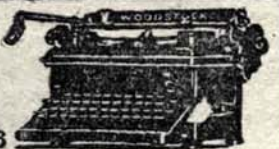
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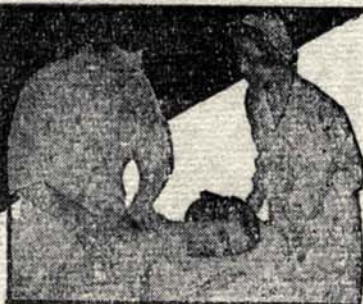
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(Continued from page 127)

—and we welcome the suggestions of Reader Madle. We dip into the cauldron now and come up with the following from Harold F. Feating of Quincy, Mass.:

Please keep the standard of STRANGE STORIES up to its present level. Commenting on the stories in the first issue: THE SINGING SHADOWS was superb, although written by an author I have never heard of before; THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE—another grand story by a longtime favorite of mine, Robert Bloch; EYES OF THE SERPENT—by two more of my favorite authors, Derleth and Schorer, fairly good but not up to their usual high standard; THE INVADERS—excellent, although Keith Hammond is also a new name to me; CHANGELING by Wellman is a perfect example of weirdness; THE SORCERER'S JEWEL by Fiske—another fine weird yarn, and another new author.

Good illustrators in issue—Wesso, Morey, Paul, Jack Binder. . . . THE BLACK ARTS is a grand department, written as convincingly as any fiction. Keep this department. I hope, too, you will have some kind of a club similar to the Science-Fiction League of THRILLING WONDER STORIES, of which I am a member. And here's to your coming out more frequently.

Yes, we're planning a club and will tell you about it in the next issue. Down goes the ladle again and we come up with a couple of short spoonfuls. B. Reagan, Pittsburgh, Pa., says:

Your first issue of STRANGE STORIES hits the spot. The subject matter is varied to suit any taste. So keep up the good work. Would like to see a vampire story in the next issues. A good outright ghost story will not be overlooked, either.

And Gertrude Gordon of New York City congratulates and criticizes us with:

STRANGE STORIES is splendid and I am a devotee of fantastic fiction. If it keeps to its present stature it will be in the lead of the several really good magazines dealing with the uncanny. But please, not those kind of pictures on the covers. I didn't get the magazine for a long time, thinking it was a "horror" or "terror" type. Then I looked through it one day and found to my delight it wasn't—but the picture is so misleading. If you have something definitely fantastic on the cover I'm sure you've got something there.

We hope so. Stirring the brew around again, up pops Weaver Wright of Hollywood, Calif.:

I am sorry to say I found the first issue of STRANGE STORIES too interesting to ignore. You see, I get fantasy mags galore, including your companion magazines, THRILLING WONDER STORIES and STARTLING STORIES. So I had hoped—my interests being primarily scientific-fictional and my time all occupied—that STRANGE STORIES would be too predominantly weird to warrant my actually reading it, only filing it away to keep my collection complete. But if you're going to offer nifty feature stories regular—I like THE SINGING SHADOWS—an absorbing uncanny yarn. Farley yarn MAJOR McCARRY'S VISION and Paul-pictured INVADERS I enjoyed next best. As for illustrations, THE FROG, and SERVANT OF SATAN by Marchioni and Schomburg. Kline's story, however, was a grave deKline for its author—or maybe it was ghost-written?

One complaint: Poor cover, no individuality. One big complaint: The *novacious* motion of having every story illustrated by a different artist.

And here's some liquid we bring to the surface tagged G. Ross Jobe of Jefferson City, Mo.:

I never thought I would ever be in a position to correct an editor and I wouldn't let this chance

pass by for lots of money because I've taken so many corrections from them. In THE BLACK ARTS department, Lucifer states that King Saul saw the ghost of Solomon. Tut, tut. According to the Bible, he asked for and saw "the wraith of Samuel." . . . The February edition was beyond doubt a fine one.

And beyond doubt Reader Jobe is correct. Chalk up one *lapis mentis* for Lucifer (the devil has his weak moments!). Now bubbling up from our cauldron comes Douglas Robinson from Garrett Hill, Pa.:

I am interested in a BLACK ARTS organization. I think the magazine is the best of its kind. Please send me information about the items of King Saul and Salem. I would like to get any kind of information and stories of Black Arts.

For King Saul, we refer you to the first book of Samuel, Chapter 28, Verses 7-14. And for Salem witchcraft, among others, there are the following books: "Narratives of Witchcraft Cases," by George L. Burr (Scribner's); Sundry Documents of Witchcraft in Mass., by Geo. W. Chamberlain (New England Historical Society); and "Witchcraft in Salem," by John Fiske (Houghton Mifflin Co.).

Our ladle dips up a weighty bowlful from J. H. Mason of Toronto, Ontario. We've absorbed the criticisms and suggestions as well as the praises and will give proper consideration to them, but all we have room for now are a few comments on the stories:

The stories are, for the most part, very good and rate as follows:

1. THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE: THE INVADERS; and THE SORCERER'S JEWEL. Tied for first place. If you produce three such stories as these per issue, I won't be doing much growling.

2. Wellman's little gem, THE CHANGELING; would take second place.

3. Farley's short hit me in somewhat the same way as Wellman's—nice and pleasing.

Then come EYES OF THE SERPENT and THE FROG, followed by THE SINGING SHADOWS, very well written but not quite bizarre enough, and finally SERVANT OF SATAN.

Another list by R. Dodson of Baltimore, Md., who thinks the first issue "shows promise of excellence" rates stories in following order:

1. THE CHANGELING, by Wellman; 2. THE SINGING SHADOWS, by Cornier; 3. THE INVADERS, by Hammond; 4. MAJOR McCRARY'S VISION, by Farley; 5. EYES OF THE SERPENT, by Derleth and Schorer; 6. THE SORCERER'S JEWEL, by Fiske; 7. SERVANT OF SATAN, by Kline; 8. THE FROG, by Kuttner; 9. THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE, by Bloch.

Bill O'Connor of Hartford, Conn., expresses his opinion as follows:

Congrats on new magazine, and super-congrats to Keith Hammond for his INVADERS, a 5-star story. The others: THE SORCERER'S JEWEL—4 stars; CURSE OF THE HOUSE—3½ stars; CHANGELING, THE FROG, MAJOR McCRARY'S VISION—3 stars; SERVANT OF SATAN—2½ stars; SINGING SHADOWS—2 stars; EYES OF THE SERPENT—5 stars.

Thanks to everybody—and keep those swell letters rolling in!

—THE EDITOR.

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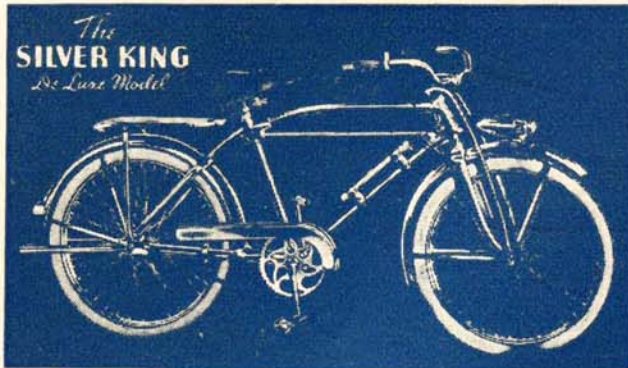
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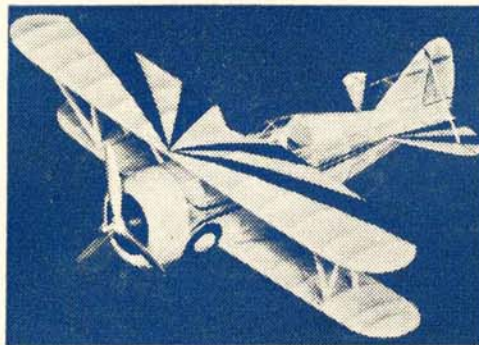
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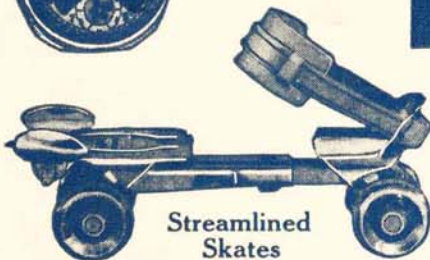


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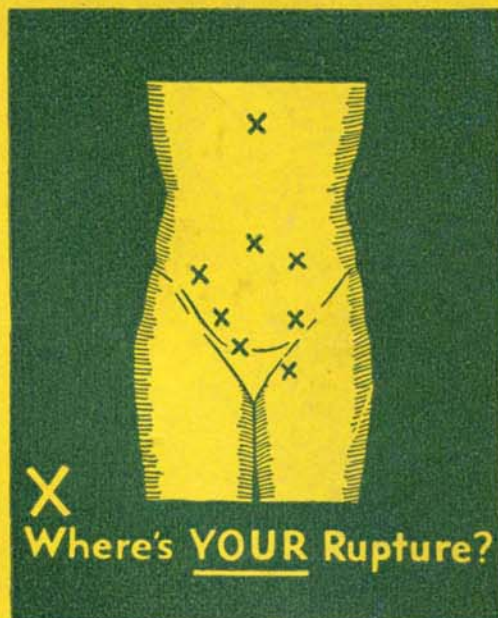
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