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Volume Seventeen

April, 1938

Number One

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- Arms of the Flame Goddess**.....By Francis James 6
The shadow of the Penitentes—that strange and terrible cult of fire-worshippers—filled my heart with dread. For I knew that soon the lovely body of my wife would be a scorched and blackened sacrifice to their devils of desire.

TWO NOVELETTES OF BIZARRE MYSTERY

- I Am the Beast**.....By Gene Gary 48
It was the war that left my face scarred and fearful to look upon—but it was something else that turned me into a ravishing beast, filled with the lust for murder. . . .
- Corpses on Parade**.....By Edith and Ejler Jacobson 88
From the doors of the exclusive Quadrangle Club they spewed forth—those living corpses whose very presence filled the streets of New York with the stench of the charnel house. But the fiend who created them was not yet satisfied. . . .

A TRUE FEATURE OF INDESCRIBABLE HORROR

- History's Gallery of Monsters**.....By John Kobler 64
William Stewart, who wrote in blood one of the darkest chapters in the annals of the sea.

FOUR SHORT STORIES OF EERIE MYSTERY AND DREAD

- Chains of Dread Desire**.....By Robert Howard Norton 30
The kiss of Judas—from the lips of the girl he loved—plunged John Bartlett into a quagmire of horror where the ghosts of his ancestor's sins arose to destroy him!
- Express to Hell**.....By Julius Long 40
Enden built his setting with the genius of the damned—and the mad gods laughed when his vengeance plan proved a deadly boomerang!
- Nymph of Damnation**.....By William B. Rainey 73
He wore on his face the mark of the devil's curse, and in his blood surged an endless lust—for the woman whose white body beckoned to him from beyond the pale of space. . . .
- Monster of His Making**.....By Henry Treat Sperry 82
While old Doctor Kennedy watched in hopeless agony, the inhuman fiend he had created prepared to plunge his knife deep into the straining white body of the only girl he loved!

—AND—

- Disturb Not the Dead**.....The Editors 4
Of a mystery beyond all human understanding.
- The River Styx**.....A Department 104

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Disturb Not the Dead

THE other day a friend whom we hadn't seen for years strolled into our office. He had just returned from India, and as he sat chatting with us, he dangled a small strangely shaped charm on the end of his watch chain—a woman's body with the head of a snake. When we remarked on it, he told us this story. . . .

Some years ago in Bombay, he said, there lived an English family, Mr. and Mrs. Featherstone and their son John.

One night they had as a dinner guest, Major Littlejohn, of the Indian Army. He had with him this charm you see here. It was supposed to have the power of granting wishes—three wishes.

When Mrs. Featherstone admired the bauble, Major Littlejohn presented it to her, saying jokingly that she'd better be careful about making her wishes.

But as the days went by, Mr. and Mrs. Featherstone found that their minds dwelt more and more on the powers of the little idol. Wouldn't it be wonderful, they thought, if it were really true. They amused themselves by discussing what they would wish, and finally they agreed that above all things, they wanted their son John to be made foreman of the iron plant—with the attendant raise in pay which would enable them to have so many more of the comforts of life.

Finally Mr. Featherstone determined to try it. "What harm can it do?" he asked. "The thing won't work anyway." Nevertheless, he solemnly repeated the mystic incantation by which the charm was invoked, and asked that his wish be granted. They went to bed laughing at each other and promptly forgot the whole thing.

When later the next day, John called from the next day, John called from the factory, bursting with pride in the fact that he had been made head foreman, they were astounded and almost overcome with joy. And yet—they caught themselves looking at each other strangely—for each was thinking of the price

they might be called upon to pay.

At six o'clock, the telephone rang. For a few seconds the old couple stared at it, then Mr. Featherstone, almost against his will, lifted the receiver.

His shocked look of horror told its own story. Their beloved son John had fallen into one of the iron presses and been instantly killed, his body horribly mutilated beyond recognition.

One thought was in Mrs. Featherstone's head. She rushed to the mantlepiece and caught up the evil charm. In a trembling fearful voice she took the second wish—she begged for the return of her son.

The old couple sat before the door far into the night. Waiting, hoping—yet not daring to hope. And then—Mrs. Featherstone, her ears sharpened by a mother's love, heard it first. A slow, dreadful, scraping noise—like a heavy body drearily inching its way along. Then they both heard the gasping breath and little whimpering sighs of *something*—human or otherwise—in awful soul-rending agony!

They both leaped at the same time—Mrs. Featherstone to the door to fling it open—and Mr. Featherstone toward the mantlepiece—and Mr. Featherstone won. He clutched the little charm with shaking hands, and as fast as he could say the words, he prayed to the evil bauble to take back whatever it was that choked and groaned on their veranda.

Mrs. Featherstone's hand jerked open the door, and she stared spell-bound into the blank *empty* darkness! And yet, there *was* something—a single spot of blood!

Abruptly our friend stopped his story and we asked how *he* got the charm.

"I happened to be present when they pulled Mrs. Featherstone's body out of the river. This was in her hand."

We couldn't repress a shudder, and we didn't feel comfortable until the charm *and* the old friend were out of the office—for good, we hope!

THE EDITORS.

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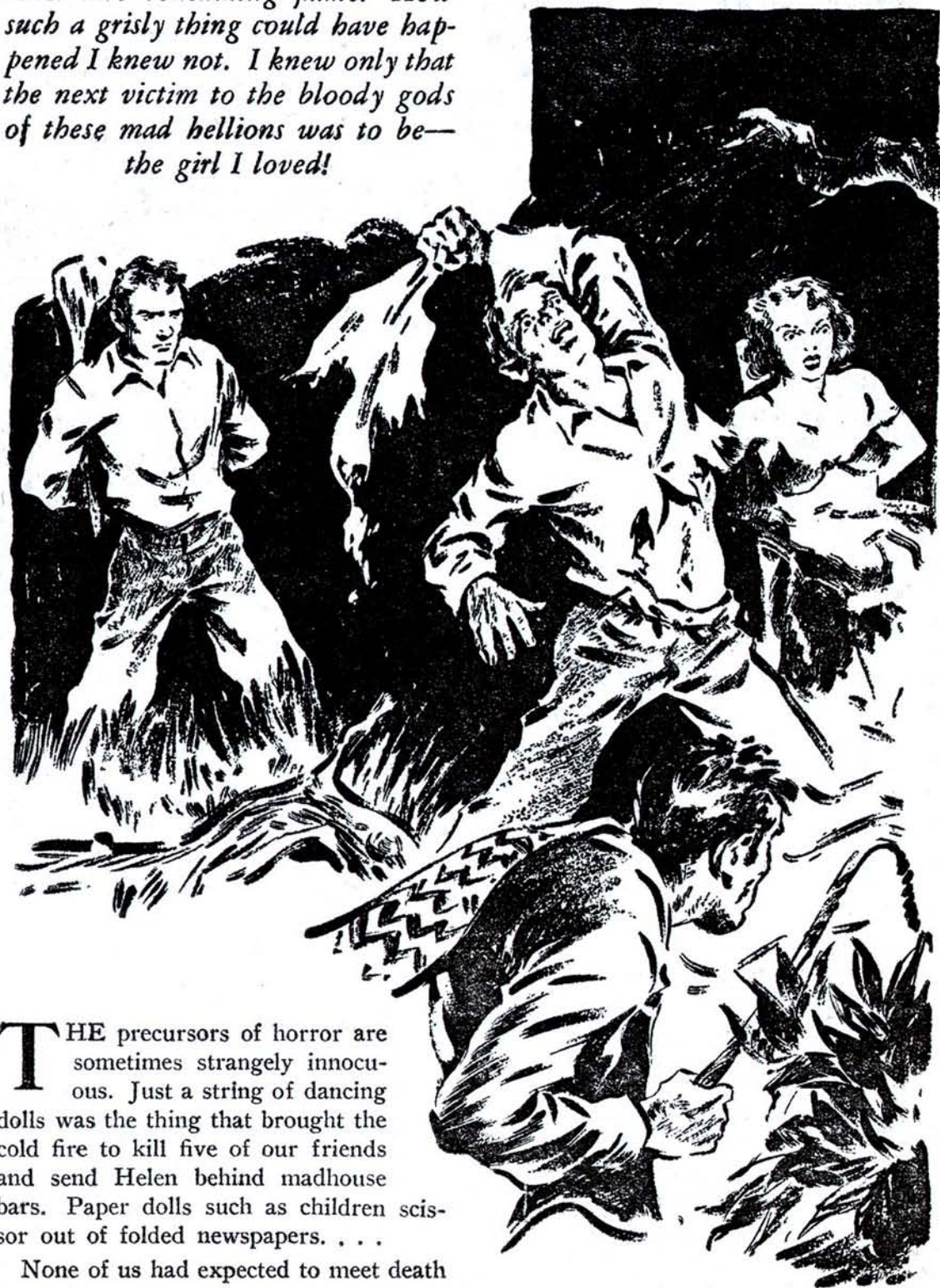
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Arms of the

by FRANCIS JAMES

Nathalie's white body suddenly burst into consuming flame! How such a grisly thing could have happened I knew not. I knew only that the next victim to the bloody gods of these mad hellions was to be—the girl I loved!



THE precursors of horror are sometimes strangely innocuous. Just a string of dancing dolls was the thing that brought the cold fire to kill five of our friends and send Helen behind madhouse bars. Paper dolls such as children scissor out of folded newspapers. . . .

None of us had expected to meet death

Flame Goddess

Mystery and Bizarre Horror in a
Feature-Length Novel

that day when we went out for a late afternoon stroll in the woods around Monmouth mountain. Just a summer day's jaunt—but it was an outing that was to lead us into the valley of hell!



After rambling for an hour or so, laughing and chatting, the six of us came out of the trees on to the crest of a little knoll. And then, at the sight which suddenly leaped at us, we came to a standstill

and I for one felt my very spine go cold.

Fifty yards away a man stood with whips of thorns in his hands. Save for a dirty rag twisted about his loins, he was stark naked. He was lashing himself with the whips. The blows brought rivulets of blood trickling over his pipestem limbs and at each stroke he leaped high in the air. Foam splattered his face and his eyes blazed with a maniacal glare.

He was muttering some unintelligible gibberish under his breath. What he seemed to be saying, in a hoarse, hysterical croak, was:

"Blood! Blood and fire to wash me from sin!"

It was a revolting spectacle. We had all heard that this remote region of mountain valleys was a hotbed of the Penitentes, a cult of self-torturers who had imported their weird beliefs from Mexico—religious fanatics who sought hope of forgiveness of sins through punishment of the body here upon earth. But this was the first evidence we had had that the tales contained an element of truth.

We all stood spellbound an instant and then I broke away from the others. Anger at sight of such human beastliness needled me. I rushed up to him, gripped him by a naked, sweat-glistening shoulder and spun him around.

"You fool!" I yelled. "What are you doing!"

He whirled to snarl through bared teeth. He brought his thorn whip slashing across my face. As I stumbled away, he jerked from my clutch and went galloping into the bushes.

The others came up and we all ran after him. There was no sane reason for this, for we knew the danger of meddling in the affairs of the clannish and hate-ridden folk of these valleys. It was some urge of horrified curiosity that sent us beating through the underbrush on his heels.

A dip in the ground shut him from our view. A moment later we came into the

open again at the edge of a little glade. We rushed a step forward and then froze in our tracks. Ed Bradshaw's voice came in gagged husking:

"Great God, what is that?"

THE man we had been chasing lay motionless on the ground in the midst of the grassy plot. He was dead. But as we stole forward, we knew that it wasn't the flogging that had killed him. He had been burned to death! His body was charred to a blackened husk crusted over with a queer hard shell that flaked off in crackling fragments as Ed poked at it with his foot.

For a long instant then there wasn't a sound save the eerie croon of the wind in the trees and our tightened breathings. This was incredible. Two minutes before we had seen him running—and now his carcass lay charred to a cinder as though it had been exposed to the blast of a holocaust!

Helen—my wife—slid her hand into mine. It was a hand of ice. George Thornton's voice came thick with bewilderment:

"He's done to a crisp. But there isn't any fire. The grass around him isn't even burned."

We stared from the dead man to one another's whitened faces. No human hand, it seemed, could have killed him, only a power conjured from sorcery's depths. He had burned to death there where he lay—but the grass stems around him were still waving and green! In vain I told myself that I was a fool, tried to use reason to convince myself that it was some kind of a grisly hoax. Educated man though I was, I couldn't, for this was beyond reason.

It was the voice of Nathalie, Thornton's wife, that snapped us out of our horrified staring and brought us wheeling around. Nathalie was a care-free and jolly sort, buxom, blue-eyed and always laughing. But now she stood queerly white, staring

down at the ground. Fear was in her face.

"Look! Oh, look at that!" she cried.

It was because they were so small that in our excitement we hadn't noticed the line of figures half buried in weeds and grass. We saw now that they were dancing dolls, long strings of six-inch high cut-outs linked arm in arm. From their nests of green stems they peered up with the pert impish faces of sprites evoked from the nether world. Such things as evil-minded children might have scissored and left to enclose the form of the dead man in a magic ring. But no children had been here—no one had been here.

Mary Bradshaw let out a cry, her voice reedily thin and unnatural.

"Don, let's go! Let's get out of here. I'm afraid!"

We were all afraid. Horror rode on the cold that flowed out of the mountain caves to tingle at the roots of our spines. "Yes, we'll go," I muttered. I slid my arm around Helen's slim waist, started to turn her away and then stiffened. For the undergrowth around us had suddenly come alive. Hunched squatting forms could be seen, with gnome-like faces, as though a vent from hell had poured a horde of its denizens up onto the earth. Their hands clutched sticks and clubs. The bushes rustled as they crept forward. Still sheer terror held us transfixed till a cry suddenly ticsinned:

"Kill! Kill! Burn them to death!"

We turned then and fled—fled from the picture of a dead man inside a ring of paper dolls, from the yells of those who wanted to do likewise to us. I don't know how we managed to keep ahead of them through the half mile of wood road out to the place where we had parked our car on the highway, for terror of nightmare seemed rooting our feet to the ground. The last hundred yards, I snatched Helen up into my arms and carried her and Thornton and Bradshaw did the same with their wives.

The sun was close to setting as we dashed out to see the machine standing at the edge of the road. Yet there was light enough to show us the addition that had been made to it since we had left it there—a string of paper dolls looped across the front of the windshield.

I yanked the things off and flung them on to the ground. We piled into the car without a word. Sweat clammed the palm of my shaking hand as I fumbled the key into the lock of the ignition.

I TRAMPED on the gas and sent the car lurching and skidding around the sharp turns of the narrow road. Fast as I drove, it wasn't swiftly enough to shake us free of the terror that raced at our sides, that seemed to snatch at us from the shadow blots rolling down from the hills like swollen carcasses of octopi.

We were returning to the house of one of the natives where we had engaged accommodations for the week or so that we had expected to be here. The business that had brought us to Monmouth Valley had started when Helen and I had been induced to join the other four friends who were with us in buying as a speculation a large tract of woodland property. That had been some years before. I knew that the timber standing on our land was of considerable value. But I had opposed their suggestions to cut and market it. I knew this region hereabouts and I hated the dark solitudes of the ridges and gloomy ravines. I feared the ignorance and sullen cruelty of its natives.

But when there came to us a report of an engineer that signs of oil were apparent in several places, the importunities of my wife and the others became too insistent to stand against. My first suggestion had been for the other two men to come with me to investigate the truth of the reports. But the girls vetoed the idea of being left out. "I'm an owner as much as you are, and I'm going, too!"

Helen had exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

That was like Helen. Petite, brown-eyed and vivacious, she was a live-wire of eager vitality. For the five years of our marriage she had been my partner in everything—mind, soul and body. I loved her with respect for her fine brain, devotion to her loyalty and a hunger for her lush, perfect womanhood that held still a lover's ardent heat.

The other wives too had insisted on coming and so we had made up the party. We had arrived three days before and from the information we had so far gathered, the prediction of buried riches seemed to have something. It looked as though we might be in for a clean-up.

But I couldn't be easy in mind. The natives hated us, strangers coming to disturb the vice-ridden isolation in which they delighted. In the squalid little village which formed their metropolis, something foul and obscene seemed to breathe in the very air. When I saw the sin-bitten countenances and piggy eyes of its inhabitants fastened on Helen, I would have given a million if she hadn't come.

And now the dead man in the woods, and the paper dolls. And those dolls, too, across the front of our car. . . . What sense in that macabre mingling of childish toys and hideous death? It was the revolting prank of a ghoul. I looked down to meet Helen's eyes turned up to mine, and I knew that the smile I strove to make reassuring was twisted and white.

THE house to which we were returning was the home of Frank Leadbetter and his wife, who had been recommended by our only friend in town, lawyer Emery Paave. Supper was ready when we had garaged the car in the barn and gone into the house, with our two hosts awaiting our arrival in the kitchen.

Leadbetter was a gangling bean-pole of a countryman, with tallow-white face that sloped, chinless, into the open neck

of his faded blue shirt. He had a shock of slicked-down red hair and pale blue parrot eyes above a hooked beak of a nose. Big as he was, he was dominated into cringing subservience by his acid-tongued little shrew of a wife. Maria Leadbetter could have served as a pattern of womanhood at its most repellent—a face dark and forbidding as a tomahawk, with rodent black eyes under greasy tangles of hair that looked as though it had never known the ministrations of a comb.

We ate without much conversation, for the memory of what had happened lay like something dead in our stomachs. Finally I leaned toward the farmer and suddenly asked:

"Did you ever hear of a man being burned to death without any fire?"

The man's fork dropped clattering to the table. He shot me a glassy-eyed stare. He lifted a big white hand, matted with reddish hairs, to paw at the wattled flesh under his gullet.

"He didn't pay up," he managed to mutter at last. "They hexed him to burn."

"Whom didn't he pay?" I exclaimed. "Pay what?"

For a long moment, while Leadbetter stared at me, there wasn't a word spoken. Bradshaw sat motionless, his square heavy face with the mop of black hair tensely alert. Thornton's lean, intellectual countenance with the brilliant blue eyes was sharp as a hound's on the scent.

Whether the farmer would have told us more, I do not know. But his wife, standing behind at the stove, half turned to rasp out a cry discordant as a raven's croak. Leadbetter flinched as though he had been lashed by a whip. And after that he wouldn't utter another word.

The meal was finished in silence. Rising from the table, I left the house and went out on the piazza. I wanted a chance to try to focus my thoughts, to try to figure some sense out of these fantasies. In a

moment Helen joined me, to wrap both of her arms around one of mine and huddle against me.

It might have been five or six minutes that we stood there, staring at the black wall of the forest only a short distance away. And then I heard my wife's breath in a swift indrawing as her grip tightened around my arm.

Out there among the trees, lights were moving, pale will-o'-the-wisps that flitted through the gloom like torches of ethereal fire. And then came something more incredible yet. For the fire seemed to take on the shapes of girls dancing—linked hand in hand like the paper dolls! Slim nude shapes that swayed in spectral minuet. And now they seemed to be beckoning to me, luring, taunting, with an invitation of Circe-like wantonness.

Foul, unclean things were whispering, I felt their snaky crawling across my brain. For I was aware of an amazing emotion, a longing to go there to those girls!

I knew a cold clutching of incredulous fear. I as an educated man, couldn't believe in any rot of supernatural powers such as was driving the Leadbetters cold with fear. But what could have happened to me to make me so unlike myself, to make me sweat with unnatural desire to clutch those naked girls in my clasp? It was as though the hex sign of the dolls on my car, despite my disbelief in them, had distilled a subtle poison into my soul.

What dreadful thing might have taken place the next instant I don't dare to think. I was tugging impatiently at Helen's hands to free myself when steps sounded behind and Bradshaw's voice came in a gagging shout from the doorway. What he husked out in terror was:

"Collier, come in here! For God's sake, come into the house!"

His voice sounded insane devoid of meaning, it rose from a strangled sobbing to lash the air in dull iterations.

CHAPTER TWO

They Kill Without Hands

A SCREAM tocsinned from inside as we turned to run after him. It came from a room up at the head of the stairs. We saw Mary Bradshaw's face peering down over her husband's shoulder, and the next moment we were up on the landing too.

A few minutes before, it seemed, Thornton had excused himself to come up here. Wondering what had kept him when he didn't return, Nathalie had come to see. She had found—what we saw there in the middle of the floor.

We knew that it must be Thornton, the platinum wrist watch on his arm told us that. But the face that looked up at us wasn't his. It wasn't—human. It was a jet cinder, a shrunken and blackened skull burned hard as iron with rows of white teeth in sardonic grinning between what was left of the lips. The rest of him hadn't been touched, his clothes were unscorched. And no fire had been there, for the bare boards around him weren't even singed.

I stood there with my fingernails biting into my palms and I wanted to yell out my horror. Helen's mouth opened to speak, but the rasped croakings that came from it conveyed nothing save utter terror. She threw herself into my arms, shaking hysterically, her hands clawing my shoulders.

"Oh, what did it? What killed him like that, without anyone's hearing?" she finally managed to gasp.

I didn't answer her. I was just a common man, as well informed as the average, as open to reason. But this—I put it out of my mind. I wouldn't allow myself to think what I would have to if I thought at all.

Steps became audible on the stairs and the face of Maria Leadbetter showed in

the doorway. Her huge husband scuffed dog-like at her heels. He took one look at what lay on the floor and went green. His mouth made gulping motions like those of a fish and then he gasped:

"It's *them!* They've been here! Been in the house—"

His wife didn't utter a word. She shot a glance at Thornton and then she whirled and went clattering down stairs. She was muttering some unintelligible farrago under her breath. What she seemed to be croaking was a rigamarole of disjointed phrases, over and over like a charm.

I pulled Helen out of the room and then they were all getting out of there. We didn't even lift Thornton to lay him on the bed. None of us could endure the thought of touching that twisted thing that we knew would squirm and crackle under our touch.

There was only one thing to be done now, and we all knew what it was. But Helen voiced it first. She moaned:

"Don take me away from here! Get me out of this place!"

I looked at Bradshaw. He said:

"I'll get one of the cars. You folks get busy and pack what you will need for overnight."

He hurried down stairs. I stayed with the girls while Helen and Mary packed for themselves and Nathalie, too. Thornton's wife was on the verge of a crack-up. She sagged down on the edge of Mary's bed and sat swaying to and fro, racking out those horrible tearless sobs.

IT TOOK Helen maybe two minutes to fling a few necessaries into a couple of bags. When the suitcases were ready I picked them up and preceded the girls down stairs. The front door was open. Maria Leadbetter was outside working feverishly with a shovel. She was digging a hole in front of the step. Just as we came into sight she dropped into it a freshly killed chicken. And with it was

silver—a handful of trinkets and cheap jewelry—and a wisp of hairs from the tail of a horse.

"What are those for?" I said.

She looked up at me, face contorted, wild-eyed.

"The hexes can't git over 'em," she panted. "I'm a-goin' to put some more at the back door an' lay knives on the winder sills."

The spot of cold on my spine slid to my scalp. Where were we? In twentieth century America or back in the Dark Ages?

There wasn't long to think about that, for suddenly Bradshaw appeared around the side of the house. He barged up to the door and stood gripping its frame, face sweat-beaded and whiter than wax.

"We can't make it!" he gasped. "They've ruined the cars. Tires slashed, ignition ripped out, gas tanks split open—it will take hours in a repair shop to get them rolling."

For an instant no word was spoken. Something sightless and cold seemed to pass over us, the shadow of death. Then Mary Bradshaw screamed:

"We're too late! They're going to kill us! We're all going to burn to death!"

Finally we hauled ourselves around back into the house and into the grubby little sitting room. We stood there and tried to think what to do. Walking was out of the question, we were twenty miles from the nearest town. There was only one man in the place to whom we could appeal—lawyer Emery Paave. And he was down in the village a couple of miles away.

Finally it was decided that one of us—it chanced to be me who was picked by the fall of a coin—should try to get there and see him and also the sheriff. It was agreed that the three girls and Bradshaw should all sit together down stairs and that he should have Leadbetter's loaded shotgun.

We didn't know how much time we had—if we had any time. No one knew how Thornton had burned. But if he had died, why not Brad, or Mary—or Helen? Any one of us, at any moment now, turning black the way he had! Somehow I felt, I think we all knew, that whatever we did would be helpless and futile. How could we, with puny human means, thwart the unseen menace of those who had twice killed with a power that must come from hell? I took Helen into my arms to kiss her goodbye, and my soul was cold.

THE village houses were like skulls of long-dead colossi with blinking yellow eyes, lining the road. A brighter cluster of illumination marked the location of the store. Through dust-grimed windows I saw the place half filled with a motley crowd. Worm-eaten boards creaked under my feet and then I swung open the door and paused on the threshold, looking around.

For a moment none of the score of slouched figures seemed to have noticed my entrance. In that instant before a word was said I noticed again a fact that had puzzled me more than once before, that many of them wore in the lapels of their coats small buttons as though marking membership in some order. The design of the emblem was a face of scarlet against a black background. And what a face! A miniature replica of a Satan, with beady green eyes and sprouting horns.

I raised my voice.

"Can anyone tell me where to find Emery Paave?"

A few heads turned to cast black glances back at me but save for that my inquiry elicited no response. One pimply-faced youth stood slouched against a wall, eyeing me. I approached him, money displayed in my half-opened hand.

"Want to make five dollars?" I said.

The lad's eyes lighted greedily as he pocketed the bill.

"Doin' what?" he said in a high treble.

"I'm after a little information." I stepped closer and lowered my voice. "Did you ever hear of men that go around in the woods with whips, flogging people?"

The paucky-looking youth stiffened. His eyes narrowed to wary slits. His mumbling reply was too ready, too facile: "Me? I never heard of 'em."

I reached out to touch the devil button in his coat.

"What's that?" I said. "Some society that you belong to?"

His eyes flickered sidewise. A vulpine look came over his face. He mumbled:

"Hit's nawthin'. Jest suthin' I found."

I ought to have known that I had said enough, for the others had turned to come flocking around us, a cluster of pale, menacing eyes. A wizened old ruffian with trickles of tobacco juice leaking from the angles of his toothless gums shoved up to me and rasped in a strident falsetto:

"You ever hear o' folk gettin' into trouble by askin' questions that didn't concern 'em? Git out o' here and go along o' your own business."

Common sense should have told me my danger then and warned me to clear out while they would still let me go. But foolhardily I asked one more thing, for I thought that some one might let go of a hint to indicate who was behind the outrages that were taking place, and I still didn't really believe that they would dare harm me. What I said was:

"I found a man dead in the woods this afternoon. He must have been burned to death by children, for there were paper dolls—"

The moment those words left my lips I knew I had done it. Hunger for murder had lain like a mine in that crowd, only awaiting a spark to set it off, and my remark was the spark. An animal growl rasped around the ring. I saw upraised hands gripping clubs. Hunched figures surged toward me, a circle of hate-twisted

faces. Hatred founded on the primitive unreasoning ignorance of beasts.

Terror snatched at me then. I started backing away from them toward the door. I had just managed to get outside when some one threw a stone. A shower of missiles pelted me and the next moment I was pinned in the center of a cursing and milling pack.

For an instant it was slug, smash and punch with my fear-needled muscles endowed with a strength that wasn't my own. I had been a middle-weight boxer in college and for a short time I held my ground with them. My jabs drove them back holding their jaws and clutching their stomachs. They surged closer and I grunted grim relish as I felt faces cave under my full swings.

But this couldn't last. They yammered fury and came on afresh. I knew stabbing agony as their sticks bludgeoned my skull. Some one tripped me and I was down. They were using their feet on me now. With insensate cruelty of a wolf-pack rending a fallen one, they pounded my head and my vitals. I rolled on to my face and tried to protect my brain with my folded arms. Their blows ripped them away. The most terrible of all sounds upon earth, the death roar of a mob, rolled over me while shrill voices skyrocketed:

"Kill the damned rich un! Pound the damned spy to death!"

Only feebly now could I strive to cover myself, for my numbed muscles were almost done. I knew they were killing me. I sobbed prayers for mercy and I heard them laughing in mockery as my senses slipped into oblivion.

CHAPTER THREE

The Punished Of God

I CAME back from unconsciousness—from death as I at first thought in my dazed bewilderment—to find myself lying

on a couch with a huge figure standing and looking down at me in the light of an oil lamp. My forehead was wet and the raw taste of whisky burned my lips.

I blinked, grunted and pushed myself up to sitting. Seeing me at last coming around, the big man set the lamp down on a table and with a sigh of relief pulled a chair up to my side. He was the man I had come to see, lawyer Paave, a mountainous Dutchman with a mane of yellow hair and a face round and red as a balloon.

"You haf had a narrow esgape, my friendt Collier, a fery narrow esgape," he said in his thickened guttural. "Those maniacs out there would haf gilled you if I had not come along yust in time and driven them off. What happened—from de beginning?"

I told him the story, commencing with the flogging man in the woods and ending with Thornton's death and the crippling of our cars. He shook his head as I finished. Deeply troubled, his voice rumbled back:

"It iss even worse than I feared. I do nod need to tell you of the dreadful ignorance and superstitions of de people in this valley, how they are believers in witchcraft. This may seem ingoncievable in these days of progress, but you haf only to read in de newspapers to know of de hex murders that take place around here.

"But this iss nod all. There are de Penitentes, those fools who haf gone mad pondering on their sins. They commit horrible deeds to gain salvation through punishment of de flesh. And it iss believed—though no one iss sure—that the man who is at de head of de Penitentes is also de hex boss who through his supposed power to cast charms and bewitch his enemies forces efery man, woman and child to obey his gommands. He plays a double part. From time to time he kills some one in a terrible way to terrify de others and keep them obedient. And he has goot reason for wanting you out of de

way. If you find oil, it will mean the coming of business, of progress, everything which will end his gontrol which iss based on fear and ignorance."

"Have you any idea how he does it?" I said. "How he kills them without any fire?"

Paave got out a silk handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his bald head. He looked at me strangely.

"Hexes," he muttered. "They are bewitched. He puts a charm on them so that they burn."

I stared at him.

"You believe that, too?" I exclaimed. "You, an educated man—"

"When I first came here, I would haf said the same as you," the blue-eyed giant muttered. "But now, my friendt Collier, I haf seen—Gott knows what I haf seen!"

I got myself up from the bed to pace the floor. The fear of this unimaginative Dutchman, his acceptance as fact of the things that I had tried to tell myself were sheer madness, frightened me more, actually, than Thornton's death and the thing in the woods.

"Who is this man?" I said after a moment. "Where can I find him?"

"His name iss Hans Ludlam. He iss another Dutchman," Paave answered. "He lives in a shack in de woods."

"I'm going to see him," I said. "I'm going to have the truth out of him. Will you take me—or are you afraid?"

Paave knocked the ashes out of his long

pipe and rose slowly. He said heavily:

"I am nod afraid of him, but you must nod go there—nod now." He held up his hand. "Listen out there, to the mob. The town iss crazy tonight with hate against you and yours. When I wass bringing you in here I heard them talking about going out to get the rest of your friends. You haf a lovely wife, and—"

The big man's voice dropped to a fear-tightened husking.

"But it iss nod those out there with the clubs whom you should fear most, for they kill only the body. It iss the others who slay body and soul too with their fires—fires from hell kindled without human hands." The grip of his powerful fingers bit into my arm. "This afternoon they put the hex on you—and her, too. No one who has ever received that has lived, not ever one. If you have one little chance to see her alive before dot burning come to her—"

Still talking rapidly he steered me across the room toward a door.

"Go by the back way out and get home to her. Go as fast as you can, and then faster. I will go to the sheriff. He and I will get Ludlam and the two of us will take him to Leadbetter's. You can talk with him and then we still stay with you the rest of the night."

I gripped his hand silently. Through the moment's silence voices in the street rose in hubbub of curses. Lantern lights glinted on waving clubs.



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"Come on! Let's go and get them!" the gathering cry rang.

Paave pushed me swiftly out of the room and pointed my way along a darkened rear passage. I followed it to a back door opening into a yard.

Outside, I halted an instant to listen to the growl that rolled over the housetops and then I started to run. The two miles of ruddy, mud-plastered going seemed long as eternity. I raced through patches of forest and then between overhanging cliffs where the wind came freighted with cold and voices of things unseen crooned from the rock crannies. My panting breaths tugged my lungs out by the roots while terror, gibbering at my heels, flogged me faster and faster still. If God would only let me find Helen there, find her alive. . . .

WHEN at last I pounded into the yard, I took one look at the house and my heart dropped like a lump of lead into my stomach. The front door sagged awry on shattered hinges, the windows gaped with splintered panes. The mud in the yard was chewed into quagmire by milling of many feet.

I raced up to the door and there I stood rigid an instant before I could move or speak. At last I wet my lips and managed to gasp: "Helen! Helen, where are you?"

There was no answer. A ribboned window shade slatted back and forth. A vagrant wind was wandering through the dark hallways. It swayed the flame of the single candle that stood on a table as though tugging at it with spectral fingers. Somewhere a dog howled.

I stumbled in over the threshold and caught up the candle. From room to room I stormed. I cast wild-eyed glances into dark corners, from time to time I halted to sob out her name.

And then suddenly I heard her answer, a far-away shrilling:

"Don! Don, I'm here!"

I beat my way toward that wailing, my

hands pawing the dark as though they would tear open a passage through which I could fly to her. As I rounded a corner, there was a pattering of feet and a slim little figure rushed to throw itself into my arms. She clung to me in hysterical reaction and I could feel her body throb in the tremors that racked it. She lifted her tear-streaked face to mine and I couldn't stop kissing her.

"What happened?" I whispered at last. "Was it the mob from the village?"

"No—some of those men that we saw in the woods, with the whips. They broke down the door. I ran up into the attic and hid under a bed."

"And the others?" I said. "Thornton and Brad and Mary—"

Her answer came in sobbed moaning. "They got them, they took them away. Not the Leadbetter's, though; they ran into the woods."

My heart beats checked with a sudden sick feeling. All our friends gone. And only God's mercy that Helen, too. . . .

I blew out the candle and for a long minute we stood motionless, clinging to one another and listening. Outside, the night was alive with noises, whisperings and clickings and rustlings. Whether those ghouls had departed or were still hanging around there was no way to tell. If those noises out there were men, they would realize that there was one whom they hadn't got and return.

Then, little by little, a small wooden sound became audible, rhythmic, persistent, like tapping of spectral drumsticks out of the night's immensity. I listened a moment longer and then I slid my arm around Helen while I laughed shakily.

"That's the loose spoke in Paave's buggy," I said. "He and the sheriff are coming. And the boss of the Penitentes."

A COUPLE of minutes later the ancient horse-drawn vehicle turned into the yard. Paave and the big flaxen-haired

sheriff got out and came forward. Helen and I met them on the steps and I told them what had taken place.

"They've got all of our friends," I concluded savagely. "And if that man there is Hans Ludlam, he knows where they are."

Paave turned to the figure which up to this time had stood half concealed in the shadows.

"Dere iss Hans Ludlam," he said.

I stepped closer to Ludlam. Big as Paave was, the boss of the Penitentes loomed shoulders above him. A huge white beard rippling like burnished silver from the blue, intensely penetrating eyes clear to the man's wrist gave him a patriarchal appearance. He had a swelling dome of a bald head over high corrugated forehead, a nose massive and rapacious as a hawk's beak. The mouth under the bushy moustache was a pair of lips thin, white, incredibly cruel.

"Is it true that you are the leader of a sect known as the Punished of God?" I asked.

The big shining head nodded indifferently.

"I am the pastor of those of us who are aware of the power of sin," a deep voice rumbled sonorously.

"And your adherents torture themselves and one another by voluntary floggings?" I continued.

"Christ was flogged with a whip of thorns before He died on the cross," the patriarch intoned. "Can we wretched mortals do less than accept punishment for our sins in the same way?"

"And you practice witchcraft as a side line," I went on. "You keep this valley of ignorant people in slavery by working on their superstitions. You kill men and women to keep them subservient to you."

The man's voice came with the bellow of an angry bull.

"That is a lie! I do not deny that such things go on. But they are the doings of

—others. We are just a company of poor struggling souls trying to purify ourselves so that in the day of judgment we may be received at the heavenly gates. We harm no others and what we do among ourselves is our own affair."

"My friends and I saw a man flogging himself in the woods this afternoon," I retorted. "When we got to him, he had been burned to death, but no fire was near him. Men with whips—some of your men—were there and chased us. There was a hex sign of paper dolls there, and one on our car. Later, one of our party was killed in this house in the same way. Those men of yours did it all. They took our friends away an hour ago. Where are they now?"

FOR a long moment the man stared at me in such frozen silence that I thought he had not understood what I said. Then suddenly he leaped at me, clubbed fists beating like pile drivers. They came down on my shoulders and one smash of them beat me to my knees. I tried to jump backward, but they found me again. They pounded my head and the back of my neck. Their blows rang on my cranium till they filled it with shooting stars.

Paave and the sheriff were after him now. He drove his great knotted hands into their faces like rocks at the ends of piston-rods. They staggered back, gasping through spurting blood. They rallied and charged him again and he beat them like puppets.

They were gone now, taken to flight, and he whirled to where I was just staggering up to my feet. He blasted me down again. His fists were hammers of Thor beating the life out of a squirming pigmy of mortal man who twisted and grovelled this way and that to escape from their punishment.

Finally he paused to get breath. Like a mouse fleeing a torturing cat, I dragged

myself, half crawling, half running, into some bushes. He didn't follow me. I heard him muttering under his breath as he turned and went stamping out of the yard and off down the road.

I got myself up on my feet and stood leaning against a tree, panting and spitting blood. I felt as though I had been pummeled by the hoofs of a horse. I wiped tears and sweat from my eyes and looked around for Paave and the sheriff. I couldn't see either of them, or the buggy. And then the spine-tingling realization came that they had fled. Terrified at Ludlam's berserker onslaught, they had left Helen and me to his mercy. Helen—what had become of her? I looked wildly around, gasped her name.

Footsteps sounded and she was there, shivering against my side. I slid my arm around her yielding softness and I thanked God for one mercy, that she was alive. She clung to me, she sobbed through chattering teeth:

"What are we going to do now, Don? Where can we go?"

"Try to get back to town, I guess," I said. "Get to Paave's. He's a coward, but he'll take us in."

I thought that, then—I dreamed that in this night of fear there could be one place of safety for us!

Helen and I groped our way to the road. For five or ten minutes we plodded along, clinging to one another's hands and not talking. The darkness was thronged with armies of shadows that scuttled forward, skipped sidewise, rolled backward again. Shadows of rocks and trees, or . . . We couldn't tell. We slid past them, cringing, and the leaping of their swart arms at us brought showers of gooseflesh tingling our spines.

And little by little I was convinced that they weren't shadows of inanimate things. The croaking of frogs in the marshes had been the only sounds for a while. Then from behind came rustlings and grittings,

squashing of feet, rumble of guttural whispers. The roadway was clogged with a jumble of forms whose whiplashes zig-zagged against the stars.

"There they are! They're coming for us!" Helen's cry spurted. And then we were running, stumbling and tripping, slewing through mud, racing as we had never fled before. I pulled Helen along by one hand and visions of Thornton's cindered face and the circle of paper dolls twisted an iron hand in my vitals.

How long or how far we ran I wouldn't know. Finally came the time when I knew it was over, for we couldn't go any more. Helen's knees had melted beneath her, I had swept her up into my arms. Now I too was winded, retching for breath and spitting blood.

Her voice came half strangled from where her face was crushed into my shoulder.

"Kill me, Don! Kill me now with your pocket knife! Don't let them get me!" she sobbed. "Not to die the way Thornton did. Do it now, quickly, while I am kissing you!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Fingers Of Doom

WITH my free hand I fumbled for the knife in my pocket. She was right. Better death at my loving hands than the tortures of those sadist beasts. And that was something for which the Almighty would forgive me on judgment day.

Wildly I groaned as I kissed her. I would have done it the next instant, had I not suddenly caught sight of a light in a house window. And perhaps, even so, it would have been better. Perhaps she would be happier now; perhaps I would be spared the nightmares that are slowly driving me mad, if I had opened a vein in her little white throat.

But the house was there, just a short distance ahead, and I flogged my legs in

a frantic sprint. Sagging piazza boards creaked under my weight as I rushed up to the door. I didn't pause to knock. I pawed for the latch, burst open the door and threw myself over the threshold. Before looking to see who was there or explain to them, I spun around to find the bolt and throw it across.

I set Helen down on her feet. White fires were searing my inwards and for a long minute I sprawled against the wall gasping before I could utter a sound.

"The floggers are after us!" I finally managed to pant.

There were two of them in the poverty-bare kitchen, a woman and man. The poorest type of the most ignorant inhabitants of the valley, ill-clad, ill-nourished, vacant-eyed. At my words the woman let out a moan. The man's jaw went limp.

"They—ye say *they're* out there?" His

voice rasped in a scream. "They'll git me! They've come to kill me!"

"We'll fight them off," I said. "Haven't you got something, a gun or an axe or some clubs, anything we can fight with?"

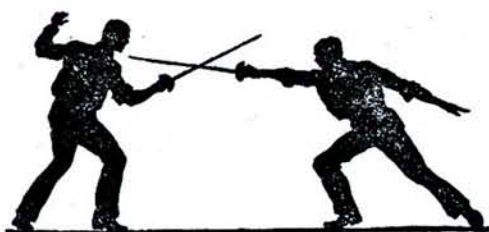
He shook his head. "Wouldn't do no good. I didn't pay in, didn't hev no money to pay."

"You didn't have money to pay what?" I said.

He looked at me curiously. "You're strange in these parts, ain't ye? We couldn't pay fer our button. They come high—twenty dollars. And now—"

He turned to point at one of the windows. Against the outside of the glass had been pasted a string of the dancing dolls. His finger jerked with his trembling, beads of sweat rolled over his face.

"They put 'em up three days ago," he slathered. "That means he hexed me. Means that I got to die."



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Out of the bowels of the earth they came, old and lank and blind—and their cold, dead hands sought warm, fresh youth. The whole town shuddered with uncontrollable terror, and parents clasped their daughters close in their arms. For they all had heard the dread whisper—

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OUT NOW!

I stared at him. It couldn't actually be true, that in these modern days I was watching a man gibbering in terror because some one had pasted paper dolls on his window pane! Yet when I remembered those other two men, my heart seemed to turn over. Explain it or not, call those fears madness of fools, that pair had died in a way that no sophistry of the effete civilized world could begin to account for. Something hideous and stark and primitive was here.

"Who is this man you say hexes you because you didn't buy one of his buttons?" I said at last.

The farmer shook his head.

"I dunno. Nobody does. He never shows up himself, jest sends around one of the boys that works for him. Some of the men tried stringin' up one of them boys to make him talk. He didn't—but every last one in the crowd that did it was dead inside of a month. Burned to death."

I understood now the meaning of those emblems that I had seen in the village. Some mind with a hellish genius that cast that of a New York racketeer into eclipse had figured out this way to capitalize the superstitions of these besotted country folk and wax fat on their sacrifices. If they bought a button and wore it—paid for "protection"—they weren't bewitched. If they didn't. . . .

"Anyhow, it's all nonsense." I gripped the man's arm and shook him to jolt his bovine mind out of its daze. "There is no such thing as witchcraft. It's all a—"

He wasn't listening. He was staring past me at something over my shoulder. I saw his jaw drop and then a strange light that I can only describe as hunger stab through the apathy of his eyes. His lips grew slack and wet and a gurgling sound broke from his throat.

I turned to follow his gaze. I heard Helen's gasp and then I felt my own pulses spurt with amazement.

A WINDOW opened from the kitchen onto the piazza. And through this, against the awful blackness of the night, a figure was visible. It was that of a young girl, utterly nude save for a gauzy scarf around her slim loins. She was of a witching, Circe-like beauty. Her gaze fastened on us—on both of us men—and I for one couldn't withdraw my eyes. Her look held a pagan allure, knowledge of age-old power of things beyond words, of the stark and primitive instincts that call from woman to man.

She stepped back from the window so that her whole figure was visible. Her arms rose over her head. Her slender body taut and standing on tip-toe, she seemed to be reaching to draw down the tide of white light to her bosom. Like a naiad of ethereal and inhuman beauty she stood there, quivering, breasts hardened and throbbing—a thing not of this world, thrilling to the call of something born of the night and the moon's radiance.

Her arms dropped. Lascivious ripples passed through her, writhings of a cat in throes of desire. She lifted her breasts in her cupped hands, holding them toward us.

A choked cry burst from the farmer. And then I saw him rush past me to claw at the bolt securing the door. Sweat stood on his face, it was the passion-gripped face of an animal. His wife let out a scream. She ran after him to pound at his hands, trying to beat them down from the latch. Failing in that, she flung herself on him, battling with all her frenzied strength to drive him away.

He shoved her angrily one side. He shot back the bolt, wrenched the door open and dashed out.

And I ran behind him! I didn't at that time understand what prompted me to do that. If I had used any reason at all to account for my action, I would have told myself that I wanted to find out what was happening, who was behind it. For

those who had been chasing us were no longer in evidence. They seemed to have been drawn elsewhere to a fresh victim.

I would have told myself that. But my eyes had devoured the seduction of that naked girl and heat fired my brain. Again that strange impulse that I had felt once before was urging me, too, in pursuit of the evasive figure that eluded the farmer's wild rush and went pirouetting across the yard.

She didn't pause for him to overtake her. She ran swiftly to the opening of a path that led into the woods. Down this she sped, a lambent white flame in the darkness, and behind her lumbered the ungainly form of the rustic.

I turned in there to rush after them. But Helen had had enough. She brought me back to my sense with a stinging slap in the face.

"What are you doing, Don?" she cried. "What is the matter with you?"

I halted, blinked and passed my hand over my eyes. I had a queerly dazed feeling.

"I don't know," I muttered. "I must have been bewitched."

I had said that, not of course meaning it literally, but as a thoughtless form of words to convey that something had taken place which I couldn't explain. And then my voice broke as a cold hand leaped to the back of my neck. The farmer claimed to have been bewitched, and I had scoffed at the notion. But some unholy compulsion had drawn him from his wife's side to follow the girl to what he must have realized would be his death. And for the second time tonight I too had known that same unearthly, almost uncontrollable temptation!

I groaned and swept Helen into my arms. Hexes, witchcraft — phantoms whose power lives only in the minds of the damned, those slaves of fear, or vital forces of evil? In that moment of terror I didn't know, for I had lost the faculty

of reasoning. I only knew that I had just experienced an invisible magnetism of sin against which no will power could struggle. If Helen had not been here to save me. . . .

Sweat stood on the palms of my hands as we turned and started back toward the road. Still we saw nothing of our late pursuers. They had gone into the woods where the girl had been leading the farmer. From deep in the forest came cracking of whips and a tocsin of agony. A voice rose in gagged screechings to lash the dead air. A sudden light flared briefly and died. Wafting of breeze brought aroma of roasting flesh. I grabbed Helen's arm and husked through clenched teeth:

"Come on, let's run! Let's get out of this!"

WE came to the highway and started once more in the direction of town. For perhaps ten minutes we plodded along when we were overtaken by a buggy which came lurching over the road at a gallop. It drew down to a halt and the face that peered from around the side curtains was that of lawyer Paave. He waited for us and exclaimed as we came up:

"I haf been looking eferywhere for you. Ludlam knocked me out senseless into some bushes, that must be the reason you did not see me. The horse took fright at de fighting and ran away and then de sheriff is scared too and he goes. After you two haf left, I come to my senses back. I catch de horse half a mile down the road and start to search for you."

He made room on the seat.

"Get in. I take you back to my house where you will be safe. De sheriff is out with a possee looking for Ludlam. In de morning everything will be all right."

There was nothing else to be done. I dreaded going back to the village. I feared to stay in Paave's house. For his story of that last half hour sounded fishy. Between him and Ludlam I had seemed to

sense some unspoken understanding. Suppose he himself were in with the bearded giant—was the boss of the hex business! But we had to go somewhere. The lawyer's house seemed the only hope.

If I had realized then that there was no hope—not any at all!

Paave arrived at his back door by side streets avoiding the crowd that still milled in the main thoroughfare. The first faces I saw when we got inside were those of Leadbetter and his wife.

"They came here to get taken care of, too," Paave explained.

I went up to my erstwhile host and said:

"Have you got one of those buttons?"

He stared at me for an instant as though tempted to say he didn't know what I meant. Then his face twisted as he said:

"No, I hain't got one. Maria won't let me. Says it's all nonsense to pay twenty dollars fer a hunk o' glass."

I said: "Are you afraid—really afraid?"

He licked his parched lips. He darted a look back at his wife, her narrow face alive with a vulpine ferocity.

"I'll say I'm afeared," he husked. "Maria wants fer me to git killed. That's why she won't give me no money fer to pay up. She wants 'em to hex me."

The farmer produced a flask from his hip pocket and held it out. The liquor was the vilest of rot-gut, but its raw scorching against the walls of my stomach gave me a synthetic courage that I badly needed. I took two drinks, long ones.

It was late, long after midnight. Paave came, proffering beds, but I declined for Helen and myself. This was one night that I didn't dare close my eyes. The Leadbetters, however, accepted and departed to leave Helen and me alone in the small sitting room.

She stretched out on a couch while I pulled a big chair up to her side. Hands

linked, we listened to the buzz of excitement now dying away in the village. The place seemed to be quieting down. Yet I couldn't relax. Visions of terror rocketed through my brain. Thornton's face with the grinning white teeth—the demoniacal power that radiated from that patriarch of sin, Hans Ludlam—our four friends gone where, suffering what, God only knew.

We two had so far escaped. But would they leave us in peace now? Was Paave himself the boss of the hexers, and had he brought us under his roof to make the rest of it easy to arrange? Minutes dragged into eternities while terror sat the night watches with me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Love Of The Damned

I DON'T know when it was that I closed my eyes and allowed slumber to overtake me—that night of all nights when with hell meshing closer I should have fought off the demons of weariness and kept awake at no matter what cost.

Then presently I was conscious again, lying sprawled in a stupor of half waking, half sleeping. The moon was higher now, spilling a rectangle of misty light through a window. I watched it, trying to focus my thoughts. The picture of those two dead men, the circle of paper dolls, the elfin forms of the dancing girls in the woods. . . . Was I mad or had uncanny and supernatural things really been taking place around me tonight?

My eyes slid away from the spot of light in the effort to shake off those bewildering thoughts. They moved toward the window and there they stopped. My breath caught in my lungs. A strange incredulous terror prickled me with icy needlings. There in the moonlight was the girl! She wore only the same diaphanous scarf about her lithe hips and her

hair was a tossed mass of gold above the ivory mask of her face. Her eyes, deep with that knowledge of unnamable, timeless things, clung fixedly to mine. For a second she stood there in suddenly arrested motion and then she was gliding toward me.

She halted at the side of the chair, stooping over me, and her perfect body was an alabaster white statute sculptured from moonlight. Her hands reached down to glide over my face. Cool firm fingers stroked my temples.

There was a tingling passion in the touch of those fingertips that thrilled me over my whole body. She smiled, slowly, languorously; her voice came like an echo from far away. What she was whispering I couldn't tell, but the cadence of her voice vibrated answering strings in my brain. Half conscious, half stupified, I groped to seize those pale hands and crush them against my lips.

She trilled a laugh and moved swiftly out of my reach. Then I was conscious of rising to my feet and stumbling toward her. My throat seemed to be bursting with the hammering of my heart which had flown up to lodge there. And the fear that gripped me sprang from my knowledge that it had happened to me now, as it had to those others. Having bewitched me with longing for her beauty, she came to claim me, to make me another one of her victims.

And yet for all that terror, I was glad with a fiercely reckless exulting that dried my mouth and brought sweat to the palms of my hands. I was a damned soul, cursed by her beauty to follow her to my death in the fire, yet the blood hissed on my ear drums as I mumbled wildly:

"Wait for me. I'm coming. I'm coming!"

I rushed another step toward her. She pirouetted away and stood in the moonlight close to the window. She waited there, smiling. She lifted her breasts in

her cupped hands and held them toward me, a maddening offering.

I started to run to her, and then some deep-buried and almost forgotten memory prompted me to halt and direct a glance toward the couch where Helen had been. One faint tugging of loyalty to her, still alive in the quicksand that was sucking me down!

Again I looked and a cry broke from my lungs. She wasn't there. Helen was gone. While I had forgotten her in swinish sleep, they had come and taken her.

For an instant longer I stood there transfixed, while grief-stricken terror rolled over me in a flood that made me oblivious to the girl and her temptings. I turned my back on her and rushed out of the room. Through the house I went storming, shouting Helen's name. Only echoes beat my cries back to me, for she wasn't there. Paave, the Leadbetters—no one was in the house.

At last I found myself out of doors. I must have been half demented, for the triangles of the hills hunched over me like squatting beasts and the wind from their caves brought voices of night and bottomless sin. I stood there alone with the stars and my agony.

AND then at last I was aware of the girl again. She stood near me, swaying slightly, a wind-blown lily against the dark, waiting and beckoning.

Her call surged over me once more with a longing that obliterated all other thoughts. Fires swept through my parched throat and filled my brain. I dashed after her, arms straining. God forgive me, with my wife carried away to torture and death, I raced after that naked woman and choked cries burst from me, imploring her to come to me, to wait till I could catch up.

She didn't pause. She ran scarcely seeming to touch the ground with her twinkling white feet. By deserted back

roads she led me out of the village. And now she had turned into another narrow way into the woods. Down this she sped, whirling, spinning, gyrating, her nude body like a woodland sylph in the moonlight.

No words can possibly portray the weird, uncanny loveliness of that spectacle. Her slim white body against the dark boles of the pines; her blood-red hair spreading and billowing till it seemed an aureole of fire against which her torso and limbs stood outlined in gleaming ivory. Then suddenly she vanished—rather she seemed to turn wholly into a flame, for her body disappeared and there was only a fire, an errant pointed flame that flitted in ghostly dippings against the black tree trunks.

Whether that fire was human or animal, material or only a hallucination of my maddened brain, I didn't know. It was a will-o'-the-wisp that led me sweating and panting through bogs and across fallen trees, gasping incoherent cries while I fought to get near enough to clutch its flickerings into my arms. Stark terror twisted my soul, but I couldn't help myself. Honor, my duty to Helen, my love for her, all seemed windy words without meaning. The only thing that mattered was that leaping, gyrating figure of passion incarnate—passion whose attainment would bring my death as Thornton had died. . . .

Suddenly the girl vanished completely, blotted out as though by a veil of enveloping gloom. And the fire, too. I came to a sudden standstill and stood breathless, staring while my figure went rigid as stone.

As my eyes focused to take in my surroundings, I became aware that I stood at one side of an open space among towering trees. The area was half filled with raggedly clad figures—some in Mexican costumes—clutching whips. The flames of a bonfire in the midst of the circle

etched their faces in crimson and black, countenances inhuman in fanatical cruelty. They could have been imps of hell cavorting around a furnace-mouth in its infernal depths!

But those furies weren't alone there. My horrified eyes counted other faces—Bradshaw and Mary, Nathalie Thornton. And Helen. . . . Brad and his wife and Nathalie they had stripped naked and tied to stakes. The Penitentes pranced around them in a march, bearing whips pointed with steel barbs. They whooped in glee as they laid on the flagellations. Garment by garment they ripped off their own clothes till they were stark naked. They lashed themselves, too. They leaped high in the air at the pain, grotesque, plunging figures that seemed to have been whelped from earth's hidden horrors.

The rout grew frenetic. Their shrieks held wild ecstasy of devotees approaching ultimate frenzy of pain-rapture. I tried to identify some of the faces, for I told myself that if ever I got out of this alive, I would invoke the help of the Governor to wipe out this unspeakable cult. In the uncertain firelight, I couldn't be sure. Of only one individual was I positive, of a huge white bearded form that I suddenly spied standing behind a screen of bushes and watching proceedings—Hans Ludlam!

MY hand groped over the ground, seeking a club. If I could find a weapon and creep around in the rear of this Satan, I would strike one blow to bring an end to his racket with the dashing out of his brains.

I hadn't crawled more than a few steps in my search when I froze to crouch staring into the circle. A curse sprang to my lips. For they had taken Helen down from her stake and brought her into the ring. She was still clothed and for an instant they contented themselves with disrobing her. I had to kneel there, helpless,

and watch that! Fingers hooked into the neck of her dress. A rip shredded it to the waist, bringing her white shoulders and arms into view. Then they went after her underclothes. In a moment it was all over. Before those gibbering satyrs she stood utterly nude.

They fell in behind her and drove her around and around while their whips rose and fell. Crooked red fingers leaped in zigzaggings over her skin. Her face in the firelight was a twisted white cameo chiseled from torture.

I felt every one of those whip strokes as though it were falling on my naked skin. I cursed in meaningless snarlings, my fingers clawed at the ground as I went scrambling on all fours, still in search of a club. I stopped to spin around as Helen's moans rang again. Some one had brought a bridle and jammed the steel bar between her teeth. They forced her down on her hands and knees and they were driving her like a horse. Flogging her and sawing the reins till the foam on her lips dripped crimson.

I lunged up to my feet and the yell that burst from my throat was a sound wholly animal. I hadn't been able to find any weapon. But I couldn't wait any longer. The way I felt then I could tear them all limb from limb with my naked hands.

I surged a step forward and then to a standstill again at an incredible sight. The gang had suddenly wheeled from Helen to flock in a group around Nathalie, still tied to her high stake. Exactly what happened—whether they did anything at all to her or not—I couldn't tell. But suddenly her body seemed to burst into flame, a spurting glare of yellowish-pink light. It was an outlashing of heat terrific in its intensity, for it sent the crowd spilling backward and even there where I stood I could feel its torrid wave in my eyes.

The fire went out as swiftly as it had come. It had been, in fact, more of an explosion than a flame. As it ebbed away, I saw Nathalie's body glowing all over red as a great coal drawn from a furnace. Swiftly it cooled to a black cinder. It twisted in spasmodic convulsions of muscular reflexes.

I stood there spellbound while goose-flesh of an unspeakable horror rolled on my spine. In my smug assurance of twelve hours before, I had mocked at witchcraft and all its works. But now I had stood and watched that girl burned to death when no fire was within yards of her. What hope did I have, what hope could there ever be, of saving Helen from those who killed with a power that could only be evoked from hell?

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The knot of forms moved rapidly to stand before Bradshaw. And while he writhed and screamed in his ropes, the same thing took place again. And then there were two blackened things, grotesque and curled-up as fetuses snatched in untimely birth that crackled with thin gritting noises as they swayed in the breeze.

Mary Bradshaw was next. One of the Penitentes seemed to throw something invisible toward her. The light sprang in a blinding surge and then the breeze brought the stench of roasting meat.

All this time I hadn't moved. Sheer fascination of horror rooted me to the ground. And then came the thing which blew the fuse in my brain. As in a moving picture of doom, I saw them seizing Helen and dragging her toward another stake, as yet untenanted. Their shouts rang:

"The next! She is the next! The fire-god wants a new bride!"

I saw them hustle her up there, tie her by her uplifted arms to the vertical shaft. Saw her white nudeness against the pines, her eyes upturned to her Maker, while before her the pack stood motionless, waiting. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Damnation's Picnic

I HAD no weapon of any kind, only my naked hands, as I smashed through the undergrowth into the open. Neither had I any real hope of fighting off that mob single handed and rescuing her. I was only a berserker primate who had slid backward ten milleniums in evolution in as many seconds, in whose brain just one red emotion surged—to get to her side and gouge and rip and tear, to kill as many of them as a man, fighting by the side of his woman, may kill before he himself dies.

It was the fury of my unexpected on-

slaught that took them off balance and scattered them for an instant. I fell upon the ring from behind and I had dropped four of them with smashes to the nerve-centers of their necks before they were aware of my presence. Two who halted to spin around at me I felled with clubbings that broke their jaws. And then I was through and running to Helen.

I had got out my pocket knife as I ran. I had thought to cut her down, at least get her away from that stake where death leaped out of nothing. But there wasn't time. They came swarming over me, dragging me back. Pinned inside of a ring, I lashed at them with loathing of terror giving me a maniac's strength. I used my fists and my feet on them, then my fingernails and my teeth. And suddenly then the ring parted to let through another figure.

I saw a leather-brown face, contorted and foam-spattered, with glaring black eyes of a maniac. Long hair tossing against the stars told me that I had to do with a woman. But no qualms of chivalry need have kept me from slugging her, for she fought with the ferocity of a she-panther.

With a screech she flung herself on me. Her hands, equipped with fanged claws, lashed at my face. Long dirt-clogged nails dug into my eyeballs. Horror-thrilled, I recoiled from her fury. Such a face as hers could have been whelped from no mortal mother, only from womb of witches and midnight hags.

Some one tripped me with a kick from behind and I was down. She caterwauled and came flying knees first, medusa locks streaming. I retched with nausea at the smash in my vitals while she knelt there ripping and scratching.

She was killing me, tearing my face into ribbons. Needled by pain, my hand lashed out. It caught her in the front of her dress, rending it to the waist and bearing her withered brown breasts. I jolted

another blow to her face as I got my breath and lunged up to sitting. She yowled like a rabid cat and drove her thumbs into my eyeballs. All compunction swept away now; I drove out a short jab that took her flush on her scrawny throat. She slumped onto hands and knees, gagging, her larynx shattered.

Somewhere in the maelstrom that seethed around me, Helen screamed. I gathered myself for a leap back to my feet, but the mob surged in and their clubs beat me down again. I was crawling on hands and knees while their whips found me. Helen sobbed again and the sound of that tortured wailing seemed to burst something inside of me. God, I had to get to my feet and go to her, before there came another puff of that pink fire and her body swung there, a blackened pendulum.

But I couldn't rise, they were too many for me. I clenched my teeth through bleeding lips and dug my fingers into the ground as I clawed myself forward.

Suddenly I stumbled over something that impeded my progress. It was a wooden box half filled with a greyish powder. In frenzy I snatched it up and whirled to throw its contents over my shoulder into the faces and eyes of my tormentors.

It blinded them for an instant and as they stumbled back, I attained my objective, the edge of the bonfire. Long heavy sticks, only partially burned, projected around its rim. I snatched up one of them and with the thing in my hands I leaped to my feet.

Armed now, I rushed at them. With the blazing end of the brand I belabored their bodies and faces. And suddenly something took place which caused me to let fall the stick and stand gaping in amazement.

WHERE sparks flew from the stick to light upon the irregular patches in which the powder had landed on the men

and adhered, there burst out those explosions of incredible heat.

Some with faces half burned away, others with cindered cavities where eyes had been, still others wearing jagged black shawls draped over their chests, they shrank from me to throw themselves on the ground and lie rolling and shrieking in agony. The foul horrible smell of burning flesh filled my nostrils, and a fierce tumultuous joy swept me. At last my friends were being avenged. I left them yammering there and stumbled around to the stake from which Helen's choked screams were coming.

I didn't wait to get out my knife. With bare hands I wrenched at the cords that pinioned her crossed wrists. They parted and her limp figure came tumbling down into my arms. I clutched her in the crook of one arm and wheeled back to face the pack. For I hadn't disposed of all of them. There were still enough of them left to do their will on us. Teeth bared like an ape, I gripped the end of my club and stood waiting.

They didn't come. And when my blurred vision cleared so that I could see again, I stared transfixed with amazement. For another battle was in progress there now. A second group of men armed with long flails had come dashing out of the trees. They fell upon those of the torturers whom I hadn't disposed of and were engaged in bashing their brains in with their six-foot wagon stakes. The leader of the new-comers was the white-bearded boss of the Penitentes, Hans Ludlam! And at his side, bellowing vengeance, stormed lawyer Emery Paave.

A sound of sobbing brought my eyes back to Helen. She hung limp in my clasp. Her eyes lifted to meet mine, but she didn't recognize me. Through the blood-flecked foam on her lips she was moaning dull, toneless screams, over and over and over. I groaned with agony drawn from my own tortured soul. Fast

as I had tried to come, it hadn't been soon enough. The pain and terror had been too much for her gentle mind. She had gone mad.

I was still holding her crushed to me, kissing her poor twisted face and begging her to speak, when feet sounded at my side. The fight was over. Paave and Ludlam paused an instant and then without speaking strode forward to shaft the light of a lantern into the face of the woman I had hit in the throat and of the man lying next to her, his face half obliterated by the strange burning. The revelation of their features didn't tell me anything new. For already I had divined that they were Frank Leadbetter and his wife.

"It was those two who was doing it," Paave's voice rumbled at last. "They was the ones who have been collecting twenty dollars for buttons from eferyone on pain of hexing and death. They fixed up t'ings to make it look like de Penitentes, so that Ludlam would get the blame. I myself thought he was doing it—till he came to me an hour ago and asked for my help. Their men with whips was all fakes. Those men you saw in the woods the first time was some of theirs. Ludlam and his people never hurt anyone. They yust whipped one another and minded their own business. The Leadbetters did not want you here because they knew that sooner or later it would mean the end of their business. They must have collected thousands of dollars. They must have been terrible rich."

I STARED at him and even now that I understood I was cold with the horror of it all. What a racket! And one possible only in a community whose members believed so implicitly in the power of witchcraft that they never questioned the genuineness of the things that seemed to be taking place.

"And the girl who led the men into the woods to their deaths?" I said at last.

"She wass my little Ella, my niece who keeps house for me," the big Dutchman groaned. "I did not know it, I had no suspicions. The Leadbetter woman got her to do that, she must haf given her money—and drugs. Many times I haf seen her acting not herself and I haf wondered what iss wrong. Those other girls that you saw from the house, dancing, are probably more that she used in the same way."

"The men on whom the Leadbetters put the sign of the dancing dolls—without the victims knowing it, some of their men must have got them to eat or drink something containing a drug that made them insanely sex-hungry," Ludlam went on as Paave halted, overcome by grief. "And then when the naked girls came, they could not help themselves, the instinct was too strong. They would follow them anywhere, even to death, believing all the time that they had been bewitched!"

"Leadbetter gave me a drink of whiskey in your house, Paave," I exclaimed. "That was how he got me. And the first time, back at the house, it was in the food. When I thought that I saw the girls turning into flames, it was hallucinations brought on by the drug."

"When the girl came to you, you could not help from following her," Ludlam said. "But when you arrived at the place where they were torturing your wife, you came to your senses. The drug had not been strong enough."

The big man took a turn up and down.

"But what I do not yet understand," he muttered after a moment, "is how they did it with the burning. How one could be burned without any fire."

"I can explain that now," I said. I remembered the box of grey powder which I had hurled into the men's faces and which had later burst into flame. "There is a certain chemical—thermite—which can be ignited with a match and 'burns with a terrifically hot fire, hot enough to melt

iron. It is used for welding together broken pieces of metal. If this thermite were mixed with a little grease to make it adhere, and the paste smeared over a person's body, it could be set going with just a match and he would roast to a crisp in five seconds."

Paave and Ludlam both stared at me, open-mouthed.

"Then that is the way it was done," came the deep voice of the bearded giant. "In some way, Leadbetter, ignorant as he was, learned of that chemical and got a supply of it. Those men you saw in the woods had already spread the body of the self-flogging one with it before he started whipping himself. During the few moments when he was out of your sight, they set him on fire and then placed the circle of paper dolls around his body. The man who died in your house—"

"Leadbetter did that himself!" I exclaimed. "He must have got Thornton up stairs alone, knocked him senseless with a club and then in only a few seconds, spread the stuff over his head and touched it off."

For another long moment nobody spoke. Now that we knew the truth of the horrors, it didn't seem to make them any less dreadful, rather more soul-sicken-

ing. And the sight of Helen's nude body, dribbling blood while those meaningless noises rasped from her throat.

I PICKED her up in my arms and carried her out of there while the two big men were tying up the Leadbetter who by this time had recovered consciousness. Buggies were waiting in the highway at the end of the wood road. Some one brought blankets to wrap around Helen and we started the twenty mile drive to the nearest town where there was a doctor.

It was noon of the next day before I finally got her into a hospital. She was there for two months before she knew me again and they said it would be better for her to go away somewhere with me.

That was two years ago. There wasn't any oil on our property in Monmouth Valley. I sold the timber right to a syndicate and tried to forget it all. Little by little, those memories are fading from Helen, too. But when the flame of a lighted match suddenly spurting in her eyes sends her to fly shivering into my arms, I know that she is seeing again the form of Nathalie Thornton bursting into red fire—and hearing the croon of whips hissing against her naked skin.

THE END



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CHAINS of DREAD DESIRE

by ROBERT HOWARD NORTON

Because his namesake had violated the laws of God and man, in a long-dead century, John Bartlett had to die—betrayed by the girl who loved him!



THE FOG was growing thicker, dimming the rays of the headlights into a sickly yellow that didn't show more than five feet of the muddy road ahead of the car wheels. Spawned by the river bottoms, the heavy grey vapor coiled about us like the miasmatic breath of a monster from another world. My teeth were pressed tightly together to keep them from chattering. Then a spasm shook me and I trembled so violently that the car almost swung into the ditch that bordered the road. By main strength I pulled it back, glanced at Chloe who sat beside me. She had not noticed. She was leaning forward with a strange, intent look on her lovely face. Her eyes were wide and dark. Her nostrils flared slightly, as if she were waiting for something to appear out of the writhing mist and she didn't know what it might be.

Don't misunderstand me. It wasn't fear that made my palms slippery with sweat, made my muscles jump uncontrollably . . . or was it? Sometimes you can't distinguish between cause and effect. At least, I hadn't felt anything like fear when we left Boston two days before. I had been gay, excited then, and Chloe had been even more so. The trip down to South Carolina was to be a fore-taste of our honeymoon. She hadn't been home in over ten years. After her parents' death she had been sent up North by her uncle and had stayed there. When we had written to him, announcing our marriage plans, and he had invited us to come

down and stay at the old Duquesne home, it had seemed like a wonderful idea. I wanted a chance to meet this last remaining relative of hers, see the place where she had been born.

Then, that morning, just coming into South Carolina, this feeling had come over me. A dull heaviness. A sense of foreboding. A cold chill would sweep over me and I would have to knot my muscles to keep from trembling. A touch of fever, you say, born of the damp, low lying land through which we were driving? Perhaps, but it was more like the sudden, unaccountable prickling that contracts your skin when you say you felt as if someone had walked over your grave.

I SAID nothing to Chloe about the strange, leaden feeling in my heart. Somehow she seemed to have changed from the girl I had known in Boston. She had lost her clipped, finishing school diction. Her speech had become soft and slurring. She was sinking back into her heritage of the deep South, making me feel like an invader, an intruder.

I glanced sideways at her. She was still staring ahead as if she could see through the fog wreathed darkness. Her nostrils were distended as if she were filling her lungs with the dank odor of rotting vegetation. I knew we were close to her old home. She had said it was only twelve miles from the last town, yet when she suddenly sat erect, put her hand on my arm and said, "Wait!" I started.

It was she who pulled on the brake, switched off the motor. Her eyes were glowing queerly.

"What . . . ?" I began. Then I heard it, a strange murmuring chant sounding through the murk. I couldn't get the words but I didn't need to. It was filled with hopelessness and despair, yet it seethed with an under-level of hate. It was primitive, abysmal, yet I knew it was

a part of this land to which I was foreign.

With a quick movement, Chloe pushed open the door.

"Wait there," she called over her shoulder, then she had run across the road and disappeared into the swirling darkness. I continued to sit there for a split second, open-mouthed. Where had she gone? Why? With a curse, I threw open my door, leaped out also.

"Chloe!" I called. "Chloe!" No sound but the low throbbing of the chant answered me. I leaped the ditch beside the road, started to run stumbling through the darkness. Tough grasses twisted around my ankles. Branches slapped damply across my face. The chant was growing louder now. It swelled up to a chorus of misery, then ceased, and in the flat silence that followed I heard a sound that brought me up short, heart pounding. It was a faint, choked moaning, and clank of heavy chains, the crack of a whip.

I stood there, waiting, listening, the short hairs prickling up the back of my neck. The dim, eerie glow of a lantern appeared about forty feet ahead of me. It was held by a man, a white man. I could not see his face, a broad-brimmed hat shadowed it, but his costume was that worn three centuries ago!

I gaped at the high leather jack-boots, the long-tailed, brass-buttoned coat. Involuntarily I closed my eyes, tried to steady my quivering nerves. When I looked again, he was still there and plodding slowly before him, silhouetted against the faint glow of his lantern, flogged onward by the whip in his hand, was a file of black figures with chains linking their necks together.

I tried to move but I could not. Convicts, I told myself, a road gang . . . yet I knew they weren't. There were women in that fetter-yoked column and they don't put women on chain gangs.

Besides, what trick of dim light and shifting fog could make those figures seem to glow with a faint phosphorescent radiance? Those were slaves I saw being led to the auction block by a beast in human form . . . and there are no more slaves in America!

A curt order and the clanking, heavily plodding shapes halted. Opposite the lantern now was a young, slim negress. She was naked except for a loin cloth. I could see the profile of her small, erect breasts; the burnished gleam of her coppery thighs. The lantern lifted slightly, illuminating her face, and I gasped. Call me mad, but I tell you she looked like Chloe!

CHLOE'S skin is a warm ivory. That of the almost nude girl was bronze. Yet even with the wide metal collar around her neck, the heavy chain linking her to the shadowy shapes before and behind her, she carried herself as Chloe did. There was the same tilt to her head, the same half shy, half seductive twist to her full lips. The man with the lantern put out his hand, ran it slowly down over the swell of her breasts. I still could not see his face, but I could sense his lust in the tenseness of his body. The girl half turned, her body swayed toward him, and then she was locked in his embrace.

A faint stir rippled along the line of chain-linked blacks. Slowly, stealthily they began to move. The two ends of the line swung outward, then together so that they had formed a circle with the man and the girl in the center. One end of the line dipped under the other, continued to move outward, so that there was now a loop in the center of the heavy chain. It began to get smaller, drew tighter. Then as she pulled her lips away, dropped her head down, the lethal links passed harmlessly over her, and tightened crushingly around his neck!

He screamed once, tried to pull away, but with wild, animal laughter, the girl held him. A score of black bodies bent, lunged in opposite directions. The lantern fell, went out. Then, as fog-faced blackness blotted out that hellish scene of primitive vengeance, as the man's screams died away into a choking, bubbling sound, I heard his bones crunching under the constricting pressure of the tightening chain!

A moment longer I stood there, my body cold with the sweat of terror, my stomach churning. The girl's shrill, triumphant laughter still rang in my ears. Then, almost unconsciously, I ran forward.

"Stop!" I screamed. "In God's name . . ." Water splashed around my feet. There was a deep ditch between me and those ghostly figures. I turned to the right, ran along its bank. My feet struck a plank. By the way it lay, it must bridge the ditch. I ran across its swaying length toward the spot where I had just witnessed that soul-shaking scene. All was silence. The only moving thing was the curtain of the swamp born fog. Somehow I knew that what I had seen was not murder but retribution; that if ever a man deserved to die it was that cadaverous figure in mouldering antique garb. Yet I could not help myself. He was white, they were black and . . .

Something hard and round rolled under my foot. I went down on the clammy clay. I sprawled full length for the space of a heart beat, listening. Still nothing. If those spectral figures had really been there, if I had not imagined them, they were gone now. With a trembling hand I struck a match. A skull leered sightlessly at me from the muck. That had been what I stumbled over. Beside it was an ancient, crazily leaning tombstone. By the feeble match glow I could make out the almost obliterated name on it.

It said . . . *John Bartlett!*

My scream was the despairing wail of a lost soul. You see nothing terrible in that? *My name is John Bartlett.*

INSTINCT led me back to the plank, across it and up to the road. I did not run. I plodded slowly, mechanically like a man in a nightmare of doom. Chloe was standing beside the car when I reached it. She was so excited she did not notice my condition.

"That chant—it's an old tribal one," she explained. "Only our field hands sing it. When I heard it, I just had to run out and see them."

Had she seen them? Had she seen what I had? Had even *I* seen it actually or was it the ghostly re-enactment of some scene from the abysses of the past? I did not know and I did not ask. Whatever else might have been illusory, that tombstone with my name on it had been real. That and the sickening dread which now filled my being. I might be feverish. I probably was. But now I knew that I could not attribute to fever alone the terror that had gripped me as we drew near to Chloe's ancestral home.

I started the car and under her direction went on down the road and turned in at a driveway. I stopped when the tall white pillars of the house appeared in the watery glow of the headlights. I got an impression of a huge, rambling structure looming over us, lowering at us with the sightless eyes of dark windows. Then the door opened and three figures stood there, silhouetted against the lamplight from within.

One was a white man, Chloe's Uncle Walter. He was tall, spare, dressed in dark broadcloth. She got out of the car, ran to embrace him. I got out more slowly, looking at the two who stood behind him. Chloe had told me about them. They were the Negro servants, Stephen the butler and Mammy Mallie, his wife. They were no longer young but Stephen

carried his grizzled white head erect, his huge body was still powerful and Mammy Mallie's shapeless body and lined black face yet showed signs of an earlier beauty.

I shook Walter Duquesne's hand.

"So this is John," he said to Chloe. His narrow, dark eyes searched my face and I could also feel the impact of the two Negroes' stares. "I'm very happy to meet you. I know you've had your supper but we must have a drink together."

He gave instructions to Stephen about taking care of our bags and Chloe and I followed him into the house. It had a dank, musty smell as if the sun never penetrated the heavy drapes that covered the windows. He led us into a large room whose darkness the lamp he carried could only partially lessen. I sat in a moth-eaten chair while Chloe flitted about the room examining this piece of furniture, remembering that one. Then she ran out into the hall and up the stairs to look at our rooms, leaving me alone with her uncle.

I was sitting with every muscle locked tight to keep the tremors that rippled through my body from showing, yet I was filled with a hopelessness that did not permit me to stir from that dark and gloomy house. He glanced at me curiously.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

I had to bite my lips to keep from screaming with mad laughter. Feeling well after . . .

"A bit chilled," I managed to get out. He came over, felt my head. His hand felt hot, dry.

"Hmm. Probably a touch of swamp fever. I could give you some quinine but it's best not to take it at night. A drink's what you need. That and a good night's sleep."

I nodded, hardly listening to what he said. A thousand questions were trembling on my lips. Questions about what I had seen, about the graveyard, about the tombstone with my name on it. I

moistened my lips, then froze. Faintly there came to my ears that throbbing chant, that wailing hymn of despair and hate that I had heard the spectral slave shapes sing but a short time before.

I must have blanched for Duquesne gave me an odd look.

"Nothing to be afraid of. Just the field hands down in their quarters singing an old slave song."

I glanced at my wristwatch. Eleven-thirty. "At this hour?"

He shrugged. "I've known Negroes all my life and I still don't pretend to understand them." He took a step toward me. "They knew you were coming tonight when I was sure you wouldn't get here till tomorrow. And Stephen has told me other things about you that you may not even know yourself."

"What . . . what things " I didn't want to ask, the words slipped out of their own accord.

"You come of Boston stock, seafaring folk." I nodded. "Did you know that one of your ancestors was a slaver?"

A slaver? One of those who traded in human flesh, captured blacks in Africa and sold them here like cattle?

"No," I whispered. "No." And yet . . . there was a gap in our genealogy. There was a great-grandfather whose name I did not even know.

He nodded. "They say so. They even know the name of his ship. I can't remember it, but . . ."

"It was the *Monadnock*," said a deep, booming voice. I turned. It was Stephen, the butler, who spoke. He set down a tray with glasses and bottles on it.

"How . . . how do you know?" I asked unsteadily.

"My ancestors were brought over from Guinea on it," he said slowly. "They were kings there. Here they became slaves. But that was John Bartlett's last trip."

"JOHN . . . BARTLETT?" I repeated thickly.

"The slaver's name was the same as yours. It is said he died here. It is said he is buried in the cemetery on the other side of the compound. And it is said . . ."

"Stephen!" A voice hissed out of the darkness of the hall. Slowly I swung around. Mammy Mallie. I could just make out her face, her eyes that were filled with hate. Stephen bowed his grizzled head.

"Good night," he said softly to us and followed his wife out into the darkness.

John Bartlett . . . died here . . . Was it possible that what I had seen, or thought I had seen but a short time before, was an atavistic memory, a warning or a promise of . . . ?

"Here," said Duquesne. "You look as if you could use this."

He handed me a stiff drink of Bourbon. My hands were shaking so that I spilled some, but I gulped it down. I could feel it spreading through my vitals, but there was an icy lump in my chest it could not reach.

"Let me have another," I rasped, holding out my glass.

"And one for me," said Chloe, coming in from the hall.

"Whiskey isn't a lady's drink," said her uncle reprovingly. He filled my glass again, poured out some port for her.

"Whiskey's not for ladies?" said Chloe merrily. "Well, it's never too late to learn."

Her uncle looked at her strangely, then at me.

"Sometimes," he said cryptically, "it is."

I tossed off my glass, not listening to his words, but afterwards . . .

"By the way, uncle," said Chloe, "how has Stephen been lately?"

I was starting to feel better with the alcohol coursing through my veins.

"What's the matter with him?" I asked.

"Well, when I was a child, sometimes we thought that . . ." She tapped her head. "It was his daughter Louise. When she was about sixteen she discovered she was lighter than the other negroes. That her hair and eyes were different. And . . ."

"She realized that she had white blood in her," finished Duquesne, "and she committed suicide. Stephen took it hard." He shrugged. "It may have been dormant in her parents' veins for generations. Perhaps," his eyes had a peculiar look, "since the time they were brought over to this country. It happens more often than you'd think, down here. A white child cropping up in a black family . . . or a black child in a white."

"I've heard," said Chloe, "that you can't always tell. A girl looks white and . . ."

"You can tell," said her uncle, "if you know where to look. Certain parts of the body," he glanced at the bosom of Chloe's dress, "and the nails. If the little half moons at the base are dark, there's negro blood present."

Chloe held up her hands, laughing. Her nails were covered with a bright red polish.

"You could never tell with me."

Her uncle shook his head sombrely. "You'd better take that polish off. Down here, anyone that paints their nails is suspected of . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

I LAY alone in the darkness of the strange room. The bed was dank, hard. The blankets seemed to give me no warmth, only hold in the cold that stabbed me to the marrow of my bones. How much of the chill that gripped me was fever, how much was the terror that swept over me when Chloe had kissed me good-night, gone to her own room, I could not tell. God knows my terror was no longer formless now. That spec-

tral scene in the graveyard . . . it had a basis in fact! That tombstone with my name on it, or that of an ancestor. The underlying hate in Stephen's voice, in Mammy Mallie's glance. It had been my great-grandfather who had brought their ancestors here, made them slaves. And now . . .

I stiffened, listening. For the third time that night, the eerie, wailing slave-chant sounded through the darkness from the field hands' quarters. It swelled louder, rising and falling in a slow, insistent rhythm. Others might hear the despair of a downtrodden people in it. I could hear only the underlying menace. I continued to lie there for a moment, listening, then suddenly I realized what my position was. I was lying on my back, feet close together, hands crossed on my chest . . . *in a posture of a corpse laid out in a coffin!*

With a choked cry that was half sob, I leaped out of bed. My temples were throbbing, my heart pounding, my limbs wet with the poison dew of terror. I could stand no more. If I stayed one more hour in this gloomy house where my every thought led toward death, toward a heritage of hate and vengeance, I would go mad. I had to get away, far away.

Barefoot, I ran across the room, opened the door. The corridor outside was dark. My hands fumbled along the dank walls, feeling for the door to Chloe's room. She must come away with me, at once. My fingers brushed the knob. I turned it, opened the door and stumbled into her room.

A wan greyness that was neither light nor darkness filtered through the windows. By it I could make out the bed . . . and it was empty. My throat corded, then I saw her. The slave-chant was louder on this side of the house, throbbing with a soft, recurrent beat, and standing next to the window, her whole

body jerking to its primitive rhythm, was Chloe. She was clad only in a sheer nightdress. Through the thin silk I could see the twitching of the muscles in her thighs, the sway of her hips. She was breathing deeply, her breasts swelling tight against the soft fabric. Her eyes were half closed, her face intent.

I went uncertainly toward her. "Chloe," I husked. "In God's name . . ."

She did not turn around. "I know," she whispered, "but I can't help it. It gets into my blood, calls to me like . . ."

My groan of abject horror cut her short. I was staring with wide eyes at her bosom. One of her hands lay across it. Under her fingers I could see her young breasts . . . and their roundness was circled by dark rings! But that was not all. She had removed the polish from her nails. They showed pink in the ghostly light . . . *all except the half moons at their base. They were dark brown too!*

HER eyes went down also and her whole body seemed to turn to stone, then with a sobbing cry she ran out of the room and into the darkness of the corridor. I continued to stand there, eyes dilated, mouth open. The slave chant from the field hands' quarters was fading, but sounding in my ears was Walter Duquesne's words. ". . . more often than you'd think . . . a black child in a white family . . . can tell if you know where to look . . . if the half moons at the base of the nails are dark . . ."

Chloe had Negro blood in her! I had sensed that she was somehow changing on the drive down from Boston. Her slurring speech, the way she had responded to the Negroes' singing. It had been like calling to like!

I had loved her. We were to be married. But now if we had children would they be white or . . . A tearing sob racked me. I stumbled toward the door.

I must get away. I must . . . then I halted again.

Where had she gone? When Stephen's daughter, Louise, had discovered that she was neither white nor black, she had taken her own life! Would Chloe . . . ?

I started running madly down the hall. I must find her. A door opened ahead of me. A hand seized my arm. Her uncle.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "What . . . ?"

Babbling almost incoherently I told him. I could feel his fingers tighten.

"You can't go out like that, barefoot," he said. "With your fever, you'll be dead by morning." He ran down the hall with me, fumbled in the darkness and opened a cupboard. "Here, put these on." He handed me trousers, boots, a coat. Hands shaking, I put them on. Somehow I realized that he had known, that that was what he had meant when he said, "Sometimes we learn too late."

Then I was pounding down the stairs and he was calling after me, "Get the field hands up. I'll join you there. We'll find her if . . ."

Fog wreathed blackness outside. Silence except for the moisture dripping from the lush vegetation, the sucking sound of the sodden ground under my boot soles. The night air was cold on my sweat damp body. My throat was dry, parched. I stumbled into the narrow path, ran down it. The field hands. Would Chloe be in their quarters or would they know where she had fled to? Blood calling to dark blood. Had they sensed the kinship? Was that why their chant had affected her so strangely?

In the darkness, the darker shapes of their crude huts loomed up before me. There was something gripped in my hand, something Duquesne had thrust toward me with the clothes. A stick? No, a heavily loaded whip. Like a madman I beat on doors, windows with it.

"Up!" I yelled. "Get up! Get up!"

Faint sounds inside the huts, doors opening cautiously, glow of candles hastily lit. White rimmed eyes peered out at me, then there was a low moan.

"*Bwana!*" murmured many voices. "*Bwana makuba!*"

Bwana makuba? That was African, the Swahili dialect. It meant Master, Great Master. I looked down and then it seemed as if a skeleton hand had clutched my heart, crushed it in a bony grip. I was wearing the jackboots, the long skirted coat that the spectral shape of my ancestor had worn in the graveyard earlier that evening! His blood in my veins, his whip in my hand, his clothes on my back, his name my name, I was he reborn!

THERE was a faint hissing sound from the Negroes. A sound no longer of superstitious dread, but of primitive and abysmal hate. A John Bartlett had made them slaves. A John Bartlett stood before them now.

My muscles were jerking uncontrollably. My breath held till it seared my lungs. Slowly I started to back away from those glaring eyes. Then I turned and ran.

I did not know where I was fleeing. I only knew I had to get away. The night reeled past me. John Bartlett, dead three hundred years. John Bartlett, about to die. Hate that had lived for centuries. The cry of vengeance from the grave. My brain was seething in my skull. All feeling of being, all consciousness of personality streamed out with my sobbing breath.

I stumbled over something square and hard, sank to one knee. Then a shrill, maniacal laugh bubbled from my lips. I was back in the cemetery! I was back at the grave of my ancestor, back at the tombstone that bore my name!

I knelt there in the clammy clay, the charnel odor of death and decay in my

nostrils, my whole body shaking with mad, hopeless merriment. The mist swirled around me, enveloping me in ghostly coils. It seemed to grow thicker, then a figure materialized out of it. Chloe. The lunatic laughter died on my lips. I stared at her.

She was still clad only in her sheer nightdress. The dampness made it cling to the swelling curves of her body. Her dark hair was disheveled, her eyes glowing with a wild light and there was a strange smile on her lips. Somehow all the veneer had cracked away. She had slipped back a thousand years. She was completely pagan, animal. Her lips swayed as she moved toward me, extended her arms.

"John," she murmured softly, caressingly. I could not move, but my heart was beginning to thud quicker, my blood to pour hot through my veins. She came closer. I could feel the warmth of her body, the soft pressure of her thinly covered breasts against my chest.

"I . . . I've wanted you for so long," she whispered. "I was willing to wait until after we were married. But now that I know, there'll be no marriage. So, take me now!" Her lithely curving body surged forward against me.

Almost unconsciously my arms went around her, crushing her to me. My lips sought hers, fastened there as if to draw out her very soul. Her hips swayed in, welding themselves to my flesh. Her passionate abandon blotted out all else for me. There was only the yielding firmness of her body, her desire whipping mine on to animal excesses. I bent her backwards . . . then froze that way, soul shaking terror congealing the blood in my veins.

Under the sound of her hoarse panting I could hear the soft jangling of heavy chains, of slave chains! I lifted my head, looked wildly around. Black, shackle-yoked figures surrounded us. Hate-filled eyes

glared at me. Already there was a loop in the chain that linked the black shapes together and it was starting to tighten!

With a hoarse scream I tried to flee, but could not. Chloe was holding me! She twisted her legs about mine, clamped my arms to my side and in her eyes was hate as black as that in the eyes of the negroes. Good God! *She was one of them!* Their vengeance was hers! She had come to this place of death to seduce me with her body, hold me till they could exact the same blood expiation from me as was exacted from my ancestor who had enslaved them!

With a cry of triumph, Chloe bent her head. The heavy loop of chain brushed harmlessly over her dark hair, coiled around my neck. And still she held me! She wanted to hold my body close while it writhed in agony, feel my hot blood spurt over her. The cold links tightened, dug into my straining flesh. I could no longer breathe. My mouth gaped open, my eyes bulged. Vaguely I could make out a huge shape that looked like Stephen, another figure near him in a broad brimmed black hat. The first John Bartlett waiting for me to join him?

Blood welled up in my mouth. I could feel my windpipe giving, my lungs beating like wings of fire then . . .

"Stop!" screamed a voice. I could not see her, but dimly I knew it was Mammy Mallie. "You fool, Stephen. It's not his fault that Louise is dead." She waddled forward out of the darkness, "it's *his!*" and her finger stabbed at the lean figure in the broad brimmed black hat. "Walter Duquesne!"

"Damn you!" he snarled. "I'll . . ."

"He was Louise's father, not you!" Mammy went on inexorably. "It was his white blood that made her take her own life! He is her murderer!"

The sound that came from Stephen's throat was more animal than human. There was a jerk that pulled me off my feet, then the chain loosened around my

neck and the air I gulped seemed to sear my lungs. It sickened me, made the world reel, but even as I fell forward I saw Stephen, eyes blazing, raise a length of chain like a ponderous flail and bring it down on Duquesne's head. I heard his skull crush like an eggshell, then darkness overwhelmed me.

COOL hands on my forehead, the murmur of soft voices. Slowly I opened my eyes. I was lying in bed. I blinked, looked around. With the sunlight streaming in the windows I hardly recognized my room in the Duquesne house. Standing next to the bed were Chloe and Mammy Mallie. They both looked careworn, exhausted. I blinked again, dazedly.

"What . . . ?"

"You had a bad touch of swamp fever," said Chloe hesitantly. "We brought you in here from the cemetery and . . ."

The look of horror on my face stopped her. I remembered now. The cemetery. She holding me while . . . Mammy Mallie pushed her aside, glowering down at me.

"You pore white trash," she raged, "how dare you even think mah Chloe got black blood in her? This yere's what make her do it," and she handed me a small box with a white powder in it.

"Do what?" I asked dully.

"Act so crazy. Her uncle he put that in the wine he give her."

I looked at the lettering on the box. Nembutal, it said. My pulses leaped.

"Nembutal. I remember," I said excitedly. "It's a new drug they're just experimenting with. It slows up the heart action. That would make the venous blood collect in the capillaries, especially in the extremities like the finger tips. It would turn them and most of the body darker. That was what . . . Oh, darling, can you forgive me for believing . . ."

"I believed it also," she said quietly. "Uncle Walter wanted me to. When I

ran out of my room, he was waiting for me. He took me into his room and talked to me. I was still there when you came after me and he gave you those clothes, sent you down to the field hands' quarters. I felt queer and somehow everything he said sounded reasonable."

I nodded. "That's another action of nembatal. It makes the subject very suggestible, easy to influence. But you mean to say your uncle was behind all this?"

"Yes," she answered. "With Mammy's help I pieced the whole thing together. When she was young and attractive, Uncle Walter forced her to become his mistress. When she discovered she was about to have a child, she married Stephen. Stephen thought the child was his and later, when the child, Louise, discovered she was part white and committed suicide, Stephen became a little touched. Then Uncle Walter heard we were coming down here. Counting on the fact that if you were of New England stock, you'd have seafaring folk among your ancestors, he told Stephen that completely fabricated story about how your great-grandfather had brought his people over from Africa. Stephen believed him, believed it was your fictitious ancestor's blood that had cropped out in Louise, and that therefore you, in a sense, were responsible for her death."

"And what Stephen believed, he could make the more ignorant field hands believe, eh?" I exclaimed. "Then the tomb-

stone, the scene at the cemetery were all arranged for my benefit?"

"Yes. I didn't see it. I went to the field hands' quarters when I got out of the car."

"I think I understand everything now," I said, "except why he should do it."

"I've been looking at the account books and I know the explanation for that too," said Chloe. "The estate here is mine. He was just running it for me. He used to send accountings to me of the cotton he sold on the open market, but actually he was selling more than half the crop to a textile mill near here and pocketing the money. If I married you, you would probably discover his deception. But if you thought I was partly black, if you were frightened away . . ."

"I see." I said meditatively. Then a thought struck me. "What about Stephen?"

Mammy Mallie's dark face twitched. "He kill Massa Duquesne. He don' wanta rot in jail. He rather die his own way. He went off into the swamp, and he never comin' back." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Now I'se all alone. Got no chick nor child left."

I was holding Chloe close to me, but I disengaged one hand long enough to grasp Mammy Mallie's gnarled fingers.

"You have us, Mammy Mallie," I said softly. "Wherever we go, you'll go. And as to a child . . ." I looked at Chloe. She flushed and snuggled closer to me.



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by
JULIUS
LONG

It was the insanely impossible plan hatched out of a mad genius' thirst for revenge—but the gods must have applauded when it resulted in a train-wreck—on the high seas!

THE four men groped cautiously through the fog, guided only by the faint lights of the yacht which lay alongside the pier. From time to time they stumbled as their shoes caught in railroad tracks set in the planking.

"As if we didn't have enough trouble!" muttered Benson, a frail little man who trailed behind the others. "A two-hundred-thousand-dollar train wreck, all the newspapers and politicians on our necks, and now we have to waste time with a lunatic!"

Denmead, whose stocky figure led the group, snarled impatiently:

"Maybe you think I like it! Enden may be a lunatic, but he also happens to

be an important stockholder that we can't afford to antagonize at this time. So stop your whining!"

Benson continued to mutter, but Forsythe and Coleman, who trudged ahead of him, remained silent. Directors in the railroad line of which Denmead was president, they were uneasy. The recent catastrophe, with its attendant publicity, had made them jittery, and they were suspicious of the multi-millionaire eccentric's motive for asking them to come aboard his yacht.

Resignedly the four men approached the yacht, started as a figure stirred in the shadows.

"Mr. Denmead and party?" a voice

asked. The tones were soft and low.

Denmead, unaccustomed to answering questions, demanded tersely:

"Are you the captain of the *Sibyl*?"

The man's smile was barely perceptible in the fog.

"No, sir. I am Steward Roberts."

Satisfied as to the identity of the four men, he trained a hand flash on the gangplank. Denmead ascended, and, like sheep, the others followed. As they reached the deck, Benson halted fearfully, timidly asked:

"Enden doesn't mean to leave the pier, does he?"

"Of course not!" Denmead cut him short. "I give him credit for having more brains than to sail in this fog!" He turned to the steward. "Where's Enden?"

"Below, sir. Please follow me."

The steward led the four men to a companionway to starboard. There he halted.

"You will find Mr. Enden below, sir."

Denmead peered down the dimly lighted companionway and shot an uneasy glance at the steward. Then he boldly descended, and the others followed. At the foot of the steps they stopped short in astonishment.

They stood on a railroad platform. Beside the platform was a Pullman car. It was Enden's private car, the *Sibyl*. Like the yacht, it was named after his wife.

AWED by the incongruity of an eighty-ton Pullman car within the hull of a yacht, the four men regarded it dumbly. As the platform was level with the car's floor and flush with its side, it was impossible to tell whether it rested on its trucks or had been blocked up. Whatever the case, the spectacle was sufficiently fantastic to appall these men. It was Denmead who expressed their thoughts.

"Who but Enden," he asked, "could be responsible for this? I've always thought

him mad! Now I'm sure he's crazy!"

"Good evening, gentlemen."

The four men whirled. Enden approached them from the car's entrance. They immediately noticed a change in both his appearance and his manner.

A powerful man, well over six feet and proportionately broad of shoulder, he had never possessed the demeanor of a big man. A child-like dreaminess in his eyes had betrayed an indifference to actuality that others had been quick to take advantage of. That dreaminess was gone from his eyes now. It had been replaced by a colorless stare that was hard and unyielding. As Enden came close, even Denmead made a movement that was very close to a wince. Certain his remark had been overheard, he said quickly:

"A most unusual thing you have here! But, as I was just saying, it's beyond me. What is the idea, anyway?"

Enden's brittle stare did not alter.

"If you will come aboard, I will try to satisfy your curiosity."

Turning on his heel, he walked to the car's entrance. His guests hesitated, then followed. Enden led them into a Pullman drawing room.

Their gaze was arrested by an oil portrait hung in the blank center section of one wall. Its subject was Enden's wife. It was impossible for anyone immediately to remove his gaze from the blonde beauty of Sibyl Enden. Every stroke of the painter's brush had caught the lucid simplicity of her soul, testified to the artist's keen appreciation of her charm.

"Is Mrs. Enden aboard?" Coleman asked hopefully.

Enden did not regard him as he answered: "No."

Drawing their eyes reluctantly from the portrait, the men noticed another detail of the car's interior. The thick panes of glass in the windows were translucent, but not transparent. It was impossible to

see out. The thick glass panes mocked them.

Denmead turned concernedly, addressed Enden.

"What's the idea of the thick—"

His words were shaken back into his throat by a violent jerk of the car. The others maintained their balance with difficulty, listened to the clatter of couplings.

"What—what happened?" demanded Benson.

"The car's been coupled!" Forsythe cried excitedly. "That's what's happened!" He turned to Enden. "We're being shunted out of the yacht, aren't we?"

"No," Enden told him. "The car is not leaving the yacht."

But its next movement belied his assurance. Slowly, in rhythmic jerks, it seemed to move aft. Listening closely, the railroad men heard the muffled chugging of a light yard engine, the click of wheels over rail joints. All eyes shifted to the windows, but, as they afforded no vision, the gaze of each director turned to Enden. Denmead, almost angrily, exclaimed:

"Dammit, Enden, you can't fool me! We've been shunted out onto the pier tracks. Listen . . ."

The occupants of the car felt the jarring of wheels over switch frogs. Denmead eyed Enden triumphantly.

"Did you think you could fool an old railroader like me?"

Enden's smile was mocking.

"I had hardly hoped to, but it is gratifying to know that I have. For we are not, as you seem so sure, on a pier track. As a matter of fact, we are not even on rails."

LISTENING to the metallic rumble of the trucks beneath, the four men exchanged incredulous glances.

"The car's wheels rest on rollers," Enden explained. "The rollers are powered by electric motors."

"That's absurd!" Denmead scoffed. "Do you think I don't recognize the sound of wheels passing over rail joints and switch frogs? And I distinctly hear the chugging of a locomotive!"

Enden seemed gratified.

"The clicking that you mistake for that caused by rail joints is caused by slots which appear in the rollers at every thirtieth turn. At more infrequent and less regular intervals, larger slots reproduce the clatter of switch and crossing frogs. As for the chugging of the locomotive, that is merely a sound effect supplied by a phonograph record."

Denmead was still unconvinced.

"There's one way to find out," he said.

He strode from the drawing room and walked to the rear of the car. The others followed. A moment later they returned to the room. They wore an almost comical look of awe.

"Now that you are convinced," said Enden, "that you are aboard my yacht, won't you be seated?"

A little dazedly the four men occupied lounging chairs. Enden pressed a button, and a Negro porter appeared with cigarettes. They were eagerly accepted, and the smokers, settling back in their chairs, tried to feel at ease.

They failed. It was difficult to believe themselves aboard a yacht, absurd to feel that they were passengers in a private car.

"It's amazing!" exclaimed Denmead. "Even now, I'd swear we were moving! I can't understand how I could be so easily fooled."

"I think I can," Coleman mused aloud. "I've been fooled before. Haven't you ever been on a train that seemed to be pulling out of the depot, leaving an idle train on an adjacent track. Suddenly, when the other train is gone, you discover that it's your own train that's left standing in the depot."

"Mr. Coleman understands the psy-

chology perfectly," Enden said. "It was an experience such as he has described that gave me my idea."

"You haven't yet explained," Denmead pointed out, "what your idea is."

Enden seemed astonished.

"I thought you would guess. The fact that I have gone to such lengths to duplicate travel by rail aboard my yacht would indicate that I do not enjoy travel by sea.

"However, yachting was one of my wife's pleasures. The installation of my private car in the *Sibyl* was my challenge to the dilemma. My wife enjoyed her yachting, and, by dwelling in aboard my car, listening to its wheels as they turned at a speed of seventy miles an hour instead of a few paltry knots, I managed to eliminate the appalling ennui of travel by sea."

The wheels of the Pullman slowed, ceased to turn. Enden's guests sat very quietly, trying not to reveal their thoughts. That Enden was an eccentric they had always known. Now their perfectly normal, altogether conventional minds drew inevitably to the same conclusion. They were the guests of a madman.

As the car's wheels began to turn again, they became increasingly distrustful of their host's unpredictable ingenuity. Each wished to end the visit as soon as possible.

"I'm glad you asked us to come here," said Denmead, with a suave air of finality. "I'm grateful for a chance to see your most unusual—"

"Thank you," Enden cut him short, "but I did not invite you here to demonstrate my artificial travel by rail. I had another reason—the Southern Express."

The eyes of the four men widened. The Southern Express was the train that had been wrecked a few days before. Its first section had been disabled in the path of the second, which had traveled only

a few hundred yards behind. Unable to stop, the trailing locomotive had telescoped the observation car, killing nine persons, mutilating one beyond recognition.

"I think I understand your interest," said Denmead. "You've been unduly disturbed by the fuss the newspapers have made. Let me assure you that the accident will not affect the value of your stock. The Southern Express is again running on schedule, and the whole affair will soon blow over. The public will forget."

"YOUR assurance is very comforting," said Enden coolly. "It indicates that you have a clear conscience with respect to the tragedy. The newspapers have placed the blame rather squarely on your shoulders, have they not?"

Denmead shrugged.

"My conscience is clear, and I'm sure the directors feel the same way." He looked to them, and they nodded.

"Then the allegations of the newspapers are untrue? I mean the charge that the first section of the Southern Express was disabled because its locomotive was obsolete and taxed beyond its limit. And the charge that the road's safety equipment is so inadequate that it is not safe to run trains in two sections. It was pointed out that there are many places on the line where the visibility is so bad that if anything happened to the leading section, the trailing section could not possibly stop."

Denmead squirmed uncomfortably.

"Look here, Enden, we're among ourselves, and there's no use beating around the bush. As president and directors of the road, it's our duty to protect our stockholders. They come first. We couldn't pay dividends if we threw away a lot of money on new-fangled equipment."

"Then," said Enden, a trifle pale, "the charges of the press are true?"

Denmead shrugged.

"Our consciences are clear. We've paid off every claim. No one has any legal cause of action against us."

"One of the victims was unidentified," Enden pointed out. "A woman, the newspapers said, though she was so horribly mangled that one physician refused to commit himself. What about her?"

Denmead threw up his hands.

"We've done everything in our power to identify her, but there hasn't been a clue. Nobody has reported a missing person. We'll probably never know who she was."

"On the contrary," said Enden, "you will."

Denmead arched his brows.

"You mean you—you—"

"Yes," said Enden steadily, "she was my wife."

The four men sat frozen. Denmead uttered a strangled exclamation, managed to ask:

"But—but are you sure?"

"There can be no doubt," Enden answered hollowly. "I bade her goodbye at the station, saw her enter the observation car that was telescoped a half-hour later."

The four men sat wordless. There was nothing they could say. Too much talking had been done already. Slowly, irresistibly, their eyes were drawn to the portrait of Sibyl Enden. An unutterable feeling of abject, self-revulsion pervaded to the marrow of their bones, made them shrink within their clothes. But this emotion gave way to one of increasing apprehension as they felt Enden's cold eyes upon them. A suspicion, a fearful foreboding, found a foothold on their conscience-stricken minds.

The car's wheels turned at a high speed now, creating a metallic rumble punctuated by clicks that might have

been made by rail joints and switch frogs. The continuous motion of the wheels combined with the swaying and bumping of the car, had dinned so persistently into the consciousness of the four men that they could no longer shake off the feeling that they rode upon rails.

Benson, unable to suppress his fears, jumped to his feet, cried hysterically: "We're no longer in the yacht! We're—"

"Nonsense!" Denmead cut him off. Trying to reassure himself as much as the others, he commented: "I can be fooled once, but not twice. We're still in the yacht beside the pier."

"No," said Enden casually, "we are not."

The four men started, drilled him with their eyes.

"Where—where are we, then?"

"The *Sibyl* is moving out into the bay."

Denmead leaped to his feet.

"What! In this fog? You mad fool! We might be rammed! I demand that you order the captain to put back at once!"

ENDEN laughed in his face.

"It is you who talk of safety now!"

Denmead tried to speak calmly.

"Where are we bound for? Why are we—"

A deafening clatter interrupted him. It was a familiar clatter, the "thwack" made by the crack of the air as two speeding trains meet and pass on parallel tracks. It continued many seconds, then ended as suddenly as it had begun. Only the steady rumble of the Pullman's trucks remained.

Enden asked mockingly:

"The sound effects are realistic, don't you think?"

No one answered. Each wondered if it was possible to duplicate that familiar clatter so realistically. Coleman suddenly exclaimed:

"We can't be afloat! I *know* we can't! I get sea-sick the minute a boat leaves the pier. I *always* do!"

"I consider that a compliment to my ingenuity," Enden told him. "I have often wondered if my artificial train ride would fool a poor sailor."

But Coleman, now grown pale, was insistent.

"I tell you, Denmead, we *can't* be at sea! I *know*!"

For the first time in his life, the railroad president looked at the director as if he respected his opinion.

"We can very soon find out," he said, and he walked across the room. But the drawing room door refused to yield. Denmead twisted its knob, shook it. The door did not budge. It was locked.

The others stared helplessly as Denmead, his face red from the exertion, turned and faced them.

"Try the other door, you fools!"

They obeyed. It required only a moment to discover that the other door, too, was locked. All eyes were focused on Enden. Denmead hoarsely demanded:

"Dammit, Enden, what's your game? Why are these doors locked?"

"Because," Enden told him, with a cold stare, "I want to watch four guilty consciences at close quarters."

Denmead returned his stare a moment, then had an idea. Moving to a window, he attempted to lift it.

"It's no use trying that," said Enden.

"The windows are fixed in place."

Ignoring him, Denmead lifted with all his middle-aged might. The window stayed fast. The directors tried the other windows, finally gave up.

Benson began to whimper.

"I told you we shouldn't have come here! We'll all be—"

Denmead snarled him down.

"Shut up, you fool! That's what Enden wants to see us do. He wants us to grovel." He turned, addressed Enden with his old-time executive manner. "If you don't unlock these doors and let us out of this car, we'll break them down!"

"In that case," said Enden coolly, "you will find that you have underestimated the thickness of their steel panels."

DENMEAD'S reaction was to seize a chair. But it was immovable. Trying one piece of furniture after another, the men discovered that everything in the room had been securely fastened. There was no object that might be used to batter the solid doors or the thick panes of glass in the windows.

Benson grasped at a straw. He pressed the button that had brought the porter.

"There is no porter on *this* car," Enden told him. "We are quite alone."

Benson continued hopefully to press the button, but there was no response. At last he gave up, turned helplessly to the others. They listened to the long blast of a whistle up ahead.



"You gentlemen are being absurd," Enden told them. "I can't help feeling flattered that you have been so thoroughly deceived, but I'm sorry to find you so distrustful. Upon my word of honor, we are still aboard my yacht. By this time, we must be well out into the bay."

A remote clatter seemed to mock his statement. The clatter drew rapidly closer, and the car jarred as both trucks, in quick succession, rattled over two distinct sets of crossing frogs.

"The B & O tracks!" Coleman exclaimed. "It's the only double-track cross-over within miles! That's what the whistle signaled for!"

The others said nothing. They listened to the long blast of another whistle, which seemed to sound from farther away and from behind.

"See!" Coleman cried, "there's another train following us! It's whistled for the cross-over!"

Denmead uttered an exclamation, reached for his watch. He studied it carefully, then, very pale, faced Enden.

"I understand now," he said, with a voice unlike his own. "You've had this car coupled to the Southern Express!"

Instantly the others consulted their own watches, saw that the time checked perfectly. Aghast, they realized the significance of the whistle that had sounded at the rear. They were coupled to the first section; the second section of the Southern Express followed behind!

Looking into the four frightened faces, Enden laughed.

"Your imagination is running away with you," he said. "Why would I couple this car to the Southern Express?"

"The devil only knows!" said Denmead.

But the others were beginning to guess. Convinced that they were trapped in a speeding car by a madman bent on a terrible revenge, they slowly grasped the outline of a diabolical plot.

"Don't you see what he's going to do?" Coleman demanded of Denmead. "He's going to make us die the same death his wife died! Something's going to happen to the train, and it will stop in front of the second section!"

Struggling to control his voice, the executive turned to Enden.

"Tell us the truth! Why have you locked us in this car?"

Enden laughed.

"You refuse to believe the truth! Why should I waste my breath telling you again that you are in a yacht at sea where I can watch your wormy, shriveled consciences writhe in a hell of their own making?"

THE four men stared silently. They were aware that the rumble of the car's trucks had lessened. It seemed that the train had slowed, and a moment later they understood why. A hollow sound reached their ears, endured for several seconds. Then the rumble of the trucks sounded as before, and it seemed the train had picked up speed again.

"Spring Creek Trestle!" Forsythe breathed.

Familiar with the road and all its landmarks, the four men were now convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt. Enden had lied to them, trapped them in this car to meet a horrible death. Why, that had been its very purpose in the yacht! What fools they had been to believe his cock-and-bull story in explanation of its installation there!

Exchanging expressive glances, the men reached a common understanding. It was necessary to act at once. They must free themselves from this car, for death might come at any second.

"If you don't unlock the doors," Denmead told Enden firmly, "we'll take the keys from you."

"But I don't have the keys," said Enden, "and you couldn't take them from

me if I did!"

Whether the four middle-aged executives could have overpowered Enden was a matter never to be decided.

Suddenly, without warning, the shock came. The passengers of the car went sprawling as it jerked to a violent halt. Air brakes hissed as its wheels came to a dead stop. Groping dazedly to their feet, its occupants rubbed their bruises. Enden's four guests stared dumbly at one another, overwhelmed by the eerie unreality of the sudden quiet. The quiet ended as a train whistle sounded very close, and drew even closer, as it continued to blast frantically.

The passengers in the doomed car reacted variously. Benson knelt to his knees and commenced to pray. Forsythe rushed to a window, tried to break its glass with his fists, which he beat to pulp. Denmead hurled his stocky figure against one of the steel doors, battered it again

and again with futile effort.

The plight of Coleman was most pathetic. He became sea-sick. Sea-sick believing that he was about to die in a train wreck!

Enden alone remained calm.

His laughter sounded above the blast of the locomotive whistle and the screech of sliding wheels on steel. But it was drowned in the rending crash of crumbling metal as a terrific impact split the car wide open, ground its passengers into meat.

Enden, who lay a mangled mass in the wreckage, regained consciousness for a split-second of confused, uncomprehending wonder, remembered dazedly the screech of wheels and the whistle's blast, then lapsed into oblivion sharing the delusion of his victims.

The gods of irony must have chuckled.

The yacht, *Sibyl*, had been rammed in the fog.



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I was certain at that moment that the rotting eyes of the ghastly severed head on the table turned over in their



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I AM THE BEAST!

CHAPTER ONE

Voice Of Horror

I CANNOT help it if I am big and misshapen and look more like some hulking grizzly than a man. Neither am I to blame if I have a menacing, almost brute-like, expression. Part of this is due to a facial wound from the war, part to the terrible experiences I had then that for a time shattered my nervous system. Only by the skill of the brilliant psychologist,

I can not help being huge and misshapen. But perhaps I could have withstood the thing which turned me into a murderous beast—the thing came to me in the guise of a beautiful woman with white, naked arms outstretched. . .



by GENE GARY

A Mystery-Terror Novelette of Many
Eerie Thrills



Dr. Hansen, was I restored to normal. Patiently, skilfully, with infinite kindness, he took my wrecked personality—like so much broken clay in his hands—and by a long course of psychological suggestion remoulded it to its former outlines, Dr. Han-

sen could heal my nerves, but he could not restore my appearance. Ominous and brutal I will always look—with tremendous physical strength, given me as by nature's caprice to compensate me for my appearance. My friends say I have the kindest heart in the world, and Amy says I have a nature as innocent and easily led as a child's. But Amy loves me—and love is sometimes blind. She had never guessed

at the monstrous and hellish appetites lurking within me—no one had—until that horrible night

I had come down to the Sheridan country place for a house-party. I knew nothing about the place except that it had belonged to Caroline Sheridan's uncle, that it stood in a tract of wild and virgin woodland, and had come to her, along with the rest of her huge inheritance, at her uncle's death. I had heard, of course, of the legend of the monster among the Sheridans, but I had dismissed it with a laugh as one does such old wives' tales and chimney-corner spinnings—and I had never connected it with this house.

I got off the train at a remote little station in deep woodland about seven o'clock at night. The moon was very bright, and the crowding tangled mass of trees, like an impenetrable wall, ringed the little station round. In the fantastic splotches of shadow they threw over the platform I suddenly recognized a familiar angular face looking anxiously at me.

I got quite a start. It was Dr. Hansen, the very psychologist who had cured me years ago.

"You!" I exclaimed.

"Bruce Trent!" he ejaculated in the same surprise, coming rapidly toward me and extending his hand. "What are you doing here?"

We stared at each other. In the years since I had seen Dr. Hansen he seemed to have grown seedier, and his elderly face was shriveled closer around the angular jutting bones of his face. His face was flushed and stretched like parchment.

"I was invited to the house-party," I said. "Are you a guest here too?"

He blinked through his rimless spectacles in surprise. "My dear boy," he said, "I am the brother of the bridegroom!"

THEN it flashed on me. My hostess, Caroline Sheridan, had recently married, and though I had received a wedding

announcement, the name Ralph Hansen on it had meant nothing to me—Hansen was too common a name for me to connect it with my friend the doctor.

"Your brother is the husband of Caroline Sheridan!" I exclaimed. "Well, I'll be glad to meet him!"

"Hm," he said. He looked at me in uncertainty. I knew he was thinking about the fact that Caroline Sheridan and I had once been in love—but that was long ago, practically forgotten by us both, and now every ounce of my feeling of that sort was centered on her good friend, Amy Deane, to whom I was engaged.

I laughed. "Are you thinking about that boy-and-girl affair Caroline and I had years ago?"

"No," he said. "That's not it." He was not looking at me, he was looking at the woods, with a peculiar expression on his face, almost uneasiness. The wall of woodland, pressing so close about us, seemed to be listening—listening, splotched leprouously black and white by the moon, with misshapen tendrils of fog wandering through it like witches' fingers.

It was lonely in that station. I felt it suddenly, like a spot of chill.

The doctor's angular face looked at me sharply. "I was thinking about the effect of this place upon you."

"Upon me!"

"Yes. There's something about this place—something queer. I can't understand it—can't lay my finger on it. I've been here several days—it's affected everyone here."

I glanced at him. It was something about his tone. He was not scoffing. He seemed to gauge my huge shoulders, my scarred and menacing expression, without doing so directly. "Do you know why I came down to the station?" he said abruptly. "It was—because I was thinking of going away."

"Going away!"

"Yes." He broke off, looking again at

the wood. At that moment I saw beads of sweat on his neck. "You've heard the story, of course," he said, "of the *beast* in the Sheridan family—the monstrosity that was born here—and never seen, concealed by the old uncle who left Caroline her fortune."

"But that's nonsense!" I said.

The beads of sweat on his neck, on the neck of this penetrating man of science, were affecting me more than the peculiar atmosphere of the wood, which was beginning to seep into us in a chilling, indefinable way.

His eyes veered to me again. "I was thinking of the effect on you," he said, "of the combination of this atmosphere and your old feeling for Caroline."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed.

Just then there was the sound of rapid feet and Joyce Sheridan, Caroline's sister, came running across the platform toward us.

"Look," muttered Dr. Hansen in a quick undertone, "I spoke of the effects of the atmosphere—look at her and judge for yourself."

Joyce ran directly up to me. Her face was flushed; she was hatless; in her light summer dress, running to us this way out of the darkness, she looked like some touseled nymph disgorged from the mysterious wood.

"Here you are!" she exclaimed. "Amy couldn't come to meet you—I ran all the way—I was so afraid I'd miss you!"

"You ran from the house?"

"Yes—through the woods."

She took my hand with a sparkling smile. She was a lovely girl, fully as lovely as her sister; she and Caroline were the only two of the Sheridan family remaining. There was absolutely nothing the matter with her that I could see. She was the picture of flushed, radiant welcome.

"The doctor has been telling me bogey stories," I laughed. I looked at the doctor in smiling challenge. His face had not re-

laxed from its compressed and narrow look.

"You should not have run alone through the woods," he said sharply. "Come, I have the car to drive us back."

WE WALKED to a town car behind the station and the chauffeur opened the tonneau, Joyce and I talking lightly. The doctor, as though out of sympathy with our mood, got in front with the chauffeur. We drove down a narrow winding road, overhung with trees; wisps of fog parted before the car as if reluctant to let us pass. Joyce and I talked gaily of a hundred things; she told me what fun they had had putting the old house to rights. After awhile she paused and became serious.

"Do you know the real purpose of the house-party?" she asked.

"No."

"To kill once for all that legend about the Beast!" she burst out intensely. "The famous Beast of the Sheridans! The monstrosity that uncle was supposed to have kept here—that was supposed to have been his link with the powers of evil! The beast that was so misshapen and ugly and—" She glanced at me and stopped. "You know they do say," she went on in a lighter tone, "that uncle delved into sorcery and had a compact with the Devil. And that that accounted for his fortune, and that the Beast was born into the family as a tangible reminder to him of his compact! And that his compact was that the rest of his descendants should die!"

She laughed merrily. How refreshing it sounded, that healthy, girlish laughter! How gruesome, in the light of what followed!

"The beast must be no bigger than a cricket," she said, "because we've looked in every cranny and cupboard, and can't find him!"

I laughed with her. "And you feel no effects of the atmosphere?"

"Atmosphere!" she exclaimed. She took a deep breath, raising one hand as if to help expand her lungs. "It's gorgeous!"

As I chuckled, I happened to glance at her hand. The laughing, railing girl, with her thumb between her fingers, was making the sign of the Evil One!

Something froze in me.

"Joyce!" I exclaimed.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Nothing will ever strike me with such sudden horror as what happened then. She was still looking at me, her face full of carefree laughter, and suddenly, before my very eyes, her face was transformed into a mask of bestiality. The eyes narrowed in a leer that was indescribable; her lips flattened, drawing back from her teeth, a drool of fine spittle leaked from the corners. From those twisted lips issued a horrible sound. It resembled that horrible gurgle a medium makes in the midst of a trance. It rose, deepened, into a voice. It was not her voice—it seemed a voice no human being could utter—rolling and guttural, like a voice from the abyss of sin.

"I am the Beast," it said. "I speak to you, Bruce Trent. I will project my soul into your body, exactly as at this moment I project my soul into the body of this girl. In your body, Bruce Trent, I shall kill the descendants of the house of Sheridan, as was the compact with Satan."

I sat riveted, with the sweat starting on me and my body like a block of ice. I could not move. I could not take my eyes from the horrible, convulsed face of the girl before me. Dimly I sensed a jolt—the car stopping—Dr. Hansen and the chauffeur looking horror-stricken from in front. For me they did not exist. Nothing existed but those writhing, foaming lips and that demoniac voice.

It stopped.

Then I saw a spasm convulse Joyce. Like one in agony she clutched at her breast, tore the flimsy fabric of her sum-

mer dress free from her slim shoulders. Her lips were bubbling; I could see only her eye-whites. Her breasts came into view, her panting, throbbing white stomach; she continued in a rending paroxysm to tear off her clothes, with hands clawing maniacally as if to free herself from something internal and terrible.

Joyce was a beautiful woman. Totally nude she swayed before me, her face like a tortured mask.

"The Beast!" she cried—in her own voice, but such a voice of agony and sheer horror I have never heard. Then with a scream like a maniac she plunged out the car door into the woods.

I plunged after her. I was shouting. I stumbled. I dashed through the massive, moss-hung trees. Her nude form flitted ahead, revealed in stark ivory by the moonlight one moment, steeped in shadow the next. She was still screaming. The creepers and boughs seemed to reach out to engulf her.

Then I lost her. I was plunging headlong through a glade. Something sudden and inexplicable happened to me—as though I had been cut off in mid-air—as though I had run into an invisible wire. The very breath leaped out of my throat; I whirled into blackness. But even as I fell, there seemed to appear before me a face—lewd and unutterable as a Congo witch-mask. Again I heard that voice—the voice I had heard in the car—but not in my ears, in the very fastness of my soul.

"I am the Beast. Now I enter into your spirit, Bruce Trent, and you *shall do my will.*"

I fell face forward like a blind man.

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's Kiss

I CAME to my senses as though from a terrible nightmare. My head was throbbing and I felt nausea deep within me. A

hand was shaking my shoulder. A voice was crying in my ear. "Are you all right? Are you all right, sir?"

It was the chauffeur. His face, panting, wide-eyed, was peering into mine.

"Yes—yes," I muttered, and struggled erect. I was in a glade—the same glade, I recognized, in which I had lost Joyce, though the blobs of moonlight and shadow seemed to have changed. At my feet, tangled with moss, was a twisted tree-root that made the very outline of the face I had seen . . . my senses seemed confused.

The chauffeur called behind him: "Here he is! I have found him, sir!"

Out of the blackness, with a crashing of branches, ran Dr. Hansen.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "You, at least! Where is Joyce—did you find her?"

"No," I muttered, gazing into his horror-stricken eyes. For some reason I dropped my own. I felt somehow different. There was a peculiar desire in me not to discuss with him anything that had happened. It was as a hand laid on my soul, prohibiting me.

"My God, Bruce, what happened to you?" he cried.

"I must have fallen over this tree-root and been knocked unconscious," I said.

I saw him staring at my hand. It looked unnaturally dark. Purely reflexively I put it in my pocket.

"Are you hurt?"

"I must have cut myself as I fell."

"We must get back," he insisted. "If she hasn't run to the house, we've got to get the others to help search."

We went back to the car. Inside I glanced at my watch. I stared at it in amazement, held it to my ear, glanced at the doctor. "What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

I felt a shock all through me. Nine-thirty! It was shortly after seven when we left the station. "Good God—how long did you search for me?" I exclaimed.

"Upwards of an hour."

My lips felt dry. *Upwards of an hour*—I had been lying in that glade. It came to me with a sick sense, stabbing through the unnatural calm that held me, as if for the first time I was coming awake. In that hour—what had happened to me? What was this blood on my hand?

The great house, rambling and ablaze with light, suddenly flashed before us.

A group of people were on the verandah. They thronged about us. There was a babble of incoherent talk and salutations.

"Bruce Trent!"

"Doctor! Have you seen Caroline?"

"Caroline? No."

I recognized Frank Jameson; the Blairs; Lyle Scott and his wife; Grey Harning. I saw neither Caroline, my hostess, nor Amy, my fiancée. I saw several people who did not know me, make a start of involuntary horror which, at sight of me, they could not suppress.

"Is Joyce here?" demanded the doctor.

"Here? No—she went to meet Bruce at the station."

"Don't tell me she's gone, too!" exclaimed Frank Jameson.

"Too!" repeated the doctor. "Who else is missing?"

"Caroline!"

The name came from several at once. In the expression of their faces, I would see this was the reason for their uneasy gathering. "She's been missing for the last hour! No one seems to know where she's gone!"

"Where's Amy?" I demanded.

"She and Ralph Hansen are making another search of the attic. It's ridiculous, because we've ransacked it once already!"

"SEE here, this is serious," said Grey Harning. "You say Joyce is gone, too?"

"Yes," said Dr. Hansen. "She—she ran from the car," he said, obviously in some uncertainty how to put it. "We looked for

her everywhere, but couldn't find her. We thought she had come here."

"Ran from the car!" exclaimed Frank. "Why? Wasn't she with you?"

I spoke up. "She took a short cut toward the servants' lodge because she thought she saw Caroline."

The doctor looked at me thunderstruck. "Why, Bruce, she did not! What are you saying?"

I knew it was a lie as soon as I opened my mouth. They all stared at me. With my sweating, contorted face, my disheveled hair, my clothes covered with moss and brambles, I made a strange appearance.

"What's the matter, Bruce, are you hurt?"

"You don't look well!"

"He's had a nasty fall," said the doctor.

"Yes," I mumbled, "if you'll excuse me—"

"Show Mr. Trent to his room," said Frank to the butler.

"Yes, sir." The butler took me sympathetically by the shoulder and led me into the house and upstairs to the room that had been appointed for me.

I got rid of him as soon as I could. I wanted to be alone. Particularly, above everything else, I did not want to see Amy. The thought of her sweet face, her innocent and trusting eyes, filled me with a strange aversion.

Was it because I did not want her to see the unnerved confusion I was in? I could not take time to analyze my thoughts. Too many things were pressing on me. I sat down on the bed and cautiously, like a thief examining something he has stolen, examined my hand.

It was covered with blood—palm and back, even between the fingers—matted and clotted with blood stuck with wisps of moss.

I felt myself swallowing convulsively. I got up, felt myself over, examining my face in the mirror. There was no cut on me, not so much as a scratch. I was un-

hurt. Yet I had lain senseless in the glade for upwards of an hour—why? Why?

During that time had something happened to Joyce? My God—was this—was this her blood?

A horrible tumult began in me. Yet, through it all, part of me remained calm, as if unmoved and watchful.

It was that part of me that led me to the washbowl, where I quickly and thoroughly washed my hands. Even as I dried them I came up with a start. Why, in God's name, was I doing these things? Why had I lied, downstairs there? Why had I not wanted to talk to the doctor? Sweat broke out again on me.

I walked swiftly up and down the room.

The Beast! The Beast! Confused impressions crowded upon me—the glade—the guttural voice—that unspeakable face—Joyce's paroxysm. Was it really possible that some horrible being had taken possession of me? Something intangible and utterly non-human, that was using my soul to do its will? I mopped my face; I was trembling with ague. I stopped with a violent gesture. No! This was the Twentieth Century—it was utterly preposterous! I had fallen over the root, I had been stunned, and everything was simply a phantasmagoria of my confused brain.

But how account for the actions of Joyce in the car and the voice she had spoken?

I had *heard* the voice. I had *seen* her face. Those things had happened *before* I was stunned.

I happened to glance into the mirror. My face, with its sinister lowering look, met my eyes, not torn with suffering, but looking at me with a smile.

"She looked like Caroline," I heard myself say.

A sea of horror swept over me as I realized what I had said. Yet even then I saw my own eyes looking back at me, reflecting no anguish, but gleaming with a light of satisfaction.

There was a knock at the door.

WITH a swift movement like a cat, I got softly into bed just when the door opened and a woman in a black silk dress came in. She was carrying a small tray with a glass.

"I'm the housekeeper," she said, smiling. "I brought you a bromide to soothe you."

"There's nothing the matter with me," I muttered in confusion.

She came over and set the tray on the bed-table. With a graceful movement she leaned down to draw over me the light quilt, which I had disarranged.

As she leaned down I saw that if anyone ever had what in medieval days they termed the evil eye, this woman had it.

Her eyes were black, exotic, and long-lashed, with smiling, languorous, yet baleful depths that seemed of themselves to reach out and search to bottom of my soul. I saw too that she was beautiful. Her white face, perfect in every feature, had not one hint of color—no more than there was in her superbly molded arms and shoulders of pale ivory. She wore a dress cut very low, and yet with a suggestion in its snug tailored fit of a uniform, which accentuated the voluptuous curves of her slim body.

"Let me arrange your pillow," she said after a little while.

She gently raised my head, and as she did so I saw, almost completely revealed, her smooth breasts. I was flooded with a subtle and exotic perfume.

A combination of aversion and attraction moved strongly within me.

With another graceful movement she sat down by me on the bed, leaning over me, one hand resting lightly on my knee above the coverlet.

Honeyed, tempting, provocative, was her smile.

"You wish to ask me something," she said.

It was not so much what she said. It was the way she said it. As if we shared,

somehow, some sinister knowledge. With an effort to throw this off I asked:

"How long have you been here?"

"In this house?"

"Yes."

She did not take her eyes from me. They probed me, fondled me, soothed me, yet there was something malevolent deep, deep, within them.

"A good many years," she said.

"Perhaps you can tell me," I said with an affectation of casualness, "something about this monstrosity the legends speak about?"

She looked at me, but did not speak. Instead she bent lower over me, until her face was directly above my own. I could feel the touch of her soft breath on my cheeks.

"Why should I tell you," she breathed, "when you *know!*"

Her red lips were parted, her baleful exotic eyes holding me like a cobra's. For that instant I felt utterly unable to move. Whether it was the shock—the significance of her words—something chilling and malignant in her eyes spread over me like some miasmatic net.

"You must not think of me as your enemy, but as your friend," she said. Her voice fell to a very wisp of sound, a caressing ghost of a whisper. "More than a friend, if you will . . . because I know what happened in that hour—and *I am here to help you.*"

She leaned down and pressed her lips, full, luscious, quivering, to mine.

It was a kiss shot through and throbbing with a dark ecstasy such as I had never known.

Her lithe arms, with a sinuous movement like snakes, moved over my body; her solid breasts crushed against me.

There was the sharp crash of the door opening.

"Bruce!" cried a voice that stabbed me like a knife.

CHAPTER THREE

Prints Of Bloody Hands

I SAW Amy, her golden hair gleaming, one hand to her lovely cheek. Horror, unbelief, shock, struggled in her stricken eyes. "Oh, no! Oh, how could you!" she cried, and turning on her heel, she rushed from the room.

I rose like a drunken man. I ran out after her. She was gone; the dark stairway was deserted. I pulled up in the hall. Something within me told me I did not particularly care. My blood was warm, throbbing with the sensuous exotic charm of the marvelous body that had been in my arms.

A few guests were still on the verandah. I could hear them shouting to others in the distance. A search was going on in the wood. A man crossed from the verandah into the living room and encountered me. He was walking with a quick, nervous step. His brows were knitted, his mouth grim. He stopped at sight of me, his eyes flashing in surprise, shock, and checked aversion.

"You are Bruce Trent?" he asked.

"I am."

"I am Ralph Hansen."

So this was Caroline's husband. I saw at once he did not like me. Not so much my appearance as—well, it might have been the recollection of what I had once been to Caroline. Without offering his hand, he moved close to me, as though to engage me in quiet conversation.

"My brother has told me," he said, "of what happened in the car."

"Of what happened in the car?" I repeated coolly. "What happened in the car?"

He frowned. "I mean when Joyce ran away."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Have they found her yet?"

"No, nor Caroline." He was looking steadily at me. "You were the last to see Joyce alive."

"Alive!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to say she is dead?"

He did not speak immediately. He drew the tip of his tongue across his lips, like a man striving to control himself.

"What happened to you in the woods?" he said. "My brother told me you were gone for an hour."

Violent rage blazed in me.

"What are you accusing me of?" I demanded.

He flushed. He was a handsome man, in an angular, sharp-cut way, and that very handsomeness fanned my anger.

"You are my guest," he said coldly. "I am not accusing you of anything; I am merely asking you what happened to you in the woods."

I raised my shoulders, expanding my great chest with a suck of air and knotting my fists. I raised an impulse to smash this handsome face before me to pulp.

"I was unconscious," I said, "and if you hanker for more explanations, think up your own."

His set face twitched with a sharp effort at control; mastering himself, he said calmly:

"Since you were the last person to see her, you should be out there directing the search. You are the only one who knows where she disappeared."

"I shall," I said, and shoved by him.

I did not pass him gently. I was hoping he would make some move, some trifling answering gesture, that would give me an excuse to let loose my rage upon him.

But apparently he restrained himself. I plunged out through the door, ignoring the people on the verandah, striding on down the stairs into the night.

My feet seemed to go of themselves.

THE moon was riding high, now, gibbous and curved, with one small cloud below it, fantastically red, like a salver of blood beneath a gleaming knife. Below it the wood seemed to hang like a black and

tattered pall, shot through with lances of light and towering shadow shapes. Grisly beards of moss, hanging low from the boughs, touched my face, seeming to move over my eyes and cheeks. I felt water squelch under my feet, warm and evil-smelling; rotting leaves, in layers, rose and lifted beneath me as though composed of sponge rubber. Stumps of water-cypress, thrust up at grotesque angles, looked like squatting dwarfs. Moths flew before me, slow, silent and heavy-winged, their shapes increased eerily by the mysterious underbranching penumbra of light.

Here in the dark unfathomable night, increased by the shifting fog-fingers and the unearthly light of the moon, appetites as old as humankind, lecherous and carnal awoke in me. I moved through the trees quickly, with gleaming eyes, a feeling of inexplicable exultation in my heart, hunched forward like a satyr.

It suddenly came on me that I *seemed to know where I was going*.

This knowledge shocked me like a cold douche; but in the state I was in, of baffled rage, excitement, awakened rioting desire, I did not pay great attention to it; it was only one among the hundred unleashed emotions rioting within me.

I heard voices to my left.

It was that way I was heading. I stopped, checking myself with instinctive caution.

The voices stabbed up suddenly in a scream.

They were repeated, hoarsely, wildly—screams of discovery. I heard other voices foregathering, lights flashing, the crashing of feet.

Without altering my course, I went unerringly to the spot.

A ring of faces surrounded something on the ground. I recognized Frank Jameson, Gray, the Scotts, others of my friends. The women were sobbing; the men, after the first shouts of excitement, were grim and tense-lipped.

"My God!" I heard a voice. "Joyce!"

I pushed my way into the ring. Joyce's body, nude as I had last seen it, lay on its back, the legs and arms flung apart like the petals of some lovely broken flower; like a flower still blooming in the moonlight. Each limb, each delicate modulation of the flesh was flowerlike in its softness—yes, like a flower even to the scarlet blot of blood on the breast for a calyx.

The blood came from her throat, which had been hacked apart until her head was nearly severed from her shoulders. That head, that glorious head, with its glassy eyes that had laughed so glad and carefree into mine. The moon with its mysterious soft luminescence made more vivid her virginal pallor, more scarlet the gruesome star at her throat.

The wound was horribly enlarged, as if it had been seized by the open edges and ripped apart, again, again, by some rending instrument. Or—by hands, of unnatural strength.

I felt the cold saliva trickle down the inner walls of my cheeks.

Yet in spite of the pounding in me, the paralysis of horror, I did not feel surprise. I seemed to know everything about that body, its disposition, how it lay.

Something deep in me groaned, as though to say: "You are lost. There is nothing you can do."

"My God!" I heard Grey Harning ejaculate. "What fiend has done this?"

"The Beast of the Sheridans," someone said in a quivering breath like a sigh.

A vicelike, frozen silence held us all, in that impenetrable, moon-drenched wood. An owl swooping high overhead hooted a soft syllable. It made everyone stare upward, their faces shaken, stricken.

"Caroline!" broke out one voice. "What of Caroline?"

WITH a sudden movement the group was galvanized into action. "Frank!" cried Grey, "you go this way—take Will

with you—search the east woods—I'll phone the police—Lyle and John, you take the woods to the west!" His eyes fell on me. "Bruce, you take the premises around the house!"

"Yes," I nodded. As I passed through the group I saw several, seeing me unexpectedly, shrink from me with involuntary aversion. I ran on heavily toward the house. I did not seem to know where I was going. My head was reeling in chaos. I could not breathe; my brain was ringing like brass. Had I done this? I tore at my throat for air; my eyes went over those blighting tree-tops to the unfathomable sky. My soul seemed to cry out of itself, as if for a second, in tremendous agony, it threw off a horrible weight. God, God help me, I cried, *You* know my heart; I swear I am innocent before *You*!

That second's cry was swallowed up in the impenetrable night.

Confusion engulfed me once more, and something approaching madness. I ran, ran.

I came up suddenly at a wall in the darkness before me. Without knowing it I had blundered to the back of the house. I could see the dark outline of the clipped hedge; I felt along it, turned the corner. Here the wood encroached, sliced with squares of light from the house windows. Half in shadow were the back stairs. I plunged up them without knowing why. It seemed almost as though some force outside myself were telling me what to do—and I had no strength to disobey those commands.

As I ran through the lower rooms I felt the house was deserted. There was no sound. But—yes—my ear caught something. A footfall, distinct, quick—upstairs.

I ran that way. As I came up from the shadow of the stairhead I stopped short.

The housekeeper was before me.

She wore something long, clinging and dark; on her bare feet were the merest wisps of high-heeled, red sandals.

I looked into those malevolent, beautiful eyes. They were black in the semi-darkness, black as the pits of hell, burning with a sultry fire. As she parted her lips in a smile I could see the tip of her red moist tongue between her teeth.

"You have come back," she said.

She moved close to me. The sensuous atmosphere of her presence enveloped me; my nostrils were filled again with that alluring, exotic scent.

"You are tired," she said. "Very tired. You must rest."

Her eyes, languorous, inscrutable behind their long lashes, swept me with a caressing look. I could see the pulsing throb in the white column of her throat.

"Come with me," she said, and taking me by the hand, she drew me down the hall.

My silence was not due to stupefaction. It was due to the hellish, burning desire that reared its bestial head at sight of her. Every movement of her graceful body, moving ahead of me, seemed to suck my very veins with hunger.

She drew me into a darkened room. It seemed the antechamber of a bedroom; it was littered with couches. It rose above me in a vault of darkness; I could see neither the ceiling nor the walls. A light on a branching, ornate candlestick made a nimbus of radiance at one side. There was a smell of richness in it; I could barely see the rich hangings, obscurely in the dark; it breathed an Oriental, incense-like odor, clinging, aphrodisiac, that soothed the senses.

She drew me beside her, sitting on a low lounge. She crossed her knees with a sensuous movement; down the graceful fold that marked her leg I could see her bare foot, in its red slipper, tilted toward me. She still kept her tapering fingers on mine; she transfixed me with a slow smile that revealed the depths of her dark eyes. The touch of her fingers seemed to send jets and barbs of fire up my arm.

"Your brain is twisted like a knot," she said. "Tight, tight. As though someone were drawing the ends to the breaking point."

I passed my hand over my face. "Yes, yes," I muttered.

Again I could feel her breath on my cheek. "Your mind is screaming like a stretched wire. As though one more touch on that wire would shatter it to pieces."

"God, yes," I breathed.

HER voice dropped like honey. "In me you will find solace," she said. "Put your head here." She put her slim fingers around my neck, pressed my head into the warm juncture of her neck and shoulder. "Rest, rest quietly—here you can be at peace."

Though the dark, clinging robe covered her from head to foot, I was sure she wore nothing beneath it. I swung like a straw between the horror of my experiences and the mad intoxication of her nearness. Yet I sensed a touch of horror here, something dread ahead. Tired, maddened as I was, some obscure part of me was fighting against her.

"They will not find you here," she said.

"They!" I jerked up my head. "Who?"

"The other—your friends."

I licked my dry lips, staring at her. What was she saying, what was she telling me, with her evil eyes?

"I know you did it," she said. "I, and I alone. Come, do not be afraid of me. I told you I was your friend—that was here to help you."

She put her hands on my shoulders, holding me at arms' length. The movement swept back the full sleeves of her robe, revealing her bare white arms to the shoulders. Her red lips parted again. I could see them glisten.

"Tell me about it," she said softly. "Did you hack her with a knife?"

I could feel my face tremble with the violence of my emotions.

"Who?" I articulated.

"Joyce," she said. "Joyce, the one you murdered. Did you tear, as is always his sign, the edges of the wound like a star?"

"Whose sign?" I asked hoarsely.

She leaned toward me. The black light seemed to leap out of her eyes.

"Our master," she said. "The Beast. The Beast you saw in the moonlight."

With a gagging movement I tore myself from her, standing upright. "Who are you?" I gasped. "What makes you speak as you do? What do you know of what happened?"

"I know all," she said. Her voice was vibrant, now, her eyes wells of black triumph. "All. I know you followed her from the car and murdered her horribly in the woods—at *his* bidding—*his*, the master. Why should I not know, when I, too, am his creature and do his will?"

She came to me and with a soft movement fitted her body against my own. I could feel her bare arms, from behind, encircling my back and shoulders.

"Why struggle?" she breathed. "It is all over now. It is done."

My mind seemed to be exploding. Again my brain teetered like a spinning bauble between two madnesses—the madness of her and the madness of conviction of the deed I must have done. For a second I felt like shouting out in maniacal laughter, seizing her and drowning myself in her beauty. Then that tiny part of me, that edge still struggling blindly, fought briefly through.

My mouth made cracked sounds. My voice did not seem to obey me. "As God is my witness," I croaked out, "I did not do it!"

She withdrew from me with a supple movement. As she did so, one whole bare leg, from red slipper to symmetrical thigh, was displayed for a second and then disappeared in its folds. She fixed me with her fathomless eyes. A slow smile, mocking, crept over her face.

"You do not think so?" she said. "Look, I will show you."

She stepped to me again, and with a deft movement of her slender hands she opened my shirt. She spread apart the clothes to reveal my bare breast.

On it were prints—prints of blood—small, convulsed hand-prints—of piteous, feminine, delicate hands, tearing in supplication against the strength that had torn the life from them.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pit Of Doom

JOYCE'S! No other—they could be no other! A tortured noise came from me I closed my eyes to try to blot out that damning, implacable evidence. Now I could see those black eyes again, that inscrutable white face, moving before me with the rapid motion of a snake's head.

"What did you do with Caroline?" she asked.

I could not scream. I hung there voiceless, my body quivering like the jarred pendulum of a clock. Again she was close to me. "Peace," she breathed, "it is all over—and now comes your reward."

She put my hands on her rich flesh. Then, moving from me with a lithe movement, she stepped into the shadows and opened a door.

I saw dimly the outlines of a richly caparisoned bed.

Something came out of that room—something intangible, an indescribable emanation; it cut the perfume of the room like a knife, suggesting horrors beyond the bounds of human imagination.

"Come," she said.

She enfolded me once more; I could feel the voluptuous curves of her warm body through the soft material throbbing against my own. That small bit of sanity in me fought through blindly again.

"No," I said.

"Come," she said, her voice more throaty, imperative, her eyes avid.

"No!" I repeated, and with a violent movement I threw her off.

She stood in the doorway. With a single motion she opened her robe and stood nude before me.

As I crossed that threshold a constriction came over my soul like ice.

I stopped. Everything good, everything sane, everything decent in me seemed to be fighting a death struggle against the lure of this woman. She appeared to sense it. Nude, with her robe parted like great silken wings, she threw herself upon me, winding herself about me like a vine.

Then I saw something beneath the curtains of the bed.

It was the face I had seen in the glade. It was the face of the Beast, Hideous, unspeakably vile, its mouth gaping in the blubber-lipped smile of a Congo witch-mask, it stared at me. I saw its misshapen body move under the silken litter of coverlets strewn on the bed.

A scream burst from me.

But even as I screamed, a vestige of realization struck at the corner of my mind—the thing was *tangible*—the thing was *there*. This was nothing filling my mind's horizon and blotting out my soul—it was there before me, no bigger than that bed, under those coverlets.

I think it was that that saved my reason.

I let out a horrible cry of rage. This was something I could get my hands on; something I could break and tear. I leaped for it. The woman gave a scream; dropped to the floor as I sprang forward. She writhed her supple length about my leg, so that I fell short of the bed. I was like a wild man. The room was absolutely black. I tore, beat, struck at the bed; I threw the woman from me. I caught up a chair, and flailing like a thresher in the darkness, I smashed the bed—smashed it, smashed every piece of it, smashed the corners, the hangings, the paneled walls.

Splinters rained around me, I was panting like a gorilla. I sprang to the wall and flashed the light on.

Empty. Not a trace of the thing with the mask-like face. I whirled to the ante-room. The woman was just whisking away, her robe flying like a banner from her white body. I seized her. I picked her up bodily off the floor.

"You hell-witch!" I rasped. "You led me here—you brought me to him—where is he—the Beast—where has he gone?"

I HELD her overhead like a Hun holding a woman at the sack of Rome. I would have dashed her brains out on the floor. But hands gripped me from behind. I let her drop, whirling.

"Bruce!"

"My God, what's going on?"

"Hold him!"

Four men had me pinioned. The woman, snatching her robe about her nudity, jabbed a frienzied arm at me.

"He came in here and tried to kill me!" she shrieked. "He did it! *He* did it! He murdered Joyce!"

"What's this?" gasped voices.

I looked panting at the ring of faces, saw Grey, Frank, Tom Scott, the women. Someone had turned on the light. The place looked like a shambles.

I found my voice. It was more like a hoarse roar.

"She is the accomplice of the Beast!" I bellowed. "She is his partner! The Beast is in that room!"

"He is the murderer of Joyce!" screamed the housekeeper, her eyes like hell-fire, her hair disheveled. "Look—if you don't believe it—look at his chest!"

Her outflung hand pointed to my shirt, which, torn open, revealed the extent of my bare breast.

"What is this?" said Grey, stepping up to me. "My God—a woman's hands—in blood!"

A shudder of fear was on their faces.

"Bruce!"

"Where did those come from?"

"His brain has snapped!"

I suddenly recognized Dr. Hansen's quivering face. "My God! I feared this!"

The housekeeper's voice lashed the air like a whip. "He tried to kill me! Me! Me, too, like Joyce and Caroline! Ask him where Caroline is!"

Dr. Hansen said in a steady voice: "Where is Caroline?"

Before those unflinching eyes my whole being seemed to collapse. My eyes dropped. "In the cistern," I muttered.

I could take no account of what I did or said. I was past that point. In the silence that followed I could hear the woman's strident peal of demoniac laughter. "He knows! He knows!"

Frank Jameson's eyes were on me, shocked, glassy, like the eyes of a dead man. "*Bruce!* How do you know?"

"It was—just a guess," I muttered.

"My God—" I heard the doctor's voice—"there is a cistern under the house—connected with an old tunnel—but I don't know how to get to it!"

At that moment a woman's scream bubbled up to us. It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth. I felt the short hair stand erect on my neck.

"Amy!" I gasped.

"Amy—she has found the body!"

"Where? Where?" gasped voices.

"I will show you!" I cried.

I LEAPED ahead of them for the hall. Again, as in the wood, I seemed to know where I was going. My feet, as by their own volition, led me unerringly down the staircase. We plunged down corridors, stairways, into the foul, dark clammy reek of the cellar. Frank Jameson's flashlight stabbed the darkness; we saw black, mildewing, cob-webbed barrels, walls oozing a clammy sweat of damp. The rest were confused; only I knew the way, seemed to chart it as by instinct in the

darkness. I seized Frank's flashlight, played it around a far, barrel-choked, filth-grimed recess.

"There—there—is the entrance!" I cried. I turned on them. My eyes were rolling. A horrible, confused sound like a moan issued from my throat. "I know what is in there—and I did it!"

Aghast, they shrank from me. I was listening to my own voice, struck as dumb as they. The men were by me, tearing down the barrels. They revealed a dark opening, like a tunnel.

A vague light flitted far back on the rounded ceiling—and disappeared.

We plunged down the tunnel. Ahead of me someone cried out as we looked down into the cylinder of a cistern. Frank seized the light from me, stabbed its ray downward.

A shuddering gasp came from every throat.

There lay the nude body of Caroline, outflung like Joyce's, white stomach uppermost, completely revealed in the shallow water. The slimy ooze played around her graceful sides, touching her breasts as though with clammy tenderness. There—there—was the crimson star on her throat, mingling with the black water.

Frank Jameson turned on me with a contorted grey face. "You—you—you are the Beast—you did this."

I felt hands seize me. I tore myself from their grasp—I leaped into that black cylinder.

Perhaps I wished to destroy myself. Perhaps it was reflex action—there was no other way of escape. Down, down, I hurtled; struck the irregular wall, ricocheted, struck a ledge, tumbled off. I hit the bottom, scrabbling and splashing in the slimy ooze almost over the body of Caroline. Half-stunned, I reeled up, and saw—

The cistern bellied out at the bottom like a bell. In the darkness was Amy, struggling in the clutches of the Beast!

I saw his face—that hideous, unspeak-

able face—the writhing of his body—Amy's golden hair, whipping above the gag on her face. He had nearly succeeded in ripping the clothes from her; one rose-tipped breast was thrust toward me, one throbbing haunch quivered in his filthy grasp. I dove for him, closed with him, an axe sheered by me, we tumbled into the pit. He was cold, slimy, stinking. I smashed that unspeakable face, I saw the nostrils rip. He writhed from me; his body was coated with ooze, it slipped like grease through my fingers. He was up, trying to haul down something like a portcullis that hid the entrance from above. I was baying like a wolf. I hit him head down like a bull; I drove him beneath me; I slugged him again, again. I heard the roar of the portcullis overhead. I sank my fingers into those hideous features, ripping them. The face came off with the brittle rip of a mask and I found myself looking into the handsome face of Ralph Hansen!

I CAME to in the quiet, sun-filled warmth of a hospital room. My family doctor was leaning over me; on a chair beside me Amy was sitting, her golden hair glorious in the sun, her blue eyes shining with love, my great hand clasped in both her little ones.

I saw joy leap in her eyes. "He'll be all right?" she asked the doctor.

Dr. Parmalee smiled. "Yes," he said reassuringly, "nothing serious—a fractured collar-bone and a few bad bruises. My boy," he said, sitting down beside me, "you can thank this constitution of yours for saving you last night. For saving your sanity." His eyes were grave.

"What—" I murmured. "Who—it was Ralph—Ralph Hansen—"

My mind was full of confused recollections of last night.

"Yes," said Dr. Parmalee, "it was Ralph Hansen. And Dr. Hansen. As you know, Caroline Sheridan fell heir to an enormous fortune. The doctor was hand

in glove with his brother to get her fortune. By a codicil of the will, the inheritance reverted not to Caroline's husband, but to the remaining sister, Joyce, if Caroline predeceased her. Therefore it was necessary to put both girls out of the way.

"Dr. Hansen had, in the years since you knew him, fallen in bad circumstances, lost his reputation, and became a morphine addict; so that he was an easy tool for his brother's schemes. Ralph Hansen knew about you, knew about the legend of the Beast, and decided to combine them to make of you the perfect scapegoat.

"Caroline invited you to the house-party, unsuspectingly, and the doctor met you at the station in a specially prepared limousine. He released an ether compound in the tonneau which drugged the occupants. With the chauffeur, a henchman of Ralph's, they carried you both into the woods.

"Because of the long years you had spent under the doctor's psychological dominance, you were an absolutely ideal prey for his powers of suggestion. As you recovered from the drug, he put your mind again under the power of hypnosis he had used so much on you in the past.

"Hypnotism cannot make a man do what is utterly repugnant to his nature, like murder—but a hypnotist can implant commands in the subject's brain *which he will carry out after the hypnosis*—provided again these commands are relatively simple and not heinous or atrocious. They could not make you murder the girls, but they could make you *admit* the murder. While you were hypnotized in the woods all the commands were implanted in your brain which made you give yourself away as the murderer—knowledge of the location of the bodies, the lies you spoke, the very words of confession. When you recovered, you carried them out.

"Joyce did not recover. They stripped

and murdered her alongside you, not ten minutes after Ralph had murdered Caroline in the cistern. They plunged your hand in Joyce's blood, and daubed her handprints on your breast.

"The housekeeper was Ralph's paramour. She was to lead you to the African witch-mask that was held before you during your hypnosis. It had been imprinted on your mind as the face of the Beast. They hoped the shock of seeing it in reality, would crack your mental balance. That would have made a perfect motive. As Caroline's old lover, you had gone insane through rage and jealousy and committed the murders.

"But you must have sensed a human being behind that mask." Parmalee reached out and patted my hand. "The doctor confessed everything before he took an overdose of morphine and died this morning. Ralph did not wait that long. He cut his throat with his own axe."

I looked at Amy. "But you—how did you get into that monster's hands?"

"When I ran from you," she said, "I wished to get away—away from everybody. I wandered over the house, and finally into the cellar. There I came on Ralph putting on the mask and daubing himself with black grease. He bound and gagged me, and but for you, there would have been two bodies in the cistern."

"Thank God," I said.

A sense of release, peace, and great thankfulness flooded over me. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the doctor was gone, Amy and I were alone.

I pulled her to me. In her eyes I saw no recrimination about the incident with that demoniac woman, no accusation, only infinite tenderness and infinite love. I closed my eyes again, holding her pliant body to me.

GALLERY OF MONSTERS



No. 7: William Stewart, the Monster of the *Mary Russell*

By JOHN KOBLER

ON THE morning of May 9th, 1828, the brig *Mary Russell* lay off the port of Barbadoes, her hold bulging with a cargo of sugar, hides and tropical fruit-plants. She was about to undertake the return voyage to Cork, Ireland.

A commonplace little craft, this *Mary Russell*, with a commonplace crew and a nondescript captain. The crew consisted

of six young men: Smith, chief mate; Swanson, second mate; Cramer, cook; seamen Howes, Keating and Sullivan; cabin boys Richards, 13, and Deaves, 15.



There were also four passengers: Murley, Raynes, Connell and a 12-year-old English lad, Hammond.¹

The captain was one William Stewart, a frail little man with sunken chest and spindly legs, a shock of flaming red hair and a complexion white as a flounder's belly. He looked more like a clerk or a salesman than a sailor fitted to captain an arduous voyage, let alone control the destinies of twelve human beings.

But aside from the seeming inadequacy of the captain, the crew, the ship and the proposed voyage appeared to be the essence of the commonplace. Certainly, there came to those very ordinary men and boys no foreboding of the shuddering horror which awaited them beyond the horizon, a horror unequalled before or since in the annals of the sea.

TOWARDS noon of the fateful day the brig uphauled anchor and with her sails bellying glided gracefully out of the harbor. Three hours later the island had sunk below the horizon and the ship, the souls aboard her were infinitesimal entities in the vast, inscrutable bosom of the sea, their lives, their activities, their very thoughts under the domination of the little man with red hair. It was the law of the sea. His will was law. To dispute it placed a man in jeopardy of his life, for in those days mutiny was tantamount to high treason.

But the crew and the passengers of the *Mary Russell* had no reason to fear harsh treatment. Stewart was known for his kindness and his ability. He was said to be an excellent commander, while in his private life he was known as a good husband and father, sober and God-fearing.

On the first night out this admirable man summoned the entire crew to his cabin and there loosed a thunderbolt. The men were not sure they could trust their hearing.

"Men," said he, his little eyes darting queerly from face to face, "I have reason to believe that there are those among you who plan mutiny!"

A cry of disbelief. Mutiny! The thing was incredible. Every one of them had clean records. They were honest, decent seamen, intent only on earning a living, not pirates and cutthroats. John Howes stepped forward.

"Good God, sir, there must be a mistake! I, for one, am loyal—"

The little captain cut him off with an imperious wave of his hand. "I have good and sufficient reasons for my belief. I have had a dream. In it God appeared to me and warned me that that man—" His finger shot out towards the baffled figure of the passenger, Raynes—"is planning to murder me and seize the ship!"

Raynes, whose only fault was excessive drinking, flung himself forward, babbling protest. But Stewart, his eyes gleaming strangely, went on, "Oh, I have other indications. I have watched him all day. He spends too much time in the fo'c's'le. He talks in Erse so that I won't understand. I heard him asking Howes here how to navigate the ship."

All the men were protesting violently now. Stewart suddenly whipped out two pistols and slapped them down on the table before him. "I'll hear no more. But this is fair warning. The first man who so much as whispers mutiny I'll shoot down like a dog. I mean to bring this ship safely into Cork! Now go to your posts, all of you."

AND thus dismissed, a group of sadly bewildered, gaping men withdrew from the captain's cabin. It was clear to all of them that something strange, abnormal was afoot, but what none knew. As the night deepened a sense of apprehension, of hovering terror entered their souls and they trod softly, all of them, as though walking in a nightmare.

As the days passed Stewart's suspicions grew increasingly violent. The most innocent incidents and remarks he interpreted as indications of brewing mutiny. Again he summoned the entire crew on deck. They noticed that his eyes were wilder, his gestures more violent. He blazed at them.

"I'm certain of it now! Some of you are planning mutiny. Out with it. Confess now and it will go easier with you, I warn you."

The men stared helplessly from one to the other and made no answer.

"So that's the way of it, eh? Very well, then, I'll show you that you'll never seize this ship no matter what may become of me."

So saying he ordered the boy, Deaves, to fetch up all the ship's instruments and the log. He then took them into his own hands and one by one flung them into the churning sea.

"Now, try to navigate the ship alone, if you dare!"

He pivoted on his heels and left them.

To the modern reader it will seem odd that the crew and passengers failed to take immediate action. It would seem that, believing themselves innocent, they would force the captain to prove his charges or remain silent. But such was the fear of mutiny instilled in every man's heart that not one of them ventured to speak out.

They did nothing and Stewart proceeded with his own devious plans. The next morning the men noted with some alarm that he had armed himself from head to foot. He not only carried two pistols, but a harpoon and a crowbar as well.²

It was on the night of June 18th that the captain's suspicions came to a head. Smith, the chief mate, had occasion to visit the storeroom several times for provisions and tools. His footsteps awakened the captain. He waited until dawn, then, arming himself with a harpoon, ap-

proached the spot where Smith lay sleeping, jolted him awake.

He announced in an eerie, far away voice, "It is well for you that you're here and not below with the crew. Otherwise I would have to put you to death as a mutineer."

Smith's mouth worked soundlessly, but sheer amazement kept him from speaking.

Stewart shook the harpoon at him, raising his voice to a shrill scream. "You are the chief instigator!"

The din brought the others on deck. They gathered around expressing their innocence. And strangely a subtle change came over the captain. He smiled and observed soothingly, "I believe you. You are all honest men except Smith. Tie him up!"

This the men hotly refused to do and walked off. Stewart quivered with rage. Here at last was overt mutiny! The more he thought of it the more his fury mounted until he was a trembling, purple-faced fiend of rage. He backed against the rail, his pistols cocked, clearly ready to shoot the first man who dared show his face.

Observing him at a distance in this appalling excitement three of the men, Keating, Connell and Swanson went below and confronted Smith.

"Look here, old man," Keating told him, "the captain is beside himself with anger. Just to placate him let us tie you up. Then he'll calm down and everything will be peacefully settled."

At first Smith objected, then, thinking it over, capitulated. He extended his hands meekly and the three seamen trussed him up. They then reported to Stewart. What they had done appeared to please him. He ordered them to place Smith on the floor of the storeroom. This, too, they did and from that moment on the captain personally supervised the unfortunate mate. Three times he visited him, once to test the lashings, again to bring him some food, and a third time, when he saw that

the mate was suffocating in that airless hole, to drill a vent in the ceiling.

But still Stewart was not satisfied and in his mind there seethed a plan which remains among the most fantastic things ever done by a seaman. Stewart fancied himself as one man pitted against an entire crew of mutineers and he determined to sail the ship alone! He planned to tie up every one of them!

THE brig was about four hundred miles off Cape Clear and heading towards the mouth of the English channel when Stewart put the first part of this amazing plan into action. First he must have accomplices, some one he could trust. All the men, he firmly believed, were mutinous. There remained only the three boys.

In selecting them Stewart was cunning. He knew how easily the minds of children succumb to adventure, exciting responsibilities. He began a shrewd campaign to sell them the idea that he and they must be the heroes of the occasion, must wrest the ship from the mutineers and bring it safely back to England. Although the captain's pale face and twitching hands somewhat disquieted them, the boys were soon convinced that the safety of the ship lay in their hands.

The captain was ready to strike. At two o'clock on the afternoon of June 21st Connell, one of the passengers, was informed by Hammond that the captain wanted to see him a moment in his cabin. Obediently Connell went below, turned into the tiny cabin. The fierce little man with red hair faced him with a cocked pistol.

"Confess," he roared at him, "or I'll blow your brains out!"

Connell could only shake his head dazedly. Stewart gave a signal, whereupon Hammond and Richards rushed out from a cabinet in which they had been hiding and secured Connell's legs and arms.

In this way six members of the crew

were decoyed into the captain's cabin, pinioned and flung, bound and helpless, into the cramped, black hole where Smith still lay. Stewart slammed the door shut. They were alone in the dark.

It was Smith who abruptly screamed at them through cracked, parched lips, "You bloody fools! Don't you realize? *We are at the mercy of a raving maniac!*"

FOR the first time the shattering truth exploded in their numbed brains. The captain of that ship, the man who had piloted crew after crew over the high seas, was a dangerous, murderous fiend!

Only a man accustomed to the sea can appreciate the full horror of this. Between them and icy waters, fathoms deep and haunted by killer monsters, were only the frail boards of that little brig and on the brig, in complete, God-like control of their lives was a human monster, mad and bloodthirsty, cunning and more vicious than any shark or devil-fish of the deep.

Modern psychologists could no doubt have diagnosed Stewart's terrible madness. Here was a little man, a man who was physically weak, obscure, a nobody on land and at sea just an ordinary sailor. Unquestionably from childhood he had been the butt of stronger men's cruel jests. Here was a perfect clinical picture of the paranoiac, maddened by a lifetime of persecution real or fancied and, with a measure of power thrust upon him, insanely lusting to vent revenge. It is significant that all the members of the *Mary Russell's* crew were bigger and more powerful than Stewart.

Two members of the crew still remained at freedom, Howes and Murley. It was not long before they, too, were cast into the horrible hold beneath water level. That left Stewart and the three boys in sole control of the ship. The horror had only begun.

The torture of being confined in black-

ness, lashed by rough, biting rope was unbearable. Murley succeeded in partially freeing his hands. When Stewart, on one of his periodic visits to the storeroom, saw this he devised an even more brutal torture. He obtained a long, thick rope and fashioned it into seven nooses—Howes, thought to be the most dangerous mutineer, had been lashed to the mast—which he slipped around each prisoner's neck. He then secured the rope to staples hammered into the deck so that to avoid strangulation the men had to lie perfectly still.

The men realized at last with paralyzing terror that they were doomed to remain thus until the ship reached port. That would be in more than a week's time. No man could live a week under those conditions. Already their limbs were swollen and blackened. One of them, Keating, had gone mad, shrieking horribly, foam flecking his lips. The hold was being transformed into a howling madhouse. Blood flowed from the men's bodies where the ropes cut the flesh and more than one of them strained deliberately against the noose to end their unbearable agonies. And with its bleeding, screaming human cargo the *Mary Russell* sailed on toward England.

AFTER he had tied the nooses Stewart went up on deck to discover that Howes had loosened his pinions. With a final wrench he tore himself loose and faced the captain. But he was unarmed. Not so, Stewart, who gripped two pistols.

"And now," rasped the maniac menacingly, "will you confess to mutiny!"

"Never, you bloody fiend!" Howes flung back at him.

"Then I must tie you again."

"You'll have to catch me first."

Howes wheeled and dashed down the deck. Stewart emptied both barrels at his retreating back. One missed. The other smashed Howes thumb. The sailor

emitted a howl of pain and kept running. Stewart reloaded and dashed after him. The pistols barked again. And this time a ball embedded itself in Howes' thigh. The man dropped to the deck, groaning horribly. "Oh, God, God, there's fire in my entrails!"

He lay still.

Stewart motioned to the terrified boys who had witnessed the entire scene. "He's dead," he told them.

Actually Howes was playing possum, hoping that Stewart would leave him. But his arm twitched involuntarily. Stewart, seeing the movement, levelled his pistol and shot point-blank. Lead ripped through the man's groin.

He looked up helplessly at the captain. "I'm done. That does it," he said piteously.

"Oh, no," the captain replied, "your voice is still too strong. But I'll take care of that."

He thrust harpoons into the hands of the boys and moved cautiously towards Howes. There was still strength left in the sailor's arms. He struggled to his feet, determined to make a fight for it. Stewart went white with fear and backed away. He called to the boys. "Strike! Push your harpoons into him!"

For an instant the boys hesitated, appealed to Stewart. He screamed at them. "Strike, I tell you!"

Drugged by those long days of horror, in mortal terror of the captain, they flung themselves on Howes. The ensuing struggle was fearful. Howes sprang aside and leaped upon Stewart, bringing him to the deck. His powerful hands closed over the madman's throat and he began to squeeze the life from him. But the boys, pitifully misguided, approached Howes from behind, cracked down with the harpoons. They tore deep gashes in his head and back. His grip slackened and he crashed backwards. And still he was not dead. But Stewart was too frightened to finish

him off. He ran below and the boys followed.

Howes crawled away, bleeding from a score of wounds, and collapsed among some hogsheads of sugar in the hold.

STEWART'S madness now reached its climax. With Howes alive and hiding some place aboard the danger of mutiny appeared overwhelming. Something must be done. It is evidence of Stewart's utter insanity that he now entered the hold where seven men lay dying and delivered a sermon of the most pious nature. He declared that he held nothing against them, that he loved them all, but it was his bounden duty to protect his ship against mutiny. He was even deeply moved by their sufferings and offered to release them if they would take the longboat and cast themselves adrift. They gladly accepted.

Stewart was about to free them when fear again seized him. He surveyed them sadly, bid them a tearful farewell and left the hold. Their last hope was gone.

But in his mad, twisted way Stewart for a moment believed he was willing to spare them if only the dangers of mutiny could be avoided. Accordingly, as he spied a sail, he signalled it, determined to seek aid. This man, who had all but murdered one sailor and was in the act of murdering the others, actually signalled a ship to rescue him!

The ship hove to. Then, seeing the empty decks, suspected a pirate-trap and made off. The incident was to have a ghastly effect. At first the captain bewailed his desperate plight. Then, thinking about it, suddenly came to the belief, with a true madman's logic, that the departure of the ship was a sign from God, a judgment upon the mutineers. The last shred of reason snapped in his mind and he became in that instant a wild, kill-crazy fiend. He flung aside his pistols, picked up a crowbar and burst into

the hold, followed by the three boys.

His terrible cry echoed shrilly in that Hell-hole. "The curse of God is on you all!"

With their last ebbing strength the men strained at their lashings, tried to sit up. The whites of their eyes gleamed weirdly in the blackness. Stewart strode up to the first man, raised the crowbar and smashed it down on his skull. It entered deep into his brain like a knife cutting butter, sending blood cascading over the floor-planks, spouting up into Stewart's sweat-glistening face. The man fell backwards and again the crowbar descended, mashing his nose, jaw, forehead into an obscene horror of splintered bone and flesh.

A pitiful moaning, a last appeal for mercy burst from the men's throats. Stewart howled like a mad hyena, laughed crazily. "You ruffians! I'll kill you all! You wanted to take my life; now I'll take yours!"

The taste of blood had given a new turn to his madness. Whereas first he was concerned only with what he sincerely believed was his duty. Now he craved bloodshed for its own sake.

HE WAS standing over the second man, Connell. Eyes wide with terror glared up at him. They maddened him, those pinpoints of white flame. He stabbed at them with the end of the crowbar. They drowned in sudden upswirling pools of crimson. Wielding his weapon like a medieval battle-axe, he slashed back and forth, breaking Connell's head as though it were a flower-pot.

Then Keating and Murley and Sullivan. His craving for blood had accelerated. He could not kill fast enough. He delighted, thrilled in the unending fountain of blood, lunging at them all haphazardly, striking out at all of them.

Raynes was the last, Raynes whom Stewart had thought the original insti-

gator of the mutiny. He told him, "James, I once put a curse on you. Now I take it off."

The man implored mercy in the name of God.

"The devil is your God!" Stewart replied and again the crowbar descended, crushing through the man's chest and jaw.

Wildly Stewart looked around him. The three boys who had witnessed the butchery were cowering in the doorway, whimpering. Stewart ignored them.

His gaze rested on the mutilated bodies. Suddenly a movement. What, not dead yet? He flung the crowbar from him and took up an axe. He plunged himself into a fresh frenzy of slaughter. He was like a mad butcher loosed in a slaughterhouse. He literally chopped the battered flesh around him into small bits until he stood ankle-deep in blood, until brain and bone and fragments of flesh had splattered every inch of floor and ceiling.

And still Captain Stewart's blood-lust was not sated. Howes and Smith were still alive. That omission must be repaired. Changing the axe for a harpoon, he repaired to that part of the deck below which the chief mate lay. Smith had been separated from the others the day before.

During the entire massacre of his fellow-sailors he had heard the screams, been deluged with their blood which had seeped through the adjoining partition. And now Stewart himself stood over his head, grimacing through the tiny airhole. It was Smith's turn.

Stewart gripped his harpoon more tightly and thrust it through the airhole at the helpless mate. It sliced through his ears, grazed his side, almost gouged out his right eye. But Stewart was unable to administer a final, rending blow due to the narrowness of the aperture. He went for his axe and began enlarging the hole. Meanwhile Smith, with a cleverness born of desperation, managed to struggle over to the side of the hole so that he no longer

lay directly beneath the savage harpoon thrusts. Instead, the weapon penetrated a pile of hides on which the mate had been lying. Mistaking these for Smith's body he thrust again and again until he believed the man was dead. He reached in, felt something cold and withdrew his hand, satisfied. He then nailed a board over the opening.

All but Howes had been murdered, or so Stewart thought. He was unable to find the seaman, and too exhausted to try. Hunger and thirst clamored at his senses. He ordered the boys to bring him food and wine. *He ordered them to bring them to him in the stinking cabin where lay strewn about the bloody remains of the crew!* And there he dined, calling the boys' attention to his steady hand.

He boasted, "I think no more of these carcasses than if they were a pack of dead dogs."

ONE can imagine the condition of these wretched lads. There was no longer any illusions of adventure and heroism in their minds. They knew Stewart was a homicidal maniac and that they had unwittingly played his game for him. Yet small and weak as he was, the captain loomed in their sight as something monstrous beyond ken. They could only cower in his shadow, prepared to do whatever he asked and pray that their own lives would be spared.

Meanwhile a series of events were transpiring which, had Stewart been aware of them, would have sent him into a fresh frenzy of murder. Howes, exhausted and still bleeding, had crawled out of his hiding-place to find water. On the deck he spied Stewart's pistols and axe left lying about. He appropriated them, found the water and returned to the hogsheads. At the same time Smith was working himself free. Stewart had neglected to remove his knife, thinking him dead, and with this he pried loose the board

over the opening, hoisted himself out and joined Howes in the hold.

Stewart was asleep. Following a heavy meal he had fallen into a deep slumber, surfeited as he was with blood and slaughter. He awoke with the dawn and immediately a new suspicion seized him. *Could he trust the boys?*

It seems he had hung his watch over his bunk. He had neglected to wind it before going to sleep, but now it was running. To the captain's deranged brain this indicated that some one had crept into his cabin during the night.

There was no help for it. The boys must be tied up. He found them in their cabin and announced his intentions. They went grey with terror. They knew what it meant to be Captain Stewart's prisoner. He swore not to harm them, but he must render them incapable of mutiny. They prayed, sobbed. They would have attacked him but he held them at bay with a crowbar. Slowly he reached behind him for a rope and beckoned to Deaves.

"Come, you must submit."

The terrified boy moved forward as though hypnotized. Once those ropes were around him he knew he would be battered to death by the crowbar. God, was there no escape, no mercy from this madman? Stewart advanced to meet him, arranging the rope into a noose. He was about to slip it over his head when a loud cry of greeting rooted him to the spot. He faltered an instant. In that instant the boys' lives hung in the balance.

Then Stewart turned and dashed up on deck. The cry had come from another ship, the *Mary Stubbs*, bound for Belfast from Barbadoes. Her commander happened to be an old friend of Stewart. He was Captain Callender and his voice had been raised in greeting. He had sighted the flag of the *Mary Russell* at half-mast, a sign of distress, and had hove to.

Far from terror at the sight of Callender, Stewart cried out with vast relief,

"For God's sake, come to my help!"

"What's up?"

"Mutiny! I've had to kill eight of my men and one has escaped."

CALLENDER ordered his men to lower a boat and he came aboard the *Mary Russell*. What Stewart showed him made him go sick and white with horror—the decks washed with blood, the stench of death and decay everywhere, the mutilated corpses below. And yet Stewart convinced him that he had bravely downed a mutiny. He even boasted of his courage.

The two men then went in search of Howes. They found him among the hogsheads. Callender started back appalled when he saw the seaman's face. It was an unrecognizable mask of dried blood. Howes called to Smith and the chief mate crawled out of hiding. At sight of him Stewart turned pale.

"I thought you were dead," he stammered, and added quickly, "I now believe you were innocent and I regret that I hurt you. God spared your life."

But the next moment the spectacle of Howes and Smith sent him into fresh panic. He raved madly of mutiny until they were removed to the hold.

Callender was utterly baffled. He knew both Howes and Stewart well. Whom was he to believe? He decided in favor of Stewart for he left him in full charge of his ship and headed for home with the brig close behind!

For two days the ships sailed on together without incident. Then one morning Callender went aboard the *Mary Russell* to see how his old friend was getting on. Callender had loaned him two of his own crew and now Stewart drew him aside and whispered mysteriously, "Your men are plotting against me, too. We must get rid of them."

Callender's brow creased in sudden uneasiness. "What are you talking about, man? Why, they're my two most reliable

sailors. They've served me for years."

"No, I tell you," Stewart shouted in panic, "they're mutineers!"

He didn't wait for Callender's answer but rushed towards the rail and leaped into the sea. A boat was lowered and he was dragged from a watery grave. On deck he broke loose and again jumped overboard. They saved him and this time tied him up. There was no longer any doubt in Callender's mind. Stewart was a madman.

Callender was for leaving him imprisoned on his own ship, but Howes and Smith had supped their fill of horrors. They would bring the brig into Cork, but not with a raving maniac on board. Obligingly Callender had Stewart brought up from the hold preparatory to transferring him to his own ship. Stewart saw Howes, immediately ducked below, returned with a knife and leaped for the man's throat. He could not be calmed until both Howes and Smith were out of sight. Then, finally, he accompanied Callender back to the *Mary Stubbs*.

Presently the Irish coast came into view. As the *Mary Stubbs* approached Cork harbor Stewart spied three Irish sloops. He waited his opportunity—humanely, Callender had not tied him up again—and when no one was alert sprang overboard and struck out for the first of the sloops. Mist hung over the harbor and he was soon lost to sight.

They took him aboard and believed his story that there were pirates aboard the *Mary Stubbs* who had threatened his life. But soon Stewart's madness brought further delusions. This time the crew of the

sloop were plotting against him. He gave himself up to the water once more and managed to reach a fishing-boat. In this he reached land. By this time Callender was ashore, too. Stewart was promptly clapped into iron and lodged in the county jail.

The citizens of Cork crowded down to the waterfront to see the ill-fated *Mary Russell* with her dreadful cargo of putrefying corpses, her blood-drenched decks and her half-maddened survivors. They went wild with revulsion. A cry went up against Stewart and among the mob were anguished relatives of the victims.

They would have lynched the little captain, but armed sheriffs kept them at bay. He was finally committed for trial.³

The outcome of that trial was a foregone conclusion. The defense pleaded "Not Guilty" by virtue of Stewart's patent madness. The plea was accepted by a nauseated jury.⁴ There was no alternative but to send the monster to an asylum for the criminal insane for the rest of his life.

And it was long, that life. Stewart survived for twenty years. He was a model inmate. He was at first so gentle that he was allowed to teach children religious exercises. Religion had always formed a deep part of his madness. But fits of insanity attacked him from time to time when, in his mind's eye, he reenacted his fearful crimes. In his lucid moments he was tortured with remorse. He prayed constantly and read his Bible. Towards the end of his life he said, "I cannot help praying for the souls of my poor men."

But he died hard, as the bloody ghosts of his victims passed before his eyes.

THE END

¹It was the testimony of these three boys together with that of Howes and Smith which revealed the events aboard the *Mary Russell*.

²J. G. Lockhart in "Strange Adventures of the Sea" states that Stewart hailed a passing ship, went aboard and procured these pistols in order, as he explained to the captain, to protect himself against possible mutiny.

³The trial was held at the Cork Assizes on August 11th, 1828.

⁴The Trial of William Stewart for Murder on the High Seas.

NYMPH of DAMNATION

Cameron sought the woman who could assuage his racking torment. Then one night her alluring body beckoned to him. . . .

by WILLIAM B. RAINEY



“THERE’S a girl downstairs who wants to see you,” Cameron’s wife said. “She’s a strange, rather oriental looking girl.”

John Cameron turned from the mirror in front of which he had been knotting his tie. For one second his red, perfectly chiseled lips twitched, and in his dark eyes

there was a shadow that might have been fear. “What does she want? Who is she?”

“She wants to speak to you,” Jane Cameron said. “Her name’s Nicki, or something like that. A name I never heard before.”

“Tell her I’m not here,” Cameron said.

"Tell her I'm busy and can't see her." His voice was brittle, his eyes black and hard as coal.

Jane Cameron frowned. She was a pretty woman; all of Cameron's women were pretty, even those that he used chiefly for their money. She wore an evening dress that clung sleekly around the smooth flowering of her hips. The throat was cut low so that the tops of white round breasts were visible, and the shadowed valley between them. She said, "I think you ought to see her, John. She seemed anxious, and she knows you are here. She insists on talking to you."

Cameron crushed out his cigaret viciously. "All right," he said. "You stay here." He pulled on his coat, a tall, lean darkly handsome man; a man whom women found irresistibly attractive; a man without a masculine friend in the world.

HE went down the stairs slowly, his red mouth set in a hard line. He was not looking forward to this interview, though he had experienced many of the same nature with other women. But this Nicki was like no woman he'd ever known before. She seemed to have no last name, and what nationality or race she was he couldn't say. There was something about her which rather frightened John Cameron: some shadowy thing hidden behind her face and beyond her eyes which he had always felt without understanding. He was relievedly glad that his affair with her was over, though it had been exciting while it lasted; almost too exciting sometimes, for the woman's gorgeous dark-skinned body could burn with a passion that was more than human. There were some esoteric practices of hers that had surprised, had frightened, even John Cameron. But she had furnished money when he had needed it desperately. He was beyond that now. He'd put her out and be rid of her.

She waited in the livingroom, a tall,

slim, dark woman. Her eyes were almond shaped, tilting upward at the outer ends, but the pupils had a way of sometimes expanding until they dominated the entire face. It was then that Cameron could feel the mystical, frightful force which he could not understand. She was wearing a long black cloak that covered her from ankles to chin, but even now he could feel the strange and terrible lure of her body.

"So now you are married, John Cameron," she said as he entered. Her voice was low, yet clearly audible with a sound that made him think of bells deep-buried in darkness.

He said, "Yes, I'm married now. You and I are through, and you shouldn't come here. I will appreciate it if you leave and never come back."

"You and I are not through, John Cameron. And it may be that we shall never be done with one another." Her voice had a sort of rhythmic quality that angered the man.

"We're through!" he snapped. "Now if you will get the hell out of here. . . ."

He stepped forward toward the door but the girl glided swiftly into his path. Her dark eyes held his. Her voice was fierce with passion. She said, "John, don't send me away. John, look!" Using both hands she opened the cloak wide to either side of her.

Except for the cloak she was utterly naked. The soft light of the hallway glowed on her golden-colored body. It reflected on all the tapering curves on her slim legs that rose into full, firm thighs, on the smooth satin skin of her belly. Her breasts were high on her body, large and erect and firmly soft. Her lips were parted and damp and quivering. "John," she whispered. She took a step toward him.

He felt the wild energy of her body that had always frightened him and the fear made him furiously angry. He grabbed

the cloak and jerked it around her. "You tramp!" he said. "Get out of here!"

For a moment she stood rigid. Her hands moved to hold the cloak. Her dark eyes began to glow. "I shall leave, John Cameron, but not before I have said the things I came to say. You are a coward, John Cameron, afraid to fight your way against a world of men; you have used women because they are easy for you. Every step forward you have ever made has been over the body and the heart and the soul of some woman. You have made love, but with your tongue only, for you are incapable of worshipping anything but yourself. You are a coward, John Cameron, and. . . ."

"Get out of here!" Cameron shouted. He stepped close to her, his face purpling with fury.

". . . and there must come a time when you pay," the girl said. "There must . . ."

He struck her. It knocked her against the wall and she stood there, swaying. The print of his open hand showed livid across her forehead, the bridge of her nose, and even the eyelids.

"Now get out of here," Cameron growled.

The girl's eyes were very large and he had the weird impression that he could see through them as through dark glass to where something moved vague and indistinct and horrible. Then she turned and was looking past him. She said, "Do you love this man? Are you happy with him?"

Cameron swung about and saw that Jane was standing in the doorway. "I told you to wait upstairs," he snapped. "Now go back . . ."

"Not yet," Nicki interrupted. And looking at Jane she repeated, "Are you happy?"

There were many emotions in Jane Cameron's lovely face: she was frightened and in love with her husband and

ashamed of his actions all at once. She had been married only a few days so that the word "happy" in connection with marriage still had a sexual connotation, and she blushed slightly at the question. She said huskily, "I love John very much. I'm happy with him."

The dark girl said a strange thing then, addressing her words to Jane, although as she spoke she looked at Cameron. "I give him to you," she said—"for eternity. He shall never be able to loosen his soul from the soul he has in his keeping. So long as your love endures, so long as your happiness is with him, so long he shall be as other men. After that—he shall remember Nicki and the hatred she bears for him. But even then his only hope for relief shall lie in you." While she spoke the print of his hand was livid over her forehead and eyes.

She turned, went to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the night. She went without sound, and for a long while John Cameron and his wife remained motionless, staring after her.

A YEAR after he had married Jane, Cameron was ready for his next upward step. All her money was in his name now. And he'd found Marian Reynolds, a beautiful, redhaired woman whose fortune would make the small one he had from Jane seem pitiful. Besides, Marian could give him the place in society that he wanted. He knew that he could win her; already she had given him everything except the money and social position which would come with marriage. All that remained was to get a divorce.

He located a detective agency that specialized in such cases. Pete McCory was a big, square-jawed Irishman who did not care for man or God or the devil. "And sure," McCory said, "we'll get evidence against her and 'twil be no judge

living won't commend you for divorcing her."

"It won't be easy," Cameron said. "She's a damned plaster saint."

"And were she the Mother Mary we could frame her," McCory told him. "Give me two weeks to learn her habits and its a quick divorce you'll be getting. But there's a price."

"Of course," Cameron said. "I expect to pay." He smiled thinly, thinking that it was Jane's money that would buy her ruin.

It was on his way home through the late twilight that his head began to ache, a dull throbbing in his forehead that spread down into his eyes. He stopped at a drugstore for aspirin, but it didn't help. "I feel as though I had been reading too much," he thought. But he hadn't been reading at all. There seemed to be no reason for the pain.

And with the pain came a strange fierce passion. He was not usually an ardent man; love making was more a means to wealth and position than an end in itself with John Cameron. But now he began to feel the restless urgent desire of a boy reaching puberty. He looked with furtive eyes at the women on the street.

His wife was not at home when he arrived. The maid said she'd gone out early in the afternoon without leaving any word. Cameron shrugged. "Very well," he said. "I won't be home for dinner anyway."

"Yes sir," the girl said. As she turned away he noticed the smooth flow of her dress over her hips and he called to her and stepping forward put his hand on the curve of her thigh.

She was French and had been trying to make Cameron since she first came to work here. But always he had been very cautious. Now she made an "oohing" sound and turned and looked up at him with twinkling eyes.

Cameron said, "You know, you are awfully pretty." He leaned forward as though he was going to kiss her.

It was then the girl looked into his eyes for the first time and all at once her expression changed. It might have been terror that swept over her face. "I—I've got to go in the kitchen," she said. She turned and almost ran from the room.

Cameron started after her, then remembered Marian Reynolds and decided to wait. He was puzzled at his own unusual desire. And he wondered what had caused the maid to change her mind so suddenly, had caused that look of terror. But that must have been some trick his own eyes were playing, he thought. He damned the dull ache in his head. He had particularly wanted to feel well tonight when he was seeing Marian.

He bathed and got into his dinner clothes, but the pain continued. "I'll take some more aspirin before I leave," he thought. "It may help." He was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, a glass and aspirin bottle in his hands, when he noticed his reflection. His breath caught high in his chest then; his lips grew cold against his teeth. He leaned closer to the mirror.

Across his forehead, across the bridge of his nose, and down across his eyelids there was a faint discoloration the shape of a human hand—such a print as might have been left by someone slapping him. . . .

A LONG-CLOSED door opened within his memory and it seemed to him that he was staring once more at the almond-eyed girl Nicki, seeing the print of his hand on her forehead, hearing her voice like a bell buried in darkness: "So long as your happiness is with him, so long shall he live as other men. After that—he shall remember Nicki. But even then his only hope for relief shall lie in

you." What strange words were these?

A long while John Cameron looked into the past, seeing and hearing the woman he had forgotten. His body was rigid, and beads of sweat mushroomed on his forehead, but that portion covered by the print of a hand was dry and white.

Finally he moved like a man breaking out of a trance. He staggered. His mouth was open and he gulped for breath. "I'm a damned fool," he said aloud. "I'm letting my imagination run away with me. I have a headache and I've been pushing my hand against my forehead. That's all." He washed his face in cold water, rubbing at the spot where the print showed. But the mark of the hand stayed; the pain behind the forehead and eyelids did not cease.

It was now, steeling his nerves, studying himself carefully, that he noticed his eyes. There was no change in them of which he could be certain, and yet there was a change. A difference in expression rather than in color or shape. For the first time he was able to see through his eyes into some portion of his real character. And what he saw was not pleasant.

The pain behind his eyes continued despite the medicine he'd taken. He wondered why, feeling so depleted physically, he should experience such an unusual, almost agonizing, desire for women. He finished dressing and drove rapidly to Marian Reynold's apartment on upper Riverside.

He was panting heavily when the maid opened the door for him. He stepped just inside the room, stopped, stood there rigidly waiting. From the bedroom Marian called, "Just a minute, Darling." The maid went out. Then Marian came in from the bedroom.

If that minute had been used to put on clothes, she could have started with nothing and not have had to rush. She was wearing a sheer negligee through

which the shadowed outlines of her body were clearly visible. The garment was held around her waist by a loosely tied belt and from there up it stood open. He could see the gorgeous full mounds of her white breasts, erect and trembling slightly from her breathing. Her red hair hung loose, thick about her face and shoulders.

For a moment they stood on opposite sides of the room looking at one another. Cameron was in the shadows near the door. She whispered, "John, Darling," and they moved swiftly together.

He could feel all the warm quivering flesh of her body through the thin gown, could feel her breasts flatten against him. His mouth came down hard and fierce upon hers. She trembled, ground herself against him. "John," she whimpered. "John. . . ."

HE lifted her in his arms and started toward the sofa. And it was then she saw his face clearly in the light. She cried out and her body jerked in his arms. But he did not stop. He was lowering her on the sofa, leaning above her.

She tried to push him away. Her face was working with terror. "No! Don't John! Not tonight."

"Why?" he demanded. He was panting, holding her fiercely. "Why not?"

"I—I don't know. I—Please!"

He fought to hold himself in check. He couldn't afford to anger her, not yet. After the marriage, after all her wealth was in his name. . . . He'd kill her for having held him off now. But until then. . . . There were plenty of other women. . . .

He left early. At the door he did not kiss her, did not even touch her hand. There was something wrong tonight. And there was the terrible pain in his head, the growing fear in his chest that he could not conquer. "I'm sick," he

told himself. "There's no need for me to keep remembering Nicki and what she said. That's absurd."

His wife was not at home when he got there. He looked about for the maid, but she wasn't there either. Well, he'd wait until Jane came. He undressed and went to bed.

But the pain in his forehead continued and he didn't sleep well although, after awhile, he took a mild opiate. He lay in the dark and was afraid. He wanted Jane but she didn't come and he had no idea where she was.

The next morning Jane was still gone. The maid did not answer his ring and he called down stairs for the Negro cook to bring his breakfast. It was a half hour before she arrived with the tray.

She was a fat, goodnatured Negro woman. "I sho am sorry you ain't feelin' spry dis mawnin'," she said, putting the tray on a small table and pushing it toward him. "Miss Jane ain't here and the Lawd knows where she is. You gotta get up and do som'en, Mr. John."

"I'll find her," Cameron said. "She'll be all right." Then he asked, "Where's the maid? Why didn't she answer my ring?"

"She ain't here. She lef' las' night in a powerful hurry like she was scared of some'um. And she ain't come back. I don't—" The cook had the tray beside him and for the first time raised her eyes to his face. She stiffened and almost overturned the table. "Lawd! Mistur John, what. . . ."

Instinctively Cameron moved his hand to his forehead. He said huskily, "I got hit on the forehead yesterday. Left an odd sort of mark, didn't it?"

"Hit—hit sho do look funny," the cook said. She kept backing toward the door. "I come git the dishes later." Then she was gone.

Cameron got out of bed, still holding

his hand against his forehead. The pain was there, dull and steady, like something gnawing its way through his skull. He crossed to the bathroom and faced the mirror.

He swayed and caught at the lavatory. Some invisible vise closed on his chest, crushing it. Perspiration came thick along his lip and under his eyes.

The print of a hand was still clear on There was a darker spot between his eyes and when he touched it with a finger it hurt. "It's sore," he whispered. "I must have bruised myself. It's sore as hell."

THE bruise must have affected his eyes. They seemed closer together than before, so that he studied them as one rather than separately. There was no change in their color, but once more he had the impression of seeing through them into his real character, into a place as cold and savage as the Eskimo hell. Except that he was no longer emotionally cold. Desire had dug hot fingers into him and tormented him constantly. He was beginning to understand the feeling that drives sex criminals insane and makes them attack women on the streets.

He turned from the mirror, staggering. He reached the bed and lay there a long while thinking of Nicki and the last words she had spoken.

"I've got to find Jane," he said at last, getting to his feet. "I've *got* to find her!" He wanted her now as he never had in his life, physically and because of the curse. He could clearly remember Nicki's voice saying, "His only hope for relief shall lie in you."

He telephoned the police, then McCory, the detective. "I'm not so interested in evidence for a divorce now," he said. "I just want to find her. Find her and bring her here, quick."

He thought the cook might be able to add some small clue that would help,

and he went downstairs to speak to her. She was not there. Pots still rested on the kitchen stove, and the gas was burning. There were dishes in the sink, but the hook where she always placed her hat was vacant. The suitcase-like purse which she carried was gone.

They had employed only two servants. Cameron was alone in the house now. Silence flowed in deep currents around him.

THAT afternoon Cameron visited a doctor. The man touched him, cautiously, with rubber gloves, prescribed, and sent him away. "If the pain keeps up," he said, "you better see another doctor. I—I don't think I can help you much." Cameron knew that he was afraid.

That night he tried to pick up a woman on the street. She was dressed for her profession: a skirt that clung tight over her hips so that every curve came through, the cloth wriggling like skin as she moved; a blouse open low enough to show her breasts and ready to be opened further. Her face was heavily made up, but pretty in a hard bold way. And she had a figure that offered a lot of fun. Cameron pulled his car over to the curb and called to her.

She came willingly enough, hips swaying, breasts jiggling free of any restraint. And Cameron felt desire that was like fire rush through him. His hands shook. He could scarcely breathe.

She said, "Hello, Baby," and leaned over the door of his car. Her dress swayed open. He gasped and reached for her and she giggled but made no move to draw away. "So you're in a hurry," she said.

It was then a car turned the corner and its lights swept over Cameron's face. For one second the girl stared, wild eyed. And then she screamed and jumped backward. But Cameron was frantic. He held to her, ripped her dress, leaped out

of the car after her. She kept screaming, fighting him until her clothes were torn from her.

A car had stopped and persons were running forward. Cameron leaped back into his automobile. The motor was still running and he tore down the street. He was sobbing, shaking all over.

As days passed the mark of the hand turned darkly purple; the sore between his eyes was a hole eating into his forehead, and more and more his eyes seemed to merge, to become a window of dark glass beyond which the cold and cowardly brutality of his soul was visible. Doctors looked at him and turned away, shuddering.

Within two weeks he gave up hope of finding Jane. She had vanished as completely as smoke. Frantically Cameron turned to science for help.

Time passed, and the man, lashed by terror, remembered it only in whirling, kaleidoscopic scenes, blurred pictures as from a jerky, old-fashioned cinema. There were doctors, dark-furnished consultation rooms, men in white coats with fear showing plainly in their eyes. There was the maddening, sickening pain under his skull, the pain that was driving him crazy. There were the white corridors of hospitals and other doctors, old bearded men with names that science bowed to; and there was the start and shock when they saw him, and the horror that came into their faces. There were white operating rooms, nurses white and silent as ghosts, the smell of anesthetics, the gleam of knives. And always there was the pain gnawing its insane way through his face.

And always there was the insane desire for women. He would buy them to come to him, making the arrangements over the phone, keeping in a dark room, watching their bodies grow white as they undressed before him. And then as his arms went around them they would see his face and tear free, screaming.

There was the vision of himself in mirrors, unchanged by operations, no scars left by the knives, but always the same purple print of the hand and the sore that was making his eyes into one.

Doctors, a long, seemingly endless whirl of them. Money being paid out, always money. And then there were doctors no more. He had no faith in science now. There were high vaulted rooms, expensive dark decorations, the soft voices of the mediums. There was the thin, esthetic face of the spiritualist staring back in terror, the man's long hands held upright between them. There was the voice saying, "It is a woman. She has been close to you. I cannot see her now, but you must find her. Only she can help you."

There was the intense darkness, the vague, ghostlike face that might have been Jane's, the voice crying, "Gone . . . gone . . . but only she can help."

HE remembered asking questions: of spiritualists, of fakers, of police and detective departments, of persons on the street: coming up to them while they started in horror, crying out, "Tell me. Have you seen her? My wife. I've got to find her! *I've got to find her!*" There were jails, steady-voiced men asking him questions, asylums and barred windows; then an open door and racing into the night. "Jane! Jane!! I can't stand this hurting any longer!" And there were attacks on women on the street wild, insane with desire, a sex-mad animal.

There was hunger and long nights of walking, of asking passersby for money, of seeing them toss him a dime before they turned and went too swiftly away. There were cheap, slovenly fortune tellers. Most of them told him nothing. He remembered only those who repeated the phrases; a woman . . . you must find her . . . no one else will help. . . .

And finally there was the old Negro man. Perhaps he could help to find—

Cameron found him without knowing how. There was one room, unbelievably filthy, down an alley in a city the name of which he did not know. The man was old as time, without hair and without eyes, it seemed, there in the murky gloom where he sat among a pile of dirty quilts upon the floor.

Cameron stood before him, crazy with the agony in his body. "Tell me," he begged. "Where is she? I've got to find her."

There was no fear in the Negro's face. Perhaps it was because he was blind and could not see that which had frightened the others. He sat among his blankets, swaying, humming some kind of gibberish through toothless gums. "Where is she?" Cameron shouted. "Tell me! Tell me!"

The Negro ceased to sway; the humming faded gently from his lips. A long while it was silent in the semi-dark. With blind eyes the old man looked past Cameron, past the clapboard walls of the hovel, past time and humanity. And quietly he spoke: "She is dead. She left your house one spring evening while you talked to a big blond man, a detective, and asked him to put her in the dozens. She went to the railroad depot, and she took a train to Birmingham. She took some poison out of her pocketbook and she drank it. Nobody knew who she was and they buried her in the poorground."

Cameron did not feel the pain in his head then. His hands were clenched so that blood oozed around his nails, but he did not know. "She—she committed suicide?" he said at last.

"She killed herself," the Negro said. "There ain't but one way you can reach her: you got to kill yourself. Folks who die by their hand don't go to heaven and they don't go to hell. She the only one who can help you, and you got to kill yourself to reach her."

The sound of Cameron's breathing was

harsh against the gloom. "I'll kill myself," he said. "I can't stand this pain any longer. I'll kill myself."

The Negro was humming his gibberish and swaying when Cameron went out. He had forgotten the white man and his trouble.

IT was not easy for John Cameron to commit suicide. "I've got to," he kept telling himself. "I can't stand this agony any longer. I can't live much longer like this—and if I die naturally. . . ." Suicide was the unforgivable sin; those who took their own lives went neither to heaven nor to hell. Even after death there would be no relief for Cameron, he believed, unless Jane granted it. And Jane had killed herself because of him. Only through suicide could he reach her and get released from agony.

But Cameron was a coward. When he stood face to face with death his muscles turned watery and he could not move.

There was a river in this city, a great muddy stream, and Cameron stood upon the levee looking down at it. The pain under his skull was beyond bearing; it seemed to be ripping his brain into shreds. There in the swirling water was relief. "I've only to jump in," he whispered, "to go down. . . . It'll be easy to die." But his whole body trembled at the thought.

Later he was in the small, filthy room where he lived. There was a piece of wire tied to a beam in the ceiling, and standing on a chair Cameron tied the other end of the wire around his neck. "I'll do it this time," he said aloud. "I'll step forward and kick the chair over as I swing.

He had trouble twisting the wire so that it wouldn't come loose, because his fingers were stiff and wet with perspiration. They slipped and he broke his fingernails. But he did not feel the pain because of the terror inside his heart and agony in his body. Once he stopped.

"I'll get down and rest for a moment," he said. "I've got to."

But he forced himself to stay in the chair and keep working at the wire. It seemed to be years during which his fingers fumbled close to his neck. "It would be easy to die some other way," he thought. "I'll be glad if someone would shoot me, if an automobile hit me on the street." But he was certain that accidental death would not bring him to Jane. Suicide was his only way.

At last the wire was ready. The floor seemed to swim in mist thousands of feet below him. Blood flowed into his face and his heart was cold. And then the door of the room opened and he turned and saw *her!*

It was Nicki. Her dark hair was thick about her face. Her lips were parted and damp and amorous. She whispered, "John, darling."

She was beautiful as no human being should be beautiful. Her body seemed to glow like lighted amber. Her breasts stood out from her body, superbly shaped and firm, quivering now as though the hand of desire had stirred them. "John," she whispered, "come to me."

He cried out hoarsely and stepped forward. He had forgotten that he stood upon the chair. He plunged downward. A scream started in his throat and then he reached the end of the wire and the scream cut short.

He clutched at the wire over his head, trying to pull himself up. He tried to rip at the twisted end of the loop. His body writhed snakelike, jerking, twisting, convulsing. His bulging eyes saw the closed door. There was no one in front of it now, perhaps there had never been anything but a vision.

An accidental death wouldn't. . . .

His movements grew more gentle. A shudder ran through him.

After that he hung motionless except for a slight swaying to and fro.

Monster of His Making

by HENRY
TREAT
SPERRY

With his own hands Dr. Kelland had created this monster of sadism, and now he was paying for it . . . paying with the life's blood of his only daughter!



DOCTOR JAMES KELLAND held his arms stiffly in front of him, his hands still dripping with carbolic solution while Ronald Eccles, his young assistant, helped him into his operating smock.

"Read me the card on this next case, Ronald," he said as the interne tied the cord about his waist. "It's a cardiac something-or-other, isn't it?"

"Yes." Eccles crossed to a small wood-

en file resting on a tile-topped table in the corner, while his senior wearily tried to push back a stray lock of grey hair from his forehead with his upper arm, carefully avoiding touching it with his hand.

Eccles thumbed through the file for a moment and extracted a pink card and read, "'Carlos Cafarelli, aged nine. Clinic patient for the past six months. Primary diagnosis, aneurism. Doctors McFee and Haggard saw the patient on the next visit

and postulated an auricular leak from a feeble diastolic murmur.' They note: 'Not precisely characteristic, and all other elements of the syndrome are lacking. Suggest that Dr. Kelland' . . ."

"Yes, yes," murmured the surgeon, a bit of the weariness leaving his face, "I remember, now, Ronald. A puzzling and interesting case. Do you know, I still haven't the faintest idea of what's wrong with the boy. He's an orphan—was sent here because he had been complaining of slight pains in his chest. Perhaps I am opening myself to censure for this, but I must have a look into that lad's midriff. Something decidedly wrong—something very strange. If I told you what I suspect, you'd think me mad."

The older man suddenly halted as he noticed that his assistant was looking at him strangely. "Never mind," he murmured. "See if the anesthetist is ready."

Five minutes later the surgeon stood above a small, sheet-covered body on a long operating table. In the glare of the powerful lamps his face was tightly drawn, hawklike, as he gazed down at the pale, brown countenance of his small patient. At a barely perceptible sign, a nurse on either side of the table pulled the sheet down, baring the boy's body to the hips, then one of them quickly swabbed it with antiseptic from throat to navel. The surgeon held out a rubber-gloved right hand, and instantly a gleaming scalpel was thrust into it by the nurse standing on his right. Dr. Kelland bent above the body and the knife moved swiftly, was instantly tossed into a shallow tray containing a colorless liquid which stood on a stand at his left. The surgeon stepped back. A long red line had appeared on the boy's bare, brown body, extending from a little to the left of his breastbone straight down the longitudinal plane for a distance of eight inches.

Instantly Eceles, the interne, and a nurse bent over the body, closing the

bleeding points with clamps, swabbing away the blood, leaving a gaping opening in the small torso. They moved like soldiers at drill, every movement precise, timed.

The nurse on the doctor's right had the next scalpel ready. It was time for the transverse section. She wondered why the doctor hesitated, why he didn't thrust out his hand to receive the instrument. She was never to know. She looked at the surgeon's face, still bent over the small body, and came perilously near screaming. She had never seen such an expression on a human face before. It was as if the doctor was looking, not at the body of a child, but at a demon from hell!

Suddenly the surgeon gave a choked gasp. He looked up, glaring about at his assistants with a white, drawn face and staring eyes, as though he had never seen them before. "Get out!" he whispered hoarsely, at last. "Get out—all of you!"

The interne gave voice to a half-formed exclamation of surprise and protest, but another look at the surgeon's face stopped him. Abruptly he turned on his heel and walked out of the room, followed by the fluttering startled nurses.

FOR perhaps a quarter of a minute after the door had closed behind them, Doctor Kelland stood with his eyes fixed on space. It was as though he were preparing himself to look again into the small fleshy pit which lay open before him, and at last the color came back a little to his parchment cheeks, his breathing became normal. He bent again above the boy's body.

But this time there was no hesitation or evidence of emotion about his conduct. He was once more the nerveless, precise surgeon, save that as he worked, enlarging the wound with section after section, he murmured half-audibly to himself:

"It's impossible, against nature. But it's

true. This *vena cava* shows considerable swelling here. That would correspond to the right auricle. That's its function—it must be. . . . Then the coronary artery, here, takes the place of the ventricles. And the vagus nerve is shrivelled to nothing—yet it functions—it must. . . .”

His all but inaudible murmurings ceased, and for fully fifteen more minutes he worked, feverishly. Then he suddenly dropped the last scalpel in the pan of anti-septic, which by now had taken on a pink tinge. He washed the wound, dressed it and applied bandages, passing them round and round the patient's tiny form. At last he finished and straightened up, looking down at the child on the operating table with a strange look of awe on his hawk-like features.

“It's incredible—unheard of!” he murmured. “What sort of creature are you, my lad? What manner of being will you become when you grow into manhood—you who have no heart?”

But if the good surgeon could have had his question answered at that moment, the scalpel in his hand would have plunged downward—to bury itself in the small chest that was without a heart.

* * *

Twenty-five Years Later

THE offices of Dr. Carl Cardell were as softly lighted, somberly gleaming, and altogether colorfully impressive as modern decorators, muralists and surgical supply houses could make them. In the anteroom, where many an important personage had cooled his heels awaiting Dr. Cardell's convenience, were a number of luxuriously overstuffed divans and chairs lined against the walls. In one of the smaller chairs sat a man whose aged face showed the signs of all but unbearable grief and anxiety. His haunted eyes roved about the room, lighting with fierce hope whenever the immaculately pretty nurse

at the reception desk lifted her inter-office phone, and dulling miserably whenever she nodded to someone else.

But at last the old man's turn came, and he almost sprang to the door into the private office in response to the nurse's signal. He passed through it quickly, and it swung noiselessly shut behind him as he stood just inside the entrance, his faded old eyes fixed on the darkly handsome young man who sat behind the great walnut desk.

“So,” said the young man with no sign of emotion in his voice, “we meet again, Doctor Kelland.”

The old man did not reply for several moments. He stood there, his white, bony hands hanging lankly at his sides, their fingers trembling slightly in response to the storm of emotions which was racking his old body.

“Yes, Carlos,” he said at last in a low, quavering voice.

The young man's face darkened. “My legal name is Carl Cardell, Doctor Kelland,” he snapped. “The change, as you know, has been registered in Washington. But perhaps you have decided to capitalize on your knowledge of my past. Maybe you have thought of a way to fill the purse which your incompetence as a surgeon has emptied. . . .”

A wry smile twisted the old man's thin lips. “That's like you,” he said. “You would think that.”

The young man's shoulders moved impatiently. “What do you want?” he said harshly. “I'm busy, Kelland.”

Unbidden the old surgeon sank into a chair and sighed as he passed a shaking hand over his forehead. “It's about Helen, Carlos. You read about her accident?”

Cardell's eyes suddenly quickened with interest. He leaned forward. “Helen? What accident?”

“About a month ago—while she was driving down from Greenwich, There had been a sleet storm. She went off the road

just below Peekskill. She got a few bruises and a bad shaking up, but nothing serious—we thought. Then ten days ago she began limping. The X-rays show a fractured patella. . . .”

The old man's eyes raised appealingly to the young surgeon's. “We've had our differences, Carlos. But surely you're fair enough to admit that I had great provocation for whatever I did to you. . . .”

Suddenly Kelland shuddered and broke off. God! This was worse than he had dreamed it would be. He was talking to this man in the terms a father might use to cajole an erring son. Erring! Murder—sadism. . . .

His sick mind whirled back through the years, back to the day when he, the then famous surgeon, Doctor James Kelland, had lifted the small, brown, weirdly functioning body of Carlos Cafarelli from the operating table, carried it into a private room and placed it on a cot. He had stood there for a long time gazing down at the boy.

A human being without a heart! Not really, of course—but with an attenuated, almost vestigial heart, like a fish or a snake. And that shrivelled vagus nerve. Obviously it performed its pneumogastric functions efficiently enough—but could it be that its attenuated condition was traceable to a neurotic disfunction? We say that the heart is the seat of the emotions simply because the rhythm of the heart is affected by the emotions of the brain, via the vagus nerve. And through the heart, the whole body is affected by every emotion we experience.

Would this child prove immune to the physiological reaction of emotion? And if he should—what a surgeon he would make! His would be a steadier hand than ever a human being possessed before. His would be an intellect clear and cold, aloof from the emotions which make cowards and bunglers of us all. His would be the icy fearlessness which penetrates fron-

tiers with as much assurance as though they were long-familiar territory. . . .

Again the old surgeon's gaunt body twitched with a spasm of revulsion. But he mustn't let the man before him suspect what was going on in his brain, if he could help it. Helen's life would be ruined if Cardell refused to take her case. Only Cardell could give her back the use of her right leg—save her from the life-long tragedy of being a cripple. . . .

There was a faint smile on Cardell's chiseled lips; his eyes, as always, were utterly devoid of expression.

“Save your breath, Kelland,” he said tonelessly. “I wouldn't lift a hand to save her if she were dying.”

SLOWLY the blood drained from the old surgeon's face, his hands clenching the arms of his chair until they were waxy white. But he had expected this. Why should he feel this ghastly, overwhelming rage against the man before him? He was not a man, really, he was an intelligent beast, nothing more.

It was no use. The heartless, cruel words aroused in the old surgeon's breast the wild desire to kill, to rid the earth of the soulless monster before him. . . . And yet, it was a monster which was partially of his own creation!

It took Doctor Kelland several moments to gain mastery over his emotions, but at last he was able to command a tone which was a pitiable mimicry of Cardell's icy aloofness.

“Of course, I expected this sort of a response from you, Carlos,” he said. “You can never forget that Helen always hated you, repulsed all your advances as she would those of an ape—thank God. But naturally I didn't come to you without weapons. You asked awhile ago if I had come to capitalize on my knowledge of your past. I have decided to, Carlos, but I do not ask for money—I ask for my daughter's happiness. That is the price of

my continued silence. Years ago I would have denounced you, had I not been obsessed with my ambition to make you the greatest surgeon of history. I have condoned murder, Carlos, in the name of that ambition, and now it is time for you to repay me."

A silence fell after Doctor Kelland's last words, and for many long moments the men stared at each other. Cardell's face, as always, was completely devoid of emotion, but in the depths of his dark eyes something that had been slumbering was quickening to life.

"A cracked patella," he said at last, "is hardly beyond the skill of the average surgeon."

The old practitioner ignored the heavy irony of the young man's tone. "It is a bad fracture," he said, shaking his grey head wearily. "You know as well as I that it is one spot where the slightest error results in permanent stiffening of the joint." Suddenly his lean hands knotted into fists, came down with passionate vehemence on the arms of the chair. "By God, Cafarelli," he cried, "you are going to do this thing—or you are going to the electric chair. The mangled bodies of two girls, now buried in Potter's Field, will rise up at my bidding and blast you to hell. Don't forget that! I'm not asking you to save Helen from being a cripple. . . . I'm commanding you to do it. And God help you if you aren't successful!"

The old man had risen to his feet, and stood there shaking like a wind-blown reed. The young man continued to look at him calmly, but the thing which lay at the back of his eyes was fully alive, now, a crawling worm of light which two young women had watched with depthless horror as their pain-blasted bodies had slowly sunk into the release of death.

"Very well, Doctor," he said quietly. "It is imperative that I be at my lodge in the Poconos early tomorrow morning. I

am trying out some new elaborations of Dr. W. S. Baer's method of treating marrow infections in my laboratory up there. If you don't object to driving Helen up, some time in the early afternoon."

His tone was precisely the same as he would have used to an old and valued client. Old Doctor Kelland shivered involuntarily. Then, wordlessly, he nodded, turned and went out the door.

As it closed softly behind him the strange eyes of Doctor Carl Cardell remained fixed on space, and the smile which slightly curved his handsome mouth portrayed the sort of delight that is known to the fiends of the deepest pit in Hell. . . .

THE laboratory and operating room which had been constructed in the rear of Doctor Cardell's mountain home lacked nothing which might be found in the most elaborately equipped modern hospital, save the more ponderous apparatus. Doctor Kelland glanced about in grim approval, as with the aid of Cardell, he carried his daughter to the operating table.

Helen Kelland's pretty face showed nothing of the pain which this journey was costing her. She had consented to this operation only after her father had argued with her for hours, for although she had heard of none of the monstrous acts of sadism which had punctuated the young surgeon's career, she instinctively sensed something in his nature that was vile and unnatural.

She sighed in relief and closed her eyes as the two men lowered her young, softly rounded figure to the operating table.

Her father immediately started to cut off the plaster cast which encased his daughter's leg. Before he had finished, Cardell rolled a tank of ether into place at the head of the table, and fitted a piece of sterile gauze into the anesthetic mask which was connected to the tank by a

length of thick hose. The stage was set.

Doctor Kelland moved to the head of the table and took up the mask. "Are you ready?" he asked in a strained voice.

Cardell, his sensitive fingers gently probing the flesh of Helen's knee, nodded absently, and the old surgeon lowered the mask to his daughter's face. He reached behind him with the other hand and turned a petcock on the tank. A soft, hissing sound filled the room.

Helen Kelland's firm young breasts rose and fell under the sheer covering of her light summer dress as she inhaled deeply of the soporific gas, and at last, as his long-practiced old eyes detected the symptoms of complete anesthesia, Doctor Kelland turned off the petcock and removed the mask.

"We're ready, Carlos," he said.

Cardell straightened, turned and walked casually toward the older man. Kelland watched his approach with mild wonder, but he had no warning of what was to come until Cardell, reaching him, suddenly threw himself upon the old surgeon, pinning his feeble arms to his sides with one encircling arm, as with his free hand he turned the petcock on the tank of ether and snatched up the mask.

Doctor Kelland had time for one startled cry, and then his voice was muffled by the anesthetic mask as Cardell clapped it over his mouth and nostrils, holding it firmly in place. Within the space of a few seconds the victim's body lost its tension and relaxed. Supporting it with one arm, Cardell at length turned off the petcock and carried the lax body to the west wall of the room. . . .

When Doctor Kelland regained consciousness he did not realize, for the first few seconds, that he was in the same room. Brightly illuminated before, it was now in a darkness which was relieved only by a red-rayed lamp which gave a spot light from the ceiling. The blinds had been drawn, closing out all but a few

stray beams of daylight, and as the old surgeon's eyes focused on what lay beneath the red-rayed lamp his aching muscles suddenly hardened with the transfixion of horror.

Helen was still on the operating table, but she was stark nude, now, and her arms and legs had been securely bound to the table with stout straps. The ruddy light bathed her slender body with a crimson effulgence which emphasized rather than obscured the satin texture of her flawless skin.

Kelland gasped and cried out in incredulous horror, attempting to lurch to his feet. Only then did he discover that he had been lashed securely to a chair against the west wall of the room, and was powerless to move an inch.

At his cry a weirdly incongruous figure stepped out of the gloom and into the ruby nimbus of the lamp. The figure was clothed in the black tights and jerkin of a long dead century, and only after it spoke was Doctor Kelland able to recognize Carl Cardell.

"Ah—I'm glad to see you're back with us, Doctor," said Cardell, and Kelland was conscious of a vibrancy in his voice that he had never heard before. "Now, as soon as your attractive daughter has recovered, we can proceed."

Something which he did not yet understand made the blood run cold in the old surgeon's body. "'Proceed—?'" he quavered. "What do you mean?"

"I refer to the operation, of course," said the young man. "Isn't that what we're here for?"

"Yes—yes . . . of course. But—?"

Then the blasting knowledge of what portended almost shocked the old man back into senselessness. His widening eyes fastened on his daughter's bare right knee, noted sickly that nothing had been done to it.

"Good God!" he whispered. "You wouldn't do that, Carlos. Even a sadist

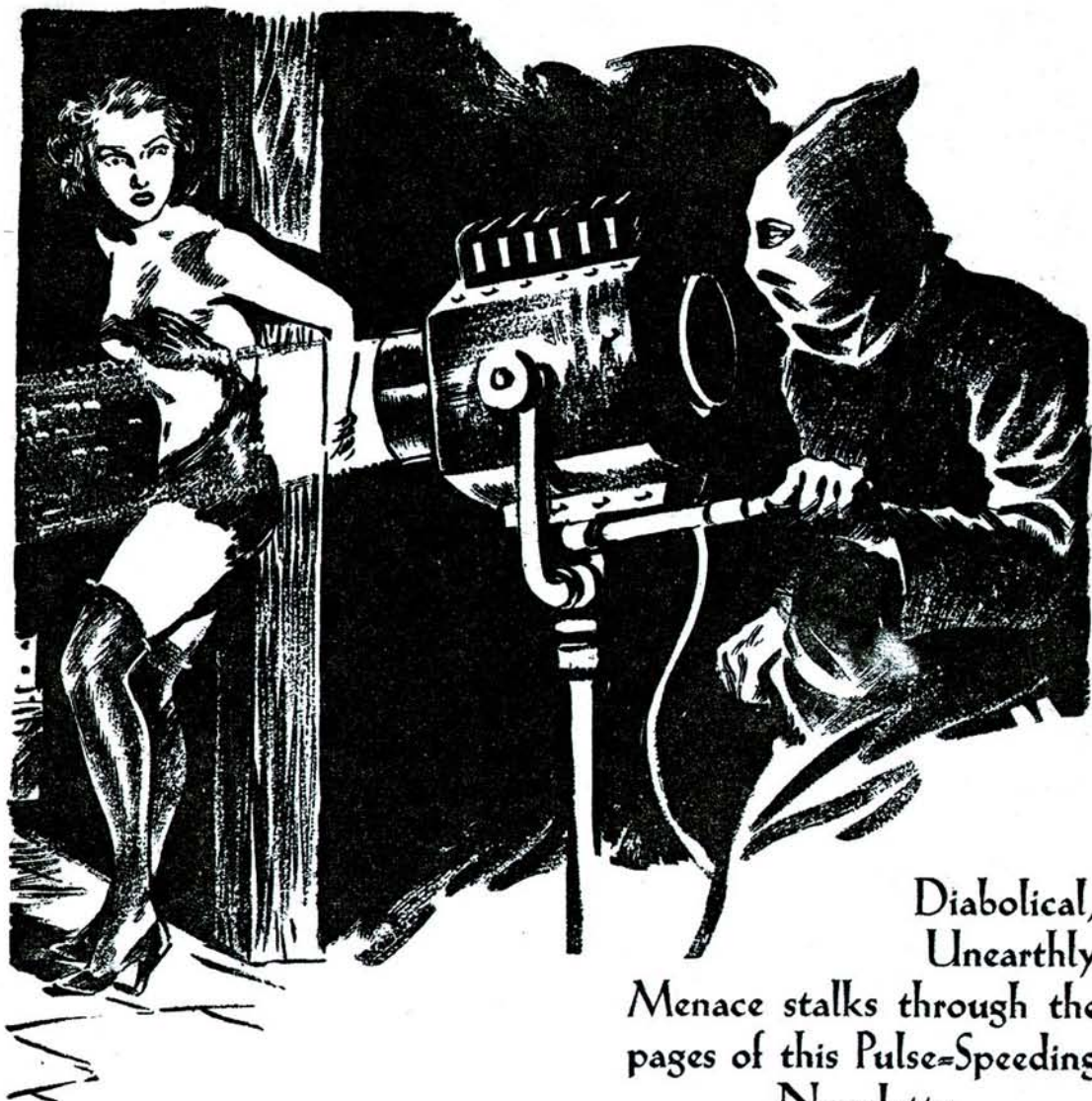
(Continued on page 105)



CORPSES ON PARADE

EDITH and EJLER JACOBSON

Putrescent masses of decayed flesh, they walked the streets of New York—the victims of the Rotting Death. Was Bonny, my beloved, destined to be of their number? Could I, alone, outwit the monsters that had terrorized the world's largest city? I would die trying. . . .



Diabolical,
Unearthly
Menace stalks through the
pages of this Pulse-Speeding
Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Dues Payable To Death

THEY buried Andy Carter on one of those bleak February mornings when the sun forgets to shine. He had a big turn-out; and I wasn't surprised to see every society editor in town at St. Anne's, dressed in mourning, with note-books and pencils constantly in hand, jotting down the notables present.

I guessed at the paragraph they'd give me: "Barry Amsterdam, New York's play-boy and thrill-seeker Number One, was grieving at the loss of his erstwhile playmate, the fabulously wealthy heir to the Carter utility millions, whose untimely death—" and so forth.

I only hoped they'd leave it at that. Because I *knew*, and so did others, that Andy Carter hadn't died of pneumonia. He had died of whatever it was that had made him a ghost-faced stranger the last time I'd seen him alive.

Or could you call that—life? That cringing shadow of a man who'd whimper as he pulled his hand from my clasp, refused to answer the natural questions a best friend would ask?

We didn't speak of it to each other, we who were the monied fraction of New York, but it was there, behind every bland mask of a face at the fashionable funeral. Andy Carter had died of stark, grisly terror!

"YOU look like the prelude to several long drinks Barry, my boy," said a slow voice at my elbow. It was Duke Livingstone, city editor of the Chronicle, and in times past, friend enough to squash some of my snappier high-jinks before they reached the headlines. Tall and baldish, with eyes like an owl's, and a mouth that was sometimes like a kid's and sometimes like a professor's. He was humorous; he had to be. A grimmer man might have gone crazy, knowing the things he knew about people and their shortcomings.

"I feel like the tail end of a bad life," I told him. "And what brings you here? Poor old Andy wasn't that important."

Duke put a long finger against his thin nose and wagged it. "Poor old Andy," he said, "died without explaining a few things that might be interesting to the press. For instance, what happened to the Carter money? Andy didn't live long enough to spend four million—"

"Duke, skip it," I urged. "Skip it as an editor, anyway. Don't hurt the Carters any more than you can help it."

Duke's owlish eyes followed my gaze to a brave erect little figure, black-veiled, at the front of St. Anne's. "And that's another thing," he drawled. "I have a hunch Bonny Carter knows more about her brother's death than any of us. Don't worry. I won't interrupt her grief—yet. You're a little sunk on her, aren't you?"

Sure. I was sunk on her. Until Andy's—well, we called it illness—we'd been talking Armonk every night of the week. Duke knew it, so I didn't bother telling him. And I guess he knew I didn't want him around, just then, because he vanished, like the good fellow he was.

There was something about Bonny Carter, even in the stark shock of sudden loss, that made a man think of the way spring felt when he was a kid. She was—well, perfect. Violet eyes, tawny hair, flawless skin; that was only a part of it. You could

feel something underneath that, a kind of beautiful purity that made you want to help her and protect her.

I don't know what she saw in me, except that I loved her; but I knew, from the way she reached out her hands to me the minute she saw me, that if anyone could comfort her in this tragedy, it was I. I swore silently to myself that I'd live up to her trust in me. God, how little we know our own follies! In spite of myself, through my very efforts to save her, I was to add to her sorrows!

"Barry," she whispered, "has he gone? That newspaper man, I mean?"

I held her fingertips, reverently. "Yes, he's gone," I said. "I asked him to. Duke's not a bad sort."

"No, he isn't. But I'm wary of reporters." She was a little breathless, and it was not the breathlessness that comes from tears. Her glance darted about unhappily, and then she beckoned me into a side aisle.

"I have to talk to you before we go to the cemetery," she said. "Barry, I don't know what I'll be like afterward. I've been so worried! We don't have a cent, Mother and I, and we don't know what's happened to it. Andy's club was awfully decent about paying for the funeral. But the living should pay for their own dead."

I tried to tell her that it would be all right, that the sweetest thing she could do for me would be to let me take care of her and her mother forever. But she retreated from me in a kind of appalled daze—and then I saw a look in those violet eyes that made me wish I'd died before I saw it.

It was the same look that had been on Andy's face the last time I saw him alive . . . a look that made you think terror, like a huge cancer, was amok in a living being, feeding on it and slowly causing its death.

She wasn't looking at me. She was looking at the pall-bearers, six black fig-

ures, moving with Andy's coffin down the aisle. Was it the candle-light, or the tragic occasion that made them seem what they were, that sad sextet? Or was it—my mind recoiled toward sanity from the thought—that same expression of panic gone hopeless that turned those faces, so familiar to cameramen around the town's hot-spots, into death's-heads of despair?

I DIDN'T see Bonny at the cemetery, nor after the burial, for the very good reason that the burial ended in a near-riot. I remembering thinking, then, that life had turned into a crazy caricature of death. I didn't know, you see, that I was as yet only in the hinterland of a horror that would blacken my world, later...

It was just after the first spadeful had been flung against the coffin. Grant Anders, the leading pall-bearer, stood very straight and gaunt at the edge of the grave, his loose black coat flapping in the February wind like the wing-humming of the Grim Reaper. Grant's family had come over on the *Mayflower*; he was an old classmate of mine. I thought that he was not looking too well.

Suddenly high, mirthless laughter pierced the reverent silence. It was Grant's voice. There was a sharp crackling sound. Grant faltered, and then plunged into the open grave, his dead fingers still linked around a smoking revolver.

I suppose I must have taken charge in the panic that followed, because when Sergeant Connor put a heavy hand on my shoulder, it seemed I had pushed eight men away from the body, and was engaged in slapping a middle-aged matron out of hysteria.

"I'm a friend of the Carters," I explained. "I know all these people. I tried to keep them from running wild."

"Ye've been doin' a bit of runnin' wild yerself, m'boy," said the sergeant, not unsympathetically. "However, I'm glad ye

let no one touch the body." He beckoned to a comrade in brass-and-blue, and they hoisted poor Grant out of the pit. "Suicide," they observed pithily.

Grant had been a great one for thrills when I knew him, and he was willing to pay for them whenever they offered. Consequently, he'd usually carried at least a century on him, generally more.

Yet, when we examined his pockets in that vain half-blind search for motive that follows every tremendously wrong human act, we found—a nickel, two pennies, a clean handkerchief, and one slip of paper in the otherwise empty wallet. It was a notice, from the *Quadrangle Club* that dues, amounting to ninety dollars quarterly, were payable on the first of February.

I thought dully, and it was a thought that clicked on an empty cartridge, that members of the *Quadrangle Club* seemed to be showing a singular mortality. First Andy—now Grant Anders. I was occupied with a resentment against Kitty Anders. Grant had married her on a dare, and it worked out as such marriages usually do. Grant had been good sport enough to stick it, but I was sure Kitty, with her erratic expensive tastes, had brought my former classmate to this pitiable end.

What a difference there is in women! I thanked God for the sweet sanity of my Bonny—little realizing that when I saw her next, she would seem far from sane.

I gave the sergeant my name, address and twenty dollars for being helpful. The funeral guests were gone; and what was left of Andy and Grant was in hands fit to deal with remains. Suddenly, after all the excitement, I began to feel a little sick—and more than anything in the world, I wanted to see Bonny.

NEITHER she nor her mother were at the town apartment when I got back to Manhattan. I floundered into an easy chair, and gritted my teeth over a Scotch

and soda. At ten-minute intervals, I phoned the Carters. By five in the afternoon, they were still out. I had just about decided to go over there and wait for them, when Suki, my man-servant, announced a visitor.

It was the city editor of the Chronicle. He helped himself to a Corona, and asked for a drink, and then his mouth that was humorous as a kid's came out with a bombshell.

He said, "Kitty Anders has just jumped out of the window." And then he sighed, and blew the kind of contented smoke rings you see in bedroom slipper ads.

When it penetrated, I shouted, "You're crazy! Or else everyone else is!"

"I always knew about everyone else," Duke answered. "You learn about them in my racket. Now, lad, I've done you a turn or two in our time. You knew the Anders better than I did. Would you say Kitty was the sort of woman who'd kill herself out of grief at the loss of a husband?"

I laughed, not happily. "Hardly. She's dead then?"

Duke nodded. "Most messily dead. It's a shame. She was a pretty woman. Say, didn't I tell you earlier you needed a drink? Keeps a man's stomach down. Swallow one, and I'll take you over for a look at the corpse. There's some kind of cop who says you know the answer."

I damned Sergeant Connor in my private thoughts, and went to the Anders' apartment on East Seventy-third in a press car. I'd avoided that apartment since Grant's marriage—it was gaudy, and there seemed to be a price tag on everything, screaming expense. I dreaded, too, the habitual reek of over-applied Oriental perfumes that had been a perfect expression of Kitty.

I needn't have. No hint of bottled flowers was in that air. Instead, a sultry foulness, faint but undeniable, hit us the

moment we entered. Duke's long nose wrinkled in distaste. I wasn't imagining it.

In the bedroom, surrounded by gew-gaws she would never enjoy again, lay Kitty Anders, and for salon she had the coroner, the press and the law. And now I placed that odor of corruption; it proceeded from the dead woman's decently shrouded body.

I said, "She's been dead for days!" and the coroner looked at me curiously and shook his head. . . .

"Take yerself a look," said Sergeant Connor, pulling the sheet from Kitty's face. I looked—and something in me froze. I'm not a coward; I've been in some tough spots in my time and laughed afterward, but this was different. In the first place, with the removal of the sheet, the stench became almost overpowering—as though Kitty had been pregnant with death before she died!

And on the dead face was that unnameable expression of hopeless despair that I had seen on too many faces that day. That was it—she had carried death within her like an unborn evil—I turned away, half-sick with a fear I dared not name to myself.

"Ye wouldn't know what makes the poor girl smell so horrible, would ye?" asked the sergeant.

I said, "The living don't smell like that, nor fresh corpses. . . ."

The coroner straightened, and looked at me. He was haggard and perplexed "Of course not. But we have sworn testimony that Mrs. Anders was alive this morning, that she shouted a warning to passers-by before she jumped. . . ." he shrugged, and went into the next room. Duke followed him, hoping, I suppose, to get a more complete report. The sergeant was busy with Kitty's effects.

I don't know what kept me in that tomb-smelling room, unless it were fear of the haunting uncertainty of the thing.

Some malign fate seemed amok among my friends; tomorrow, unless I learned its source of power, it might strike nearer home. . . .

No one else had seen the small white thing clutched by those stiff white fingers. No one saw me as I stooped to wrest the thing from their clasp.

The fingers were soft to the bone, pulpy as though maggot-ridden. I forced myself to delve there. . . . and the woman's hand turned to putty in mine, like a squashed putrescent fruit! I was a man; I didn't get sick on the spot. That would come later.

In her hand had been a membership card to the Quadrangle Club.

CHAPTER TWO

One Ticket To Hell

"SNAP out of it," Duke kept telling me, on the way back. "You're white, Barry. Well, do you know any more than I do? The sarge seemed to think you might. I'd like to get it into a six o'clock extra."

I didn't answer, because I was swallowing to keep my stomach where it belonged. Besides, what was there to say? Duke had a nose; he knew as much as I did.

Was it true, or was my imagination playing tricks on my memory? That last time Andy had retreated from me, at the Antler Bar, hadn't I thought, "What ghastly shaving lotion the lad uses!" For there *had* been a super-abundance of scent about him, a scent with sickly-rancid undertones. . . . God, it was true! Whatever they died of, these ill-fated things, they'd been dying of it for a long time before! Some loathsome disease, that rotted all of them, heart and brain last. . . . I swallowed, harder than ever, and managed to talk. "Looks like the dissolution of the upper classes. The snootiest club in town is really getting something to turn its nose." And I showed him the rumpled

card I'd torn from those rotted fingers.

"Shut up," Duke said sharply. "You're letting it get you. Come back with me while I put the Chronicle to bed. She'll run an article on the Quadrangle Club that ought to stop the slaughter. You might have two cents to put in."

I said, "No," because I remembered, with tightening heart muscles, that I hadn't located Bonny all day. And she had told me that morning that she owed the cost of Andy's funeral to—the Quadrangle Club! No wonder she had looked as though doom were a little way off, watching her helpless struggle with malevolent and unfathomable eyes! It was enough to drive a man mad, that sinister shadow whose substance I could not perceive!

There was no need to phone. I knew, when I saw the mink coat and black hat on a couch in the foyer, that I had a most welcome guest. I heard the automatic playing the Pathetique symphony.

Bonny crouched, head buried in her elbows, in a big chair. Her small, black-robed body swayed mournfully to the third movement. God, I was glad to see her—and not to—to smell her!

She was pure, thank God, and untainted. Still had the same faint toilet water scent about her, woody with lavender . . . she winced when I put my hands on her shoulders.

"Bonny, where have you been all day?" I asked anxiously.

She turned to me a white face in which the violet eyes looked like great bruises. "Dodging reporters," she answered. "Barry, I have to stay here tonight."

"You can't," I answered, with a sharpness that was as much reproof to myself as to her. "There aren't enough rooms. And—" I added, laughing feebly—"no chaperone."

"Chaperone!" She laughed with me, but it was a high, uncomfortable laugh that made my flesh creep. "Bitter music," she commented, and then: "What do I

need with a chaperone? I want protection, just for tonight."

I shook her, for she was still laughing in that bitter, almost hysterical way, but it had no effect. "Bonny, you've got to tell me! What are you afraid of?"

She shuddered. "Everything—even you. You've been wicked in your time, haven't you, Barry? Awfully wicked... but I love you."

That wasn't like Bonny. I'd told her all about myself, and the low-lights of my past, and she'd been pretty magnanimous about it. She wasn't one to rake up old ashes. Suddenly I hated that poignant music; like a crossed child, I snatched the record. I heard the needle whine once, and then the third movement of the symphony was in a hundred fragments on the floor.

"I felt that way—once," Bonny told me. She had stopped laughing. Her voice was flat, hopeless. "Now it doesn't matter. Can I stay tonight, Barry? It may be the last time I'll ever be near you..."

I shouted, "For God's sake, talk straight! If you'd only tell me what's terrifying you—you can't stay here. Think, Bonny. We buried Andy this morning. You don't want to go to hell tonight, do you?"

She had resumed her rocking back and forth, in the cradle of her own arms. "Andy this morning," she crooned. "Tomorrow—Kitty. And the day after—who knows? Maybe Bonny. Poor Kitty. Poor Bonny."

I couldn't bear the picture her insane sing-song conjured in my mind. Bonny with her tawny hair to die like Kitty! I slapped my sweetheart, hard. She whimpered—and laughed!

I remember pleading and haranguing alternately, but nothing shook Bonny from her mad mood. I shot questions about the Quadrangle Club at her, but she kept crooning and laughing to her-

self, in the ghastly mockery of a lullaby. Finally I said, "I'm calling up your mother. She'll spank you for this."

"Mother's gone," said Bonny. "Poor Mother!" A telephone call to the Carters' proved she was right, for the time being, anyway.

I'd had enough skirting on the edge of nerve-strangling mystery. I could think of only one man who might know something—a very little something—and if I pooled my knowledge with his, we might together find a ray of blessed light.

"Suki," I shouted, forgetting that there were still human ears left not deafened by madness. "Take care of Miss Carter. Don't let anyone in. I'll be back in an hour." I handed the boy my gun. He blinked, and nodded. Suki was a good boy, loyal and intelligent.

Bonny laughed as I walked out into the night.

DUKE wasn't at the office when I got there. They told me he'd gone to check some material for a special article on the Quadrangle Club, featured for front page release in the morning. I groaned, fell into Duke's swivel chair, and waited.

There wasn't much humor in Duke's face when he came in, at eleven-thirty. He took one look at me, and said, "When did you eat last?"

"I don't know. Maybe this morning."

"Let's step across the street. I won't say what I have to say to a guy with an empty stomach."

I didn't like the ham and eggs. I wouldn't have liked nectar and ambrosia, at that point. But Duke sat over me sternly, making me gulp the stuff down anyhow, and he only relaxed over my half-finished cup of coffee.

"I've been over to the Quadrangle Club," he said harshly. "An empty layout; big brownstone front, thick curtains, and a stuffed butler at the door. Couldn't get

in, though. God knows how they've kept the cops out after today's high-jinks. They sponsored the funeral, didn't they? Well, you need a ticket from the Social Register to crash. I didn't want to waste time."

I said I'd heard all that before. The Quadrangle Club had been one of those things in the background all my life, like the Horse Show.

"My lad," said Duke, his face one long grimace from the bald spot on his brow to the cleft in his narrow chin; "do you know whom I saw in the lobby, just past the butler?"

"No. You look as though it might have been a ghost."

"Correct," said the Duke. "It was Andy Carter."

There are points beyond which the mind cannot go, discrepancies of evidence which only the insane may enter and live. I knew, as soon as Duke told me that *I believed him*. And I know, too, that something snapped in my brain. It had to. I started moving, and moving fast.

First, I drove through every red light on the route to my own apartment. I wasn't surprised to find Suki blubbering and frantic, and Bonny gone. That was part of the grotesquely hideous nightmare.

"Miss Carter get telephone call. I not can stop her. She say—" Suki paused, and there was stark fear in his face—"her brother want her, she go. Is not Miss Carter's brother dead this morning?"

Dead! Kitty Anders must have been dead a week before she stopped moving about in the land of the living! What was to keep a corpse from rising then, if the dead forgot to die?

It was only after I got to the Quadrangle Club that the horror stopped. I put one finger on the doorbell and kept it there. The door opened to the width of a man's arm. Something bright flared astoundingly in my face, and blinded me. I didn't see or feel whatever it was that smashed down on my skull and sent me

into oblivion with a burst of shooting stars.

I FELT my head going round and round, just before I opened my eyes, I expected to wake up in hell, but they'd canceled that trip, apparently, because I was in my own bed, with Suki's worried brown face bending over me, and Duke Livingstone's back between me and the window.

Duke's mouth puckered as he turned. "Still with us?" he said. "When I found you in the gutter, you looked as though you had been done in for good." He paused and then exploded: "Nerts. What a set-up! The cops won't even touch it!"

My mouth was dry, and there was a weight on top of my head, where I'd been cracked, that seemed a truckload. I said, "I'm not so sure," and reached for the phone. Sergeant Connor told me cheerily that everything was under control.

"Then why the hell don't you raid that place?" I told him.

The Sergeant answered, his cheer considerably shaken, "Now, me boy, we can't raid a respectable private club because of a coincidence."

"A damned peculiar coincidence!"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "We got orders—not to touch it!" When I expostulated, there was a soft click. . . .

"Barry, there's only one way," Duke's voice was weary, as though he'd been up every night for a million years. "You've got that ticket I haven't got. You're a Social Register lad. Get in touch with the Quadrangle Club, and apply for membership."

It was a ticket, all right. A ticket to hell. But maybe I'd find Bonny in hell. . . . A brisk secretarial voice at the other end of the wire told me I would be investigated, and if I furnished the customary references, my membership would be considered. . . .

Duke's article on the front page of the Chronicle that morning was one of those

brave damfool things that only cub reporters and veteran editors have the nerve to do. He told his story simply, starting with Andy's funeral. There was Grant's suicide, and Kitty's. He stated flatly that Kitty hadn't killed herself for Grant's sake. "The popular young matron," said he, "was anything but a faithful and loving wife."

He hauled over the Quadrangle Club, briefly mentioning its history as a tony haven for the best people of the Eighties; and he posed the question, reasonably enough, "Why has the ha-cha generation of blue-bloods joined the brownstone tradition? Can it be that behind those venerable portals there is a stimulus for those jaded appetites; a pleasure so exhaustive that its ending leaves nothing but self-loathing and desire for death?"

Duke grinned at me when I looked up at him, like a small boy who has made an offensive precocious remark and expects to be told how bright he is.

I said, "Nice work, Duke. I'm glad you left your latest hunches about the Carters out of it. That was decent."

"A newspaperman is never decent. I left that out because I may not have proof."

"Proof!" I howled. "You can't prove anything. The Chronicle's going to run into the biggest libel suit in history."

Duke smiled his sad, crooked, smile. "Maybe. But it won't go to trial tomorrow. And by the time we get our day in court, I'm gambling we'll have proof enough to halt the whole blamed mess."

I was finishing the second cup of black coffee. "And where would you be getting it?" I said.

Duke didn't answer, just kept looking at me.

"I know," I said. "You think I'm going to get it for you. God, I hope I can! I hope I can find *Bonny*—" I didn't dodge his whimsical blow to the chin. It was his way of bucking me up.

"You'll find her," he assured me. "If there's anyone who can crack the story, it's you. If you want an expense account on the Chronicle. . . ."

I said, "No. I'm on my own."

"Got to be going," said the Duke. "Think it over, Barry. A big paper has resources. Files of information, contacts . . . it can send you inside places you couldn't crack yourself. It's a help."

I agreed with him. It was the brightest ray of light I'd seen yet. Duke gave me a press card, informing the police that Barry Amsterdam was working for the New York Chronicle, and left me to my own devices.

CHAPTER THREE

Doom Cracks Its Whip

JUDGE RAINEY told me that afternoon in his office, "If I hadn't known your uncle, Barry, I'd throw you out! What do you mean, I'm blocking police investigation! Why would I do a thing like that? Why, I don't even belong to the damned club!"

"But," I insisted, "you're the only political force in town that could. The others don't come from your kind of family."

The Judge, a big man with a magnificent silver head, forgot that he'd known my uncle. He threw me out. . . .

It seemed hopeless, hopeless. It might be three weeks before I'd pass that brownstone front myself, and in the meantime, *Bonny*. . . . I felt dry in the throat every time I thought of *Bonny*. It was like the thirst of a dying man lost in the Sahara.

Something made me look up as I walked through the front lobby of the office building. Something indescribably vile . . . and familiar. An odor of the charnel-house. . . .

A woman, swathed to the eyebrows in silver fox, had just passed me. I recognized her at once as Judge Rainey's young and beautiful second wife. I ran after her, and grabbed her arm. She turned, and. . .

I—I had known Thea Rainey as one of the town's huskier young glamor girls, seen her cantering an hour after dawn, heard her throaty alive laugh . . . and now I saw her with the cancer of death almost victorious in her wasted frame!

"Barry Amsterdam," she said, and then she laughed—but what a laugh! The ghost of her youth, chuckling in hell . . . and, God help her, she stank. Under the heaviness of her perfume, there was a rank odor of decaying flesh. . . .

I had dropped her arm, but she retrieved mine. I shuddered at the touch, and she knew it, and licked her lips.

"They'll get you too," she whispered. "You're a nice lad, Barry. Once—you didn't know it, did you?—I fancied I loved you. They'll bring you to me in death, Barry . . . they'll let me kiss you. . . ."

I went back to Thea's apartment with her. It took every ounce of stomach I had, but I went. She promised she'd talk, if we were alone . . . she even seemed to know where Bonny was. . . .

Her butler served us sandwiches and highballs. She touched neither. When I had pleaded with her for agonizing minutes, she rose. Her chalky face assumed an expression of terrible despair.

"You want to know what they do to us?" she whispered, tensely, crazily. "I'll show you!" Before I could stop her, she had zipped her dress open from throat to hem. She stepped out of it. I cried, "Stop!" but she didn't stop. She stepped out of her slip, and I saw the white diaphragm below her brassiere, gleaming uncleanly . . . she tore off the brassiere, and the silk shorts. In hideous nudity, she advanced one step toward me. Her breasts, her hips, seemed half-decomposed . . . and the smell! It was like the fumes that might arise from a city's garbage lying for hours under an August sun. . . .

And then I was engulfed in a putrefaction that had been the beauty of Thea Rainey. Her arm, white as the under-

side of a fish belly, twined about my neck, she pressed her naked body to me, she darted her face close to mine.

I felt the kiss of loathsome death, and when I would have withdrawn, she pressed closer. Then—I've read about lips melting in an embrace, but I'll never read it again without being sick. For that was exactly what Thea's lips did. They squashed, with the same hideous *plosh* of rotten fruit that had marked the disintegration of Kitty's hand. . . .

I didn't turn to look. I ran. My mouth felt ghoulishly filthy, as though I were a cannibal epicure. I ran right to the Chronicle office.

"Duke," I said, "I know why the police won't touch it. It's not Rainey. It's Rainey's wife. . . ."

And then I was suddenly very sick.

THEA RAINEY'S funeral was held next day at St. Anne's. Society was there; but it was a weirdly changed society from the polite group that had met two days before at Andy Carter's funeral. In fifty hours, the upper crust of Manhattan had been transformed to a cowering half-idiocy . . . no one mentioned the haste of the burial. We were thinking of other things. Each of us seemed menaced by some unholy destruction. We did not speak to each other.

More, by two score, were the faces that wore an expression of hopeless despair. And we knew, we who had escaped so far, that they were the doomed . . . they told us nothing, though they had been our friends, and our loved ones.

There was a great wreath of flowers from the Quadrangle Club. But its roses and lilies were not enough to combat the mingled odor of strong perfumes that rose from those who had come to honor the dead. Perfumes that covered a vague but unmistakable odor of decay. Thea Rainey had been emblamed cleverly; they had drained her blood and replaced the broken

features with wax. But for her friends, the dying, no such service had been rendered.

I didn't go to the burial. I needed fresh air. I walked aimlessly about town that forenoon. I wasn't quite sane, I think. A dozen times, I followed some woman simply because she had red hair . . . but she was never Bonny.

Bonny! Had the thing touched her yet, the fifty disease that a doctor in Thea's case, had despairingly named heart disease? Why hadn't she been at the funeral? Was she stolen, or killed?

I saw the last cars of Thea's cortège winding southward on Park. Dully I watched them; they were bound for a cemetery in Brooklyn.

But the last—was that a glimpse of tawny hair I caught behind the curtained window—made a U-turn, and headed north. North! They had buried Andy in Westchester . . . and Bonny had said she was going to—her brother!

I taxied to my garage, took my car, and stamped on the accelerator. It wasn't clever, half-blinded with dread as I was; for by the time I'd located Sergeant Connor, and had him explain me out of traffic court in Yonkers, it was three-thirty. I was at Hawthorne by five . . . and when I came to the cemetery night was on me. Night without a moon. . . .

The gates were locked, so I clambered over the wall. In the darkness the tombstones were a glimmering reproach to one who would discover their secrets. I crept along stealthily to Andy's grave. Once I saw a swinging lantern, and I ducked behind a monument, hugging the dank cold earth that was nourished on death.

But there were no lights where we had left Andy. *There was a pile of fresh earth where his stone had been, and the grave-pit yawned wide open.* With the cold sweat pouring down my face, I peered from behind the dirt-pile. . . .

Two hooded figures stood on either side

of the unlidded coffin. And lying within, her pale hands crossed over the emblaming sheet, her violet eyes alive with mad fear, was Bonny!

They were lifting the lid, ready to put it into place . . . I jumped toward the nearest figure, caught him in a frantic half-Nelson, and pushed. Like a frightened ghost, the other figure leapt away.

"Barry, you don't know what you're doing!" shrieked Bonny. I didn't listen. I kept pushing. Beneath the black robe, I felt that familiar puttness.

Bonny stood up in the coffin, her hair falling over her shoulders, pure as a dream of heaven in her white dead-dress. "Barry, let me die. . . . This isn't a hard death! It's over so soon . . . not like the others. . . . Let me save you, Barry!"

DIMLY, through the wild hate that throbbled in my brain, I knew that she was giving her life for my salvation. I didn't want that, God, no! I pushed, a little harder . . . and the brain of the hooded thing splashed out of the rotted skull. I dropped the body. It fell with a soft whoosh against the coffin. When I snatched off the hood, I saw no face, only battered brain and bone. . . .

Bonny screamed. I turned, and saw the other hooded thing reaching down on me with the butt end of a revolver. No time to duck . . . I took it.

Later, I would remember as though in a dream, that a black devil had carried Bonny away. But it would be no dream, because when I awoke, just before dawn, I was to find myself lying, cold and aching, across an open coffin in an open grave.

When I got back to town that morning, Suki handed me a single thing that had come by mail. It was a neat little invitation, black on white, asking me to attend my initiation at the Quadrangle Club that night, with the polite reminder, "Formal," in a lower left-hand corner. I looked at it till the letters danced—and fell into a

drugged sleep of nervous exhaustion.

I awoke toward evening. Suki had laid out my soup and fish. I felt fresher, freer—to think for the first time in days. That card . . . they'd rushed it, I thought . . . and I wondered if there were not some connection between last night's episode at the grave, and this morning's invitation. Either last night I had blundered on too much, or else . . . and another thought made me pause . . . or else the whole thing had been deliberate, that glimpse I'd caught of Bonny, luring me to witness a witless scene in a graveyard.

Too many horrors had forced themselves on my awareness in the immediate past. As I dressed, I thought how incredible it should be that I was going to the Quadrangle Club to unearth the grisliest of imaginable horrors . . . the Quadrangle Club, that had been for fifty years a guarded haven of wealth and prestige. It was almost insane, but then, my world had been insane for days.

Even as I drove over, the thought persisted that I was going on a fool's errand. I wondered why . . . somewhere at the back of my head a gap persisted, something I should have known, that eluded my dulled senses.

I pulled myself together, and went through the brownstone portals.

Old-generation tone. Cut-glass chandeliers, and the gentlemen taking their port in the card room. That was the Quadrangle Club. I recognized most of the members of my own set, the moderns and their would-be modern mammas and papas.

But we were stiff and strange with each other. Incense burned almost overpoweringly everywhere, but it was not enough to hide that other smell. . . Half the faces were chalky and tragic, the other half like polite masks over real terror. Nowhere did I see Bonny.

"So you've joined too, Barry," Mona Wells said to me. She was a charming

kid, lithe and dark and vibrant, recently married to a friend of mine, Martin Wells. But here, for a reason I could not fathom, her brown eyes were pools of sorrow.

I said, "Where's Mart? Haven't seen him around for a while."

The wine-glass in her fingers cracked at the stem. Her eyes grew mad. "Martin's been ill," she whispered. Then, "He shot himself at seven this evening. I left him lying in his blood."

"My God, Mona! What are you doing at—a party?"

"Party!" Her voice was the voice of an animal being tortured. "It was my invitation to join . . ."

When I tried to follow her, she lost herself among the guests.

IT was all I could do to keep from running berserk among the guests, shaking them like rats to get the information I wanted. They were all people in whose families there had been recent tragedy—like Mona. Had Martin told her before he died? Was that why he died? And where was Bonny? Did she know . . . too much, too?

Music came from the dim hallway, and in the glittering drawing-room, guests were dancing. What a dance that was! Like the slow waltz of decaying corpses, who had entered hell in evening dress!

I stood and watched vainly among them for a girl with tawny hair. I felt a light tap on my shoulder, and there stood the portly butler, with Mona Wells, white and shaken, at his side.

"Mr. Amsterdam, if you please, I've received word that the initiation is to begin. Won't you come upstairs for your interview?"

We followed him up the winding old-fashioned staircase, Mona still refusing to look at me. At the end of a corridor, the butler swung open a door, and deferentially waited for me to enter. "In here, sir . . ." I paused, for the room was in darkness.

Then I shrugged my shoulders. Nothing much was left to lose . . . I passed the obsequious figure and went into darkness.

I heard the click of a lock behind me, and footsteps fading down the hall.

I found a wall by groping, and leaned against it. A voice, muffled as though it came through a filtered microphone, said, "That will do nicely, Barry Amsterdam. You may stand as you are."

I answered, "Who the hell are you?" My voice sounded grim, as though it were echoing from wall to wall of that small room, as though the room were a catacomb. . . .

"I am Justice, if you like a name." The voice, I told myself, in spite of the stiffness of those short hairs at my nape, must be human. Again that pestering gap! It was a joke. . . . I said as much.

"This is not a joke," the voice went on. "Justice has long been due to you and your kind—parasites, despoilers, fatteners on the land! There is in each of your lives, or in the lives of those you pretend to love, some crime too ugly for public knowledge. But Justice knows!"

Of course it was a human voice! Damnably human! That pestering thought at the back of my head was beginning to click . . . in a moment, I'd have my finger on it. I said, "What is this? Blackmail?"

As though it had not heard me, the muffled voice continued, "And you, Barry Amsterdam . . . we have waited for you a long, long time! Too long you have escaped the fate you merit, but you will not escape now."

The thing had clicked. *I knew the name of the man behind that voice.* It had been so evident, all along, that I'd missed it! Exultantly I realized that at last I was one step ahead of him, because I knew who he was, and he didn't know I knew it. I couldn't blurt it out now. It might have been my death sentence.

To keep my voice steady, I yelled, "So what?"

"You will mail to the Quadrangle Club in the morning a check for one hundred thousand dollars. You will shun the society of friends. You will do our bidding, come at our call, and respond out of your generosity to any further call for funds."

"The hell I will!"

"You will do these things, or else the death that rots before it kills will come to Bonny Carter."

I shouted, "You dirty perverted murderer!" I wanted to hit something, hard, but you can't hit at a voice.

"We are glad to accommodate with proof," the voice slurred on. Then I *had* to grab at the wall, because the floor started tilting under me, like one of those crazy things at Coney Island. I felt myself slipping, gently, to a lower level in the building where there was light.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Scent Of Burning Flesh

I BLINKED a little. I was in a sort of cage, constructed by driving iron bars in a semicircle from floor to ceiling of a stone-walled room. The back wall of the cage was the section of the floor that had just swung down. At a height of ten feet there was a gap in the rails, through which I had fallen; and a sort of gate in front of me, latched on the outside.

The room beyond my cage was large and rectangular and had a platform extending across the far end. A big machine, something like a gigantic searchlight, occupied the left side of it. Wide cracks of light in the long wall to my left indicated a shut door.

There was a chair just in front of the camera-thing, a wooden chair, with leather straps about the legs and back. I peered, trying to find a sign of life in the purplish dimness.

Far to the left, in the shadows, two figures gleamed, luminously white. I cried out in sheer horror at the sight of them

... they were women, nude, bound upright to stone pillars.

One of them was Bonny. Bands of adhesive covered her mouth.

Had I found her—too late? I went crazy mad, tried to force the steel bars that kept me from her, shouted insane challenges to the thing that had done this to us.

Two black-robed figures stepped from behind the machine. One of them stood guard over the helpless women; it was hooded, and I recognized it as the thing that had spirited Bonny out of her brother's coffin, that had taunted me a few minutes ago in the dark room.

I was cold with despair, because I *knew* who he was. I *knew*, but my knowledge had come too late—I could do nothing. And Bonny in deadly danger. . . .

The other figure was not hooded—it was the club's butler! He descended from the platform and walked toward me, coming to a stop just out of reach of my arms. His robe fell open a little and I caught a glimpse of the heavy automatic that nestled in its holster under his shoulder. God! I thought. If I could only get my hands on that gun for thirty seconds!

The butler said, "Sir, the master wishes you to witness an exhibition. He trusts it will bring you around to his way of thinking." He retreated, and while my heart went berserk in my throat, I saw him unbind one of the struggling nude figures, and strap her to the plain wooden chair.

Not Bonny, thank God! The girl facing that evil-looking machine was Mona Wells. Like a demon lecturer explaining his lantern slides, the butler continued suavely, "Mrs. Wells has also refused to accede to our wishes. She has one more chance before we accomplish her end—a little prematurely, to be sure."

Mona shrieked in horror, "I won't do it! You can't make me, you murdering fiends! You got Martin, didn't you?

Well, you can send me after him!"

As though it were a step in a routine, the butler opened that door on the left wall . . . light flooded the chamber. There, behind a network of iron bars, like the door to a prison, their foul white faces mad with hatred of the fiend who had destroyed them, stood the legion of the cursed—the rotting! Beyond them, I saw the sad but still-human faces of the others.

"Mrs. Wells," said the butler, "will do nicely for your education, Mr. Amsterdam." He stepped behind the machine. I heard a whirring sound, and there was a sudden, blinding flash of light accompanied by the sickening smell of burnt flesh. Mona shrieked again. God, I'll hear those shrieks in a dream the night before I die!

It had happened! That was all it took; a whirring sound, a flash of light, and you—started to rot! I joined her shrieks. Over and over again I screamed at the hooded monster and the inhuman butler: "You damned swine! You damned swine!"

Mona's voice died to a whine, and became silent. She slumped in her bonds. The butler undid her straps and led her back to the pillar and tied her up again. Her head slumped forward on her chest—she was unconscious. I hoped that she was dead.

The butler glanced at her once and then came over and stood near my cage—a little nearer than before. I could have almost reached out and touched him. A sudden inspiration flashed through my mind. It was a slim and desperate chance . . . but it *might* work! If only I could get him one step closer. . . .

The rotting corpses who once were my friends were silent now behind their bars—silent with hopeless terror and despair.

THE hooded figure turned toward me. An unholy chuckle escaped from under the hood. "Do you see your friends

now, Barry Amsterdam? Do you see them as they are? As you will be soon? Their bodies are rotting now even as their souls rotted long ago. It is Justice and they are afraid of Justice. They are afraid of me! Those who have not yet felt the power of my—for want of a better name, shall be call it Radium X-Ray?—treatment, know that their time to face it will surely come.

"They don't know me, Barry Amsterdam, these sons and daughters of the four hundred. I am only one of the forty million. But they are afraid of me! They know that they are safe only so long as they obey me. They cannot escape, for no matter where they go, I can follow them—because they don't know who I am. I can sit beside them on the train or drink with them at their houses, and they will not know that Justice has overtaken them. They will never know—until it is too late and their souls are roasting in hell!"

He stopped suddenly and gestured toward Bonny. "Perhaps another demonstration will convince you, Barry Amsterdam, that it is better to submit to me. She no longer has any money, so she can no longer obey my commands. It is time for her to meet the death her rotten soul deserves."

It had come! I could wait no longer. The single card I held must be played—a slim, last, desperate hope. . . .

I shouted:

"No one else may know you now . . . but I know you—Duke Livingstone!"

The hooded figure uttered a roar of rage and sprang toward his fiendish machine. The butler, his face white with sudden fear, took an involuntary step toward me—started to draw his pistol.

This was what I had hoped for! At the same moment I had shouted Duke Livingstone's name, I thrust my arms through the bars of my cage. My hands clasped behind the butler's neck and with the strength of a madman, I jerked his head

toward me. There was the sodden crunch of flesh and bone meeting hard iron and the butler's form went slack in my arms.

Duke Livingstone had halted momentarily in astonishment at my sudden action, and that hesitation was all I needed. Holding the unconcious butler against the bars with one arm, my other hand darted to his half-drawn automatic. I fired two quick shots.

Duke spun heavily, reeled back a half-dozen paces, and slumped to the floor. I fired three more shots into his twitching body. It jerked convulsively and then was still. . . .

As the echos of the shots died away there was absolute silence for a few seconds. I heard a high-pitched voice scream. "The butler has the keys!" and then all hell broke loose. Shrieking imprecations and crying for me to free them so that they might tear their former tormentors to pieces, the mob of living corpses beat frantically at the iron bars of their prison, while the yet untainted were almost hysterical with joy.

I found the keys, but before freeing the others I released Bonny and held my coat about her head as we hurried from that hellish room so that she could not see the sickening and ghoulish fate of Duke Livingstone and the butler. . . .

"I SUPPOSE it drove him crazy," I explained to the reduced group of friends who had survived. "He was always saying that it got him, knowing the things he knew about people."

"He was a devil!" moaned Jane Anders, Grant's sister. "He got Judge Rainey's wife, to keep the police off us. He played husband against wife, mother against child. He was a ghou!"

"We mustn't talk about it," Bonny whispered. "Barry, take me home."

She nestled against me in the car. "Barry, I tried to save you. That's why, yesterday, when I caught a glimpse of you

from the car, I showed myself, hoping you'd follow me. If you couldn't rescue me at once, I thought at least you'd see that the mess was far too loathsome for you to bother with."

My arm wound tighter about her. "You thought that would keep me away! Bonny, didn't you know I loved you?" I thought for a moment of the inanity of women, and of the courage of this one. "But Bonny," I said, "why did you leave my apartment the night I left you with Suki?"

She shuddered slightly. "Duke Livingstone called and told me Andy was alive, that he'd seen him. He seemed to think I knew more about it than he did, so I didn't think anything was wrong, till I found myself his prisoner. He kept me gagged most of the time. . . ."

I swore softly at the dead. . . . "If I'd only realized what I should have realized a little earlier! I might at least have saved poor Mona Wells. It kept bothering me, what the tie-up was between the Quadrangle Club and the horrors. I was helpless before it dawned on me that Duke was the tie-up. He had to be the man. It was he who'd suggested it to me in the first place. If it hadn't been for Duke, there just wouldn't have been a tie-up—either in my mind or in the newspapers. I wonder why he didn't try to keep it a secret?"

"Duke wanted his scheme to have publicity, because, I imagine, he was about ready to close operations in New York. With Thea Rainey dead, he couldn't stave

off an investigation much longer. And when the investigation started, he'd be out from under. Then he meant to give the horror as much front page space as possible, so that when he started operations elsewhere under the same disguise, people would be afraid of him.

"He meant to use you, Barry, either as a victim or an ally. If you'd been frightened off at the graveyard—if you hadn't come to the Club—you'd have been his chief character witness at an investigation. But you came, Barry—and you saved all of us who were left to save."

I had been nodding as she explained, and suddenly I felt that my head wasn't going to nod any more at my volition. I was really faint. I pulled up to a curb, explained, and let Bonny take the wheel.

"Dearest, what's the matter?" she asked anxiously.

I said, "That darned clout on the head I took last night. Wonder if I should have it X-rayed."

"No!" She almost shrieked at me. "Don't—even—think of that word again!"

* * *

I had it X-rayed, nevertheless, but there wasn't anything wrong except a bump. Bonny doesn't know about that. Our home life is about as harmonious as things human can be, but—I hope and pray neither of us needs an X-ray again! Because I still remember the look in Bonny's violet eyes, when I mentioned the word. . . .

THE END





WE AMERICANS are an incredulous people. We do not like to believe in anything we cannot see or touch. When something occurs that we cannot quite understand or account for, we are only too likely to shrug it off as being impossible, and forget about it as quickly as we can Yet who among us can understand the common, everyday facts of life or death?

We like to think of ourselves as being a progressive people—as possessing greater knowledge and wisdom than ever man had before. Yet many of our modern discoveries and inventions were commonplace in the great civilizations that flourished while we were but half-naked savages, roaming the vast forests with no thought but to keep our bellies full. It is a strange and somewhat awesome thought! Men who have spent their entire lives among the meager ruins that are all that these ancient races have left to us, say that we have no more than tapped the secrets of their lost sciences and forgotten powers—that the greatest wonders of the past are still hidden from us.

What happened to these once magnificent cities? Did any of their peoples escape whatever dreadful scourge it was that could so suddenly and so completely destroy a whole civilization? No one knows . . . but it seems probable that a few must have survived. And that these miserable wretches, fleeing to distant lands, mingled with the roaming savage tribes and passed on to them some of their secret

powers Still in some of the desolate, out-of-the-way fastnesses of this vast continent, there are small bands of Indians whose legends tell of how the gods came to them eons ago and taught them their mysteries, and whose fearful rites are traceable to no known source. They are different from other Indians and the very few men who have penetrated their strongholds—and have returned alive—have told such fantastic tales of the eerie and occult powers of their priests and chiefs, that, not so very long ago, these brave men would have been burned as witches

In the May issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE, J. O. Quinliven takes us to the home of one of these strange tribes whose murderous rites and ancient curses went back to the earliest men on our continent—almost, it might be said, to the ages before man. From them came the severed head, its teeth still dripping blood, that lay beside the torn body of the Mexican girl. And to them went Margaret Trellis and Bob Davenport—to witness the awful “Dance of the Blood Drinkers”

(Continued from page 87)

like you wouldn't do such a thing"

BUT Doctor Kelland didn't need Cardell's answering sardonic chuckle to assure him that the heartless demon was, in fact, quite capable of operating on his daughter without giving her an anesthetic—and of deriving an evil pleasure from the monstrous act.

"You're mad, Carlos. You can't get away with it. . . ."

Cardell chuckled again. "I rather fancy I can," he said. "You see there will be no one to testify against me. I presume that someone knows that you came up here this afternoon for the purpose of having Helen's patella set. Therefore I shall set Helen's patella with the greatest care. I assure you that I shall do a job that any surgeon in the world would be proud of—supposing that anyone else were capable of performing it besides myself. I'm sure that it will attract favorable comment from the medical examiner at the post mortem."

"The—the post mortem—?"

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Doctor, but I am quite sure that on the way down the mountain this evening you and Helen are going to have a most lamentable accident. Your car is going over the cliff just below the last turn before you reach the valley. And since both of you will be in it at the time, you will naturally both come to a tragic end. However, you will actually have departed this life some minutes before—and in a most entertaining manner—in this very room."

As he spoke, a faint smile curving his lips, Cardell ran the tips of his fingers in a possessively lustful manner over the smooth skin of Helen's naked body. Under its slight stimulant the girl stirred, and presently, to her father's horror, opened her eyes and gazed about in a dazed, uncomprehending manner.

(Continued on page 106)

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Monster of His Making

(Continued from page 105)

Unable to restrain himself in the tide of grief and terror which overwhelmed him, Doctor Kelland cried out, "Heien! Oh, God, Helen—"

The girl looked toward him, where he sat in the shadows. "Yes, father," she murmured, her mind still cloyed with the last effects of the anesthetic.

Then a movement at her side caused the girl to turn her head and her eyes fell on the fantastic figure of Cardell. "Great heavens, Carlos," she exclaimed, "What are you doing in that costume?"

The evil smile on the young man's face deepened. "I doubt whether you would understand, my dear," he said. "Put it down to a perverted taste for the theatrical. I am about to indulge myself in a rare pleasure—that of arousing certain emotions which, in another man, are gratified with comparative ease, but which it my case require rather powerful stimulæ."

As he finished speaking, Cardell took a gleaming scalpel from the small table at his side and bent over Helen's defenseless body.

The girl's tortured writhings were held firmly in check by the cruelly tight straps which bound her to the table. Her screams, which all her fortitude was unable to repress as the fiendish surgeon's knives bit into the sensitive nerves of her knee, blended with Doctor Kelland's helpless, desperate cursing. Then, finally she fainted, and although the satanic gleam of pleasure faded from Cardell's eyes as she did so, he kept working until the operation was finished and the wound closed and bandaged. Then he carefully prepared a new plaster cast, and encased the girl's leg in it. Before she regained consciousness, the operation was over.

But this, as Doctor Kelland knew only too well, was just the beginning. Cardell had performed the operation to provide himself with an alibi. After the bodies had been unearthed from the wreckage of

their car, he would tell of their visit to his mountain home for the purpose of having the operation performed on Helen's knee. The testimony of Kelland's servants, and the condition of the knee, itself would substantiate his story.

Cardell straightened, and under the weird red light which poured down on him from above, he was the picture of Satan incarnate. He grinned at Kelland, and then turned his eyes, ablaze, now, with unholy lust, on the girl lying stretched on the operating table. His hands slid lasciviously over her nude, helpless body, bestowing unspeakable caresses.

"It's a pity such beauty must be destroyed, my dear," he murmured. "Soon I shall have to open your white skin and let your bright blood flow away. And that will bring me far greater ecstasy than the kisses you would never give to me. But first you shall give me something else—whether you desire it or not. . . . But perhaps, before it is over, you will desire it. . . ."

HE was bending over the girl, pressing his body against hers, caressing her with a growing fever of passion when suddenly his movements were arrested by a cry of mingled despair and rage from Doctor Kelland.

"For God's sake, man, if you are foul enough actually to go through with this thing, at least have the decency to kill me, first."

Slowly Cardell arose from the body of his victim, the diabolical leer on his face deepening as he gazed toward the shadow-shrouded wall where Kelland sat.

"Well, now, Doctor," he said, "that really was not a part of my plans. But you do give me an idea. Both you and Helen are going to die of wounds which will appear to have been made by the flying fragments of your car's windshield. I believe they will both be abdominal, and

(Continued on page 108)

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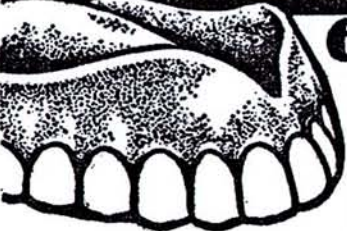


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(Continued from page 107)

I rather think you will take quite a long time dying. So I think I shall give you your wounds, now, so that your attention will be somewhat distracted from which I shall be doing to your daughter in a few minutes. An interesting substitute for the *coup be grace*, is it not?"

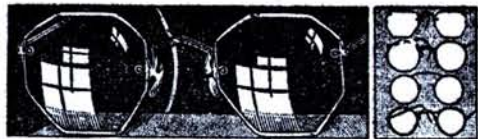
As he spoke, Cardell picked up a scalpel and started walking toward the bound and helpless figure sitting against the west wall. But Doctor Kelland was hardly aware of his approach. Within the past five minutes he had discovered an un-stoppered bottle of carbolic acid standing on a shelf next to him, and he had conceived an almost hopelessly desperate plan. Almost hopelessly desperate—yet it represented the sole chance of saving Helen from this unspeakable demon.

As Cardell came close to him, Doctor Kelland suddenly bent his head sideways, gripped the neck of the carbolic acid bottle in his teeth and raised it to his mouth. Cardell, fearing that he was about to lose a cherished victim through suicide, sprang forward with an angry cry. As he did so, Doctor Kelland allowed the bottle to fall from his mouth, to crash onto the floor, and the next instant spewed a mouthful of terrible acid into Cardell's face!

The man's agonized shriek was joined by the old surgeon's horrible choked coughing. The acid was burning away the lining of his mouth, searing his tongue and soft palate. Helen, from her operating table, had been able to turn her head enough to see the desperate performance, and she cried out wordlessly to her father.

Cardell, shrieking and cursing, tore madly at his eyes with both hands. He staggered, fell to the floor, clawed his way to his feet again, and went blundering blindly about the room, seeking among the bottles of the shelves of his cabinets an antidote for the acid which was burning the eyes out of his head.

"Oh, God!" he screamed. "I'm blind—blind!"



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Monster of His Making

He fell to the floor again, thrashed about in a convulsion of agony, until, at length, the paroxysms became less violent. Kelland continued to cough steadily and struggle weakly against the ropes which held him to his chair. He was half insensible with pain, and he knew that he had won only a temporary victory over his satanic opponent. Cardell would still be able to grope his way about enough to find them, as soon as his pain had subsided, and he would surely kill them, even though he would be unable to carry out his plan of wrecking their car, and thus directing suspicion away from himself.

As though in confirmation of his worst fears, Cardell presently stumbled blindly to his feet. He pawed his way to the instrument stand beside the operating table and picked up a scalpel. He raised his head then, and his face was a horror of seared flesh and bloody, sightless eyes. He grinned with a ghastly grimace.

"THAT'S right, Doctor," he whispered hoarsely, "keep on coughing. It will help me to locate you. I'm afraid I won't be able to do as neat a job as I had planned—but it will be just as effective, and I will enjoy it even more."

Doctor Kelland knew, then, that his hour had indeed struck. He was utterly unable to control the terrible coughs and groans which his pain wrenched from his body. Cardell, guided by the sounds, would find him—and after that, he would locate Helen. . . .

The demon-faced surgeon crept slowly toward his bound and helpless victim, the hand gripping the scalpel raising expectantly as he drew nearer. Then, when he had approached within a half dozen feet,

(Continued on page 110)

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(Continued from page 109)

he suddenly flung himself forward, as though no longer able to curb his ferocious impatience, and began slashing out with the scalpel.

The first blow ripped through the old practitioner's coat sleeve, and the next found a mark in his side. He flinched as he felt the hot sting of the steel, and Cardell giving vent to an animal grunt of satisfaction, went on slashing wildly, his face contorted into a mask of fiendish pleasure.

Then, suddenly, Doctor Kelland felt one of the ropes that bound his arms to his body give way. One of Cardell's wild slashes had severed it, and Kelland found that his right arm was almost free! He began immediately to push forward on the rope which bound his upper arm against his body, and as Cardell buried the scalpel in his left shoulder, the old surgeon suddenly freed his entire right arm.

The pain of his shoulder wound stung him to energetic action. He swung out savagely, and struck the blood-thirsting beast, who was cutting him to pieces, square on the point of the jaw.

The blow caught the younger man off balance, his feet slipped on the glazed tiling, and he crashed down, striking his head with an audible crack against the corner of a surgical cabinet.

Doctor Kelland freed himself from the remainder of his bonds in less than a minute. Then he was at his daughter's side, slicing with a scalpel through the straps which held her. Just as Cardell began to stir again, Kelland lifted her with a superhuman effort and carried her into the hallway, and out to the car which awaited them in the driveway—the car which was to have become their coffin.

Depositing the nude form of his daughter on the back seat, Doctor Kelland covered her with a robe, staggered around to the driver's seat, and started the motor just as a ghastly figure appeared at the door of the house, mouthing unintelligible

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shrieks, pawing blindly through the empty air with clawed hands which still searched for his escaping victims.

Doctor Kelland meshed the gears and steered the car out onto the main road. Five miles away was the State Hospital. There he could obtain relief from the burning agony of his mouth, the throbbing hurt of his wounds. He would not be able to talk, or eat anything but liquids for months, but the time would come when again he could take his place in the operating room, wielding the knife, perhaps with not quite as much skill as in other days, but still well enough to bring relief to many a suffering human being. He asked no more from life than that. . . .



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