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DIME



MYSTERY

JULY

MAGAZINE

THE WEREWOLF OF WALL STREET

A SMASHING STORY

OF
EERIE MYSTERY
AND TERROR

by
EDITH &
EJLER
JACOBSON



GODDESS OF THE
HALF-WORLD BROOD

by HENRY T. SPERRY

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10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Seventeen

July, 1938

Number Four

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A FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL

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As the black wall of dust swept over the little terror-ridden town, I thought I saw lurking in its depths the monstrous, evil shadow that had already seized seven lovely girls, leaving no trace but a pitiful muddle of feminine garments lying on the streets—and lovely Kay was next in line!

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Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 6, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1938, by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.20. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.



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MAIDS FOR THE DUST-DEVILS

What was that figure from a dim, dread age, which rode through town enshrouded in the black folds of each dust storm? Sometimes it left in its wake a beautiful girl, ravaged, insane. . . . Sometimes there remained only a pitiful heap of fragile feminine garments—where a lovely maid had stood trembling only seconds before!



CHAPTER ONE

Out of the Void

THE VEERING flow of wind whipped the old man's scraggly, white beard, stirred the halo of silver that fringed his bare head. He

would have been impressive clothed in a prophet's robe of long ago; but here, upon his soap-box in front of Haney's Drug Store, he was an absurd, anachronistic Jeremiah foretelling inescapable doom to an audience that was willing neither to listen nor to believe.

Still, he babbled on. . . .

By DONALD DALE

A long novel of nameless doom and sinister, diabolical intrigue!



The ominous cloud of swirling, black dust had already gobbled up the west edge of Gem City. It was swirling around Banker Jordan's big house, and beginning to lick greedily toward the center of town. More fervently, the old man's sonorous voice arose: "Meddle not with God's plans. He has delivered this land to Satan. Flee ye from the wrath

to come. Escape the Dust Devil that rides the storm!"

The few who made up the early Saturday afternoon crowd on Main Street scurried by, unheeding. A year ago, they might have been swayed by the superstitious exhortation of the old man who called himself John the Hermit, for then everyone had been discouraged, ready to

give up his home, and join the other tragic dust-bowl refugees; but now, hope renewed by the new reclamation work, they merely ducked hastily into store-doors to wait for another duststorm to blow over.

I grabbed Kay's arm and we sprinted for Haney's. As we flew past the old street preacher, the only person in Gem City who was not diving for shelter from the unpleasant black shower, I yelled at him to come in; but stubbornly he held his lowly pulpit. And as we made the drug-store just in time, he flung a last prophetic warning after us, his shrill, wild voice endowing the familiar Scripture with the urgency of a newly-discovered, personal threat: "Dust thou art, to dust returneth!"

INSIDE, a number of people stood behind the show window, staring up the street. As we joined them, "Doc" Walters, the nervous little pharmacist, and the two soda-jerkers left their post to come up front. Silently we gazed out, all held by that peculiar fascination of a dust storm that never lessens with familiarity. Fierce, wind-driven sandstorms we had always known, and accepted. But even in this third year of that plague upon our land, there still seemed something uncanny about a sky-high wall of dust that advanced stealthily, turned a few minutes of day into thick, black night, and passed, with no wind, no movement except the curious whirling and boiling within itself that seemed to endow it with sinister life.

The advancing black cloud was half way down the block. Now obscuring the red-brick front of the post-office across the street; now scudding past Rankin's Hardware; now drawing a curtain across the pies in the window of Henry's Cafe.

From his box at the edge of the sidewalk, the old man continued to gesticulate wildly, but his words were indistinguishable.

He was the only person on the street, and I was thinking that perhaps we should force him to come in, when suddenly, just as the duststorm edged in on the west side of the drug-store window, a girl—a stranger in town—ran into view from the east. Her bare head, crowned with a duchess braid of luxuriant, raven-black hair, was lowered as her tall, well-formed body bent into an eddying gust; the high-boned cheek was waxen pale, and the strong white hands clenched tightly before her.

Then the first dusty fingers reached out from the seething wall to mold the silken blouse against her breasts, and impudently flip the hem of the graceful skirt above her knees. And when, in the last minute before the storm swallowed her, I saw her fling her head up and flash a wild look into the boiling mass bearing down upon her, I had the fantastic thought that the pained contortion of her regal features was caused not by fear of the storm itself, but by terror of something she had seen *in* the writhing dust!

Then, before she could pass in her determined effort to press on westward, the thick, black cloud moved across the window, completely wiping out our view. . . .

As swiftly as it came the storm moved on. For a few minutes, the heavy after-drizzle of dust still obscured the vision; then, as suddenly it too cleared, we surged as one man against the glass to stare unbelievably at the figure outside on the dust-sprinkled walk. I hardly heard the shrieks and whimpers of fright that rose up from the group, for paralyzing terror held me.

It was the girl, the lovely stranger, who had come into view just before the storm struck. But God! What the storm had done to her!

The tall, well-formed body was nude except for a few ragged wisps of some sheer garment that, as the retreating wind

snapped back at them, whipped around her waist. The black hair, loosened from its braid, was now tumbled into wanton curls as if it had just been rumped in the play of love. The red mouth, moist and half-open, seemed to bear the burning print of fierce kisses. All the strong grace of her hinted shockingly of a Delilah's cruel ecstasies—just consummated.

But, in the split-second of my paralysis, I stared at the great, ragged abrasions—flecked with queer, gelatinous globules—that scraped her white shoulder, diagonaled her arrogant breasts, and dug deeper across the undulating line of stomach and thigh, as if made by some monster from whose huge, destructive hand she had just escaped.

She turned, and her long-lashed eyes seemed to stare straight into mine with a flash of dazed triumph. Then she flung her hand high—her right hand—grasping a strange-looking grey thing. And as her long-drawn, ululant cry split the air, she pitched face down on the dusty sidewalk!

INSTANTLY I was in the street with the villagers and Saturday-idle farmers who surged out from the stores where they had been watching the storm, and I began to realize a dreadful seriousness in the situation.

For three years, the simple people of this little farming community had seen their labor bear nothing but sterility, had watched their homes slipping away, their families reduced to want. The losing struggle against unremitting deluges of dust had left minds agonized; nerves taut to the breaking point, and imagination wild and morbid. And now, even though the last few months had brought new hope, they were ready to stampede at the first appearance of anything they did not understand.

Immediately their oft-flayed minds reverted to the superstitious rantings of

John the Hermit to supply a supernatural explanation of this strange occurrence in their midst. There is little wind in a dust-storm and so, they whispered to each other, the girl's attacker—her lover—must have been the *Dust Devil!*

I had no time to think of explanations, for somehow, though I had accepted the assistant directorship of reclamation here because Kay Frazer, my fiancée, was teaching their small school, my work had come to mean more than a job, and I felt responsible now. So, sending Kay inside, I mustered all possible firmness to deal with the terrified mob crowding around the nude, unconscious girl.

I urged them to stand back. With mutinous mutterings, they slowly gave a few feet, but I saw nerves quivering in toil-worn faces and superstition slinking into dust-reddened eyes, as Dr. Larmer, the village practitioner, crowded through and knelt with me over the inert body of the girl.

She lay prone, right arm doubled beneath her. The left arm was outflung and the left knee bent as if bracing against unutterable agony. Dr. Larmer did not look at the girl's pale, patrician face half-covered with the loose ebony curls, but, having fumbled his scarred stethoscope from the battered case, he placed it against the blue-veined whiteness of her superb back, just under the left shoulder blade. The crowd held its breath while he squatted there, listening for her heart-beat, and stirred uneasily when, a moment later, he turned to growl, testily, "Well, she's all right, but somebody's got to take care of her. Who is she?"

The question was flung all around, but, in this village where each least detail of everyone's life is common knowledge, nobody claimed to know her. Who she was, where she had come from, or why she had entered the little isolated town, was a complete mystery.

But Dr. Larmer was impatiently insist-

ing that someone take her for a few day's care. Knowing the town had no hospital and no hotel, I looked around the ring of staring faces, expecting many offers from these usually hospitable westerners. Grim silence met my unspoken appeal.

"Mrs. Bailey," I finally began, "won't you—"

But Mrs. Bailey recoiled with shuddering protest, and her husband crowded forward toward me, belligerently. I began the same appeal to two or three others whom I had in the past months been able to befriend, but all the crowd was backing nervously away, and no eyes would meet mine.

It was then, as I was silently cursing their stupid superstitiousness that Kay stepped through the nervous circle. "Dan," she said to me, "why not let me take the poor girl up to my cottage?"

Involuntarily I recoiled, a protest springing to my lips, while for an instant I was flicked by the same illogical uneasiness that had touched the superstitious mob.

But Dr. Larmer was enthusiastically accepting Kay's offer, and, ashamed of my strange momentary lapse, I had to agree that the little cottage, where Kay and her bronze-haired assistant, Anna Falk, lived, was the best place for the lovely stranger. The staring circle had closed in again, but someone pushed through to spread a blanket beside the still, white girl. I helped the doctor turn her over, and started to wrap the blanket around her.

Then, I saw—*the thing she clutched in her hand!*

A wave of fantastic thoughts washed over my mind, and I was hardly aware of the recoiling circle as, terrified, they stepped on each other in their haste to back away. But my own wild thoughts were prodded by their choking, staccato fear: "The Dust Devil! . . . I told you! . . . He'll git us all! . . . God-a-mighty, let's git outa here. . . . *Dust to dust!*"

As if under compulsion, I forced loose the girl's convulsive grip. But my fingers refused to receive the thing, and it thumped to the walk, soddenly. Tingling with a queer, creeping fear, I stared—tried to force myself to characterize the thing.

Grey, malformed, elongated, ragged at one end, it was like life as it had first manifested itself in the beginning of time—a repulsive, shapeless blob—enlarged to monstrous size! A tentacle from the body of a huge rhizopodic monster to engulf and consume an enticing victim.

Then my eyes jerked to the girl's hand. To one white finger clung a shred of green—like algal slime. And across the upturned palm, was a deep furrow, almost to the bone, filled with a clear gelatinous substance! It was as if the touch of the gruesome thing had caused devolution—reduced the girl's flesh to *protoplasm*—to its own *protozoan state!*

CHAPTER TWO

Mates for the Dust-Devil

SOON after Kay and Dr. Larmer had taken the unconscious girl away, I stood in the prescription room of the drug-store with several others, staring at that queer mass of matter. Walters, the pharmacist, had carefully scooped it onto a rubber pad and carried it in there, and while he examined it, I began to get control of my thoughts. I realized that the unknown girl's clothes could have been torn from her by some freakish whirlpool in the dust, and the grey object must be something floating in the storm which she had convulsively grabbed. It wasn't—it couldn't be—*life*.

But the four or five men who had followed us inside were strained and silent, as Walters got tongs and probe from a drawer and fearfully poked at the gelatinous mass on the pharmaceutical mixing slab. The Reverend Clark Wilson ad-

justed his tie, cleared his throat and said huskily, "Perhaps Dr. Larmer had best be present at the analysis."

Jan Christman, the town's huge blond plumber, shot a quick glance at the stern, aristocratic face of Banker Jordan and said, nervously, "Maybe some of you think I got a nerve crowdin' in here, but I'm here and I got my opinions. Let's don't stall about this thing. Let's look at it right now."

With only one purpose, I spoke: "Our people are in the grip of a grave menace—the menace of fear. Unless we can find a solution to this mystery that will satisfy *them*, we can not save them from themselves. They will desert this place as they so long have been on the verge of doing, and, here on the very eve of recovery, all our reclamation work will go for nought. I'm sorry to have spoken so long, but—"

"You are exactly right, my boy," Banker Jordan said between thin lips; "if the people desert now, they cannot pay off their mortgages, and I'll be ruined—left with countless acres of barren, worthless land on my hands."

It was like him to be thinking only of himself, even at a time like this. A hot retort sprang to my lips, but at that moment, Monroe Shelton, director of reclamation, and "Dynamite" Tate, his right-hand man, pushed into the little room. Shelton, with his usual over-politeness, shook hands all around, and his long, bony hand in mine was like ice.

Immediately Walters began to poke at the ugly grey mass, and all heads stooped low above it. As a cleft was forced in the dark, gelatinous substance, I forgot my glib rationalization, and once more a deep, instinctive fear began to stir in me. The thing was boneless, and without definite form. All the way through, it was like gelatine impregnated with dust, or—I could not keep the thought back—like dust-engendered *protoplasm*, congealed

because cut off from the source of life!

Walters' pale eyes behind the huge, shell-rimmed glasses were wild and excited. He was muttering under his breath: "God! Why not? . . . Protozoa were engendered from primordial ooze. And this—the monster rhizopod from which this tentacle came—could be bred of the dust. The friction! . . . The static electricity of the dust storm! . . ." His voice rose hysterically—"Why not? Why not?"

"God in Heaven!" Jordan licked his thin lips. "It's even easier to believe than the other. Every one accepts the first theory of the spontaneous generation of life. Then why not this? God! It is as true as life itself—*your* life, *mine*!"

NOTHING but harm had come of our awkward attempt to examine the thing that looked like the tentacle of some amorphous monster. And when Dr. Larmer joined us later, his nervous examination of it and his few pretentious remarks added nothing. So we wrapped the thing carefully, planning to send it for analysis the next day to the science department of Midwest College.

I lingered a moment at the drug-store to inquire again if anyone had seen the Hermit since the storm, and to question Dr. Larmer about the lovely stranger who had suffered such peculiar disaster from the duster.

His usual garrulity seemed to have deserted him. "Coma, my boy, coma," he said, brushing past me.

But I stepped outside after him and went with him to his office door. I had to ask one more question. "And the queer, glutinous wounds—what caused them?"

"Seem to be from some acid capable of producing glutinosity," he mumbled hastily, and bolted into the door, leaving me standing in the street. . . .

A feeling of sadness and a premonition of disaster swept over me. It was Saturday afternoon, and yet there were no

children racing gayly in and out with candy and ice-cream cones. No romances budding on street-corners and at soda fountains. No chattering women peering through windows at gay prints. No men swapping yarns at the curb.

Instead, families were huddled together in old Fords and ramshackle wagons, in the care of the strangely-silent women-folk, while nearby knots of men talked together in urgent tones. One throng caught sight of me; the group pressed together and lowered their voices to a whisper.

In front of the barber shop, a cluster of my men—laborers on the reclamation project—suddenly stopped their talking, and looked toward me, as if hoping for some reassurance. But I only waved and passed on, for what did I have to say?

So, with a queer intangible dread tagging at my heels, I walked the few blocks to Kay's house. I wanted to see if I could get some clue from the girl she had taken into her home.

But Kay would not let me arouse the girl, who lay on her bed, waxen eyelids closed, black eyelashes making a fringed shadow on the ivory cheek. Nor would she let me draw her wounded hand from under the cover to examine it. So, leaving Anna, Kay's assistant, with the sick girl, I drew Kay into the living-room, and pressed her dear warm body close to me, trying desperately to regain a feeling of normality.

But she herself was strangely nervous and distraught. It was almost as if she, a woman, knew something I could not know.

For long minutes she clung to me silently. Then fearfully she asked me the one question I hoped she would not think of: "Dan . . . darling . . . did—What about the thing the girl held in her hand?"

"Well, dearest," I tried to answer casually, "naturally, there's no one here who is capable of—"

"But what," she insisted in a frightened whisper, "does it look like? What do you believe?"

"Don't bother your head about it, darling, for tomorrow it goes to Midwest College for analysis, and the strain of uncertainty will be—"

The telephone bell shrilled into the room. Nervously Kay jumped to answer. "For you," then she said.

It was Walters' voice, excited, hysterical. "Dan, it's gone!"

"But who—where—" I began, not needing to ask what he was talking about.

"I don't know. I locked it in the poison-cabinet—the thing, the tentacle! And now it's gone, or—*dissolved!*"

A FEW minutes later, I was with Walters in his little cubby-hole. His excitement had been all out of proportion to what had happened. It was very simple. A bottle of acid had overturned and broken the thing down into a harmless pool of dust and almost-clear fluid. And somehow I felt relieved. I was just going to phone Kay to reassure her, when from out somewhere in the street a cry of terror rose up. It spread, grew, surged, until it overflowed the street and filled the stores around.

With insane visions of some indescribable monster crawling over mangled corpses toward new victims, I dashed to the front part of the drug-store. The door was open and screaming children, gibbering women, white-faced men, were piling in through the narrow entrance.

"What is it?" I cried out. At first no one answered.

At last Clem Jones, whose farm I had terraced for him only the day before, croaked in terror, "A dust-storm! Two in one day! Taint natural! Another dust-storm!"

Another dust-storm. . . . Two in one day. I had never heard of dust-storms coming so close together. For a moment

I myself felt that our world was besieged by some sinister, inhuman force. But of course, that was silly. This thing could *not* be supernatural. It was only unusual.

"Nonsense, Clem! It's only—"

"But this morning—" he whispered, "the thing that—"

As if the mention of "the thing" were a signal, sharp cries rang out from those up in front who stood gazing out the window. I pushed my way in among them, stood behind the plate glass where Kay and I that very morning had watched the first dust storm. And a cold, fatalistic premonition swept over me. I felt that the gears of time had slipped backward—that I had lived this exact moment before, knew what had happened, and must therefore happen now, predestined from the beginning.

As before, the street was deserted, only this time not even John the Hermit was there to cry out his frantic warnings. The dust-cliff was slipping down the street. Now it was scudding past Rankin's Hardware across the street, now beginning to draw a curtain across the show-window of Henry's Cafe.

It was like a movie film I had seen before. I knew its inevitable sequence. So, in a queer daze, I stared into the street, waiting for what must come, waited until, at the moment the storm was almost upon us, there appeared, as was fated to appear—a girl, one lone girl!

But this time it was not a regal stranger; it was Gertie Glass, the pretty, little blonde waitress, coming out of the Rosebud Beauty Shop across the street, a newspaper held over her fresh finger-wave. She was dashing for Henry's Cafe, just two doors west of the beauty shop, hurrying to her five-o'clock shift.

Blind, unreasonable fear clutched at me—fear for the girl—fear that I was on the verge of some cataclysmic, soul-shattering discovery. Something my mind could not support.

She was in sight only a split second, but I saw a teasing finger of wind reach out and press the flimsy green uniform-blouse against her breasts; another eddy whipped the green skirt close about her firm, young hips. Then in the boiling palisade of dust that was almost upon her, I seemed to see a denser, more definite blob, with long hideous feelers pushing out from its huge amorphous body—like some rhizopodic monster bred from the dust, eagerly seeking a victim. My wild imagination saw a long, grey tentacle reach out, slap the newspaper from the girl's hair, clutch the still-wet, yellow ringlets, and—

Somehow I broke my paralysis, and sprang to the door. But by the time I was outside, I saw her hand reach out toward the latch.

The door opened and then the storm hit, blotting out everything. . . .

The illusion of a monster in the swirling dust had lasted no longer than the flicker of an eyelash, yet as I jumped back inside and stared into the dust-darkened street, I could not keep from picturing an insatiable, inhuman menace stalking our town. I tried to recall my glib explanations of what had happened to the strange girl whom Kay was now giving shelter. But all I could think of was the queer, gelatinous disintegration of her flesh and the grisly tentacle torn from her attacker.

I was completely oblivious to the nervous crowd around me. Held by a queer illogical excitement, I waited for the storm to blow over, never taking my eyes from the spot just outside the cafe door where I had last seen Gertie. It was as if I knew that, when the storm rolled over, another nude girl would stand in the streets of Gem City—a victim of the Dust Devil!

The thought was absurd, I knew. Besides I had seen the girl's hand on the door, and knew she must now be safely inside serving the refugees that crowded

the cafe. Yet, I watched. . . . When the storm passed on and I could see through the fine drizzle of dust it had left behind, the street was completely deserted. I was turning away, feeling relief as illogical as my fears had been, when something on the sidewalk just outside the cafe door caught my eye. Something green, lying on the walk.

Gertie Glass's uniform! But what had happened to *her*?

IN A second I was across the street. The clothes were not thrown about the walk nor yet lying in a heap as if someone had undressed her, but together in proper order, still holding limply the shape of her body. The orange-cuffed sleeves wildly outflung; extending from beneath the flimsy green skirt, the cheap silk hose reaching out limply into the high-heeled pumps. The Weekly Clarion, the newspaper that had covered her fresh finger-wave, scudded toward the gutter.

I knelt above that strange arrangement of garments, and peered at the row of buttons, beginning at the close-fitting orange collar and running down the front of the blouse—*still buttoned*. And the skirt-belt that had fitted so snugly around the girl's small waist—*still hooked*.

Dully I ran my eyes from the neck of the dress down the limp bodice, skirt, and hose to the tips of the patent leather pumps. But how— Before I could force my mind to admit the answer that seemed to be pounding at me, an excited crowd had gathered, and Constable John Sears blundered through, exclaiming testily, "What's this? What's this?"

He snatched at the green dress, and from within it slid to the walk, two small bits of cheap silk underwear!

Then the wild thought I had been resisting crashed through to my consciousness. Side by side in my mind, was an amoeba's shifting, fluid form and the huge grey tentacle of some gelatinous substance

like congealed, dust-infused protoplasm. "One is as easy to believe as the other," Jordan's trembling voice had said.

I remembered the hand of the unknown girl and the path across her breasts and hips—glutinous, like the primal stuff of life.

And now this! I could not escape the admission of what these clothes suggested—a body converted to protoplasmic fluidity, flowing out of civilization's garb to become—a *mate for the Dust Monster!*

While my thoughts dragged back through time to the primordial ooze, I was one with the wild-eyed, superstitious crowd that stared with me at the limp garments. We seemed all bound together in an eternity of terrified silence. The world would go on like this forever, without movement or sound. Then suddenly, from far up the street, a wild shrill scream of agonized terror rose, keened its way into our raw minds.

God! Can the mind of man endure more? I cried to myself as I plunged up the street toward the cry, the others stumbling after me, crashing into each other in their panic. Two blocks up, we came to the creature who had uttered that scream of agony—a mother, standing in her front yard, staring with glazed eyes at a strange arrangement of dainty garments—like a limp, paper-doll cut-out! Another girl gone!

Then before the full horror of that scene could sink into our minds, from farther on in the deepening twilight, another scream. Hoarse, agonized, torn from a strong man's throat. And others, to the north, to the south, rising up from every direction.

Like leaves driven by a gust of wind, the terror-maddened crowd swept through the streets of that little town, tracking down tragedy. But I did not follow. Heart cold with fear, I ran into a corner grocery and called Kay's number.

At the blessed relief of hearing her

voice, I clung to the phone-box weakly. "Darling! Darling, are you all right?" I shouted wildly.

"Yes, of course, dear. But I seem to hear shouting down the street. What is it?"

Thanking God that the little school house and cottage was at the edge of town and she could not know the horror sweeping around her, I calmed myself to say, "I'm coming right up. Promise me you will not go outside until I get there."

As I turned from the phone to start to Kay, Shelton came in the door of the grocery. Pale and tense, he forgot his usual annoying over-politeness and spoke to me without greeting. "Dan, I've got to get Mrs. Shelton and our daughter out of here. Dynamite will drive us into Oklahoma City. You'll have to hold the works until I get back. The men have their orders for tonight, so there'll be just the Sunday shifts. We'll be back by Monday morning."

Then, the full weight of my responsibility settling upon me, I stepped into the dusk of the street, and saw "Doc" Walters stumbling down the walk back toward town.

Catching sight of me, he stopped to try to tell me of the swath of horror cut through the little town. With terror-drunk tongue, he enumerated the names of the victims, described the nuclei of grief and madness, scattered among the people—two, four, five, seven! Seven feminine costumes lying limply in the street! Seven lovely bodies, by some hellish metamorphosis, delivered into the power of an incredible monster!

Seven mates for the Dust Devil. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Into the Darkness

I HAD found Kay at the point of collapse, for she had learned, after my telephone call, of the disappearance of the

girls. And Anna Falk, her assistant, was among them! But now a dull incredulity had settled upon her. There on the table was Anna's volume of Swinburne, marked with her favorite book-mark. Over a chair-back was flung her blue scarf. In her desk, letters from her mother and her sweetheart waited to be answered.

But she was gone. And there was nothing we could do. No coffin to buy. No body for the undertaker. How? Where? In what hideous state did her body exist? Impatiently I jerked my mind back, for I must not let it slide off again into the wild thoughts I had had when I looked at those empty clothes on the side-walk.

"It can't be," Kay kept saying; "things like this don't happen."

Yet they *had* happened. Gertie Glass, the pretty waitress; clear-eyed Jane Thomas on her way to a violin lesson; the lovely, black-haired bride of Lloyd Jones; the vivacious, red-headed Kelsy twins, in town from the farm; the taffy-haired, blue-eyed, slow-speaking Bertha Christman; and Anna—here at the edge of Kay's lawn!

It was madness to enumerate them, trying to force some pattern from those awesome tragedies. The only certainty was that these girls were gone—gone most horribly. . . . !

Suddenly, a thought burst in my brain. The victims had not been chosen indiscriminately!

There *was* a pattern! A frighteningly obvious one: all victims were *girls, beautiful girls!*

Again the wild thought flashed through my mind that these girls had been taken to become mates for the dust monster. The lovely unknown in the adjoining room had *won* the struggle—at the cost of only a bit of flesh. The others had lost, and their bodies had, at the vile touch, flowed out to—God knew what!

Disgustedly, I checked my thoughts,

for I knew I must get rid of these wild, intangible ideas. Now was the time for common-sense; there was danger here. No use to deny that. Menace was lying in wait for every lovely woman in our town. And Kay—Kay was the loveliest of them all!

And it seemed to me, now that I had forced myself to think straight, that there was only one answer. Some degenerate monster was loose in our land; some sex criminal, under the cover of the dusters, had invaded our town, stolen the flower of our womanhood. Thank God, Kay had been inside attending the sick girl!

I had come here to make sure of Kay's safety and await the telephone call to announce that the posse, which was being organized, was ready to start. I was more eager than ever to start now—to track down the fiend who stalked our girls; and I began charting a route of search in my notebook.

Kay excused herself saying, "I must prepare my sick guest something to eat. I succeeded in getting her to take some soup at lunch."

While Kay was making the soup, I went into the bedroom and looked in pity at the lovely ghost-pale face, framed in heavy black waves of hair. The cover rose and fell with her quiet even breathing, but her waxen face was like an exquisite death mask. When Kay came in to feed her, I went back through the living-room to the kitchen and stood looking at the stubbornly silent telephone. Suddenly, I heard a crash—a tray of dishes clattering to the floor, and Kay was calling, "Dan! Dan!"

I hurried back through kitchen, dinette, and living-room to help Kay with her patient, and pulled up sharp, staring in dismay at—emptiness!

Dishes lay in a shattered heap beside an overturned chair. The covers of the bed were in wild disarray. The bedroom's outside door swung ajar against

the darkness outside. *Both* girls were gone!

I DON'T know all the things I did during those next few hours. I plunged in all directions down dark streets, even beyond into the country road. I flooded the little two-roomed schoolhouse with a flashlight, and searched in every closet and corner. I called, I wept, I cried-out Kay's name. I went down town and begged Constable Sears for help. He said that the posse had been difficult to organize, but that it would be ready to start before long. To him, Kay was just another girl—not the only girl in the world.

Completely exhausted and defeated, I went back to the little cottage, for then I seemed closer to Kay. I threw myself on the bed, buried my face in her pillow and tried desperately to make sense of the last ten hours.

God! Only ten hours, for it was not yet midnight, and it had been almost two when I had stood over the nude body of the beautiful stranger who had been the first to be attacked by the foul fiend.

And as my thoughts came around to her, I realized how selfish I had been in my grief for Kay. Not one thought had I given the girl whose scarred body had been snatched from the sick-bed. In what cabin could she and Kay be? Were they at this minute in the arms of a sex-crazed fiend? How could he have stolen them with so little noise? . . .

Suddenly, I heard the door-lock click, softly. I raised my head, stared, as slowly the knob turned. I never moved, gaze riveted to that little brass ball moving almost imperceptibly. At last, the door fell back, and, framed in the doorway, against the black background of night, was—the lovely stranger!

Her beautiful, perfectly-molded body was covered only by the sheer flowing folds of a chiffon night-gown. The classic strength of her—the long, firm thighs;

the plastic, curving waist; the proud, lifting breasts; the straight, smooth throat—was like the perfection of a beautiful, Grecian statue.

I sprang to her, gripped her fine, white shoulders. "Kay!" I cried out. "Where is Kay?"

Her dark violet eyes looked deep into mine, her arms encircled my neck, her tall body swayed against me, wilted in my arms.

Hastily I guided her to the bed, tried to stretch her out upon its tumbled sheets, make her comfortable. But she pulled me down to the edge of the bed, and curved herself close against me, her strong, young arms fast around my waist, her hair a black pool against the grey lapel of my coat, her eyes closed as if in deep contentment, her full scarlet lips smiling provocatively.

Impatiently I shook her. I shouted at her: "Where is Kay?"

Her beautiful mouth curved as if for speech. My heart stood still as I waited for her words. But suddenly her lips closed tightly and terror seemed to flick over her features. Then all the tenseness was gone out of her and, with a long sigh, she fell back in my arms, unconscious. . . .

When the call finally came and I rode through the dark village to join the posse at the court-house square, I could see, here and there, lighted windows where, I knew,

bereaved families were keeping the death-watch without even the comfort of the cold, peaceful body of the loved one.

We searched every possible hiding-place in the whole barren countryside, including the shacks at the reclamation camp, and when we returned in the chill prairie dawn with no word for the bereaved, I wondered if it were possible that their grief could match the aching despair in my own heart.

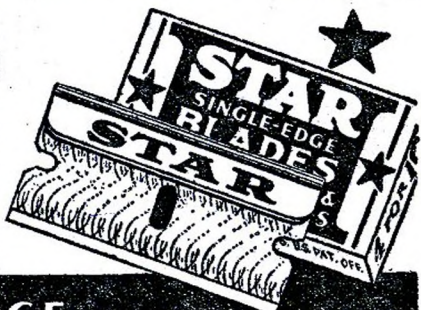
Now, as I had never ceased to do through the long futile night of searching, I kept thinking of the stranger who lay in Kay's bed. And it seemed to me that the clue we needed must rest with her. By what strange coincidence had she escaped—twice!—when the others had been swallowed up so completely? Was she a hellish decoy, an accomplice in the diabolic plot that had carried away our girls? It is true *she* couldn't have carried Kay away with so little struggle; but she could have signalled to someone outside. How else could anyone have known that for that brief instant, Kay was out of my sight?

Yet, if she were a fake; if she were not a girl in a hypnotic trance induced by fright, then she was the cleverest deceiver I had ever seen. At the edge of town, I left the posse, and went by the cottage where I had left her with Dr. Larmer, the only person I had been able to persuade to stay with her. But he said



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that there had been no change, except perhaps a deepening of the coma.

So I left for the mass-meeting that was to gather about sun-up. My feeling of futility deepened as I had to pull aside to let pass an old wagon loaded with shabby household goods upon which rode man, wife, and five children with grey, hopeless faces and fearful eyes. And a little further on was a ramshackle Ford, its trailer filled with pitiful remnants of a home.

THEY were on their way out I knew. These were the people Kay and I had tried so hard to help. This is what had become of our dream of enriching our love by service. My grief became identified with this tragedy of the people and settled more inexorably upon me.

But the deserters were few. And when the mass-meeting was over, I had a new appreciation of the courage and common-sense of these level-headed, laconic men. For even though an ungodly, superstitious fear gleamed in the eyes of many, they had, with a few, brusque words, bound themselves together in a pact to stick with their homes and their land. Rather than drag their families out to join the thousands of hopeless, unwanted wanderers driven from town to town, they were going to stay, pinning their last hopes on the work of reclamation—our work—today, *my work*. For the first time since I had lost Kay, I remembered that the whole project was in my hands for the day.

At the thought, courage rose in me to match the hope and determination of these people. I got my car and drove the five miles to the center of operations—the almost-finished irrigation well and its system of canals—to supervise the day shift. Though I was late, and the night-workers were already off duty, the day men had not yet gone to work. They were all huddled in nervous groups around the

long pine breakfast tables, talking furtively. It was the first time work had ever stopped since we had begun operation six weeks before. As soon as they saw me, the night men scattered, and the others went to work.

The day was a tortured blur. I was torn between duty and love. Yet, I know I would have deserted the work had there been anything to be done for Kay. But during the night, our posse had covered everything. Soon the state police would be out. Now there was *nothing* I could do.

But I wore myself out dashing into town to inquire for news, and back to camp to try to keep the nervous, restive men on the job. As the day wore on, my activities no longer seemed separate events, but were all jumbled together into one blur of restless unhappiness. I kept wishing there were forests, or hills, or some place in this barren country where I could spend my energy in search. And it must have been a need for a change that took me, late in the afternoon, over to the dry coulee which I had always felt, in spite of Shelton's arguments, should be made a useful part of our work. And when I stood on the steep cliff at the top of the arroyo, I wondered crazily, if I found good use for this sun-baked, dust-blighted hollow, the Almighty might accept it as a sort of bribe to help me find Kay, safe and untouched by horror.

Suddenly, far down at the other end of the dry coulee, I saw a little cloud of mist hovering close to the ground, strangely like the mists that hovered over the new earth when first life began to stir. Then the mist curled, thinned, and I could see what it veiled.

All sense of reality left me. It was as if my wild thought had transported me a million years back in time—a man forced to look upon his own meaningless, protozoic origin. For through the thinning cloud of mist, I could see tiny creatures,

moving about designlessly in what seemed a pool of black slime.

Like a visitor upon a backward planet, I stood in the huge, lonely prairie and looked upon this spot squirming with senseless, primal life—crowded and slug-gish like that in a drop of stagnant water under a powerful microscope.

A big grey shape with long waving feelers dominated that little drop of life. The smaller white blobs around it seemed to be alternately attracted and repelled to the monstrous thing by some strange, sub-normal force.

A big grey shape . . . and smaller white ones!

Suddenly my mind broke through the fetters of unreality. I snatched my field glasses from my belt, trained them upon the far-off cluster of squirming life, and then—sanity left me!

The grey shape became a monster, huge, hideous—with one of his slimy tentacles *shortened, ragged as if a piece had been torn from it*. The smaller white figures were nude girls, drifting about in the crowded pit with a queer, uncertain aimlessness. It was, I thought with horror, as if they had lost all sense of *purposeful* locomotion—had reverted to primordial vagueness.

With shaking fingers I sharpened the focus of my glasses. The white creatures' skins had a pearly translucence. And beneath, I seemed barely to see blood coursing sluggishly through the flesh that must have turned to protoplasm.

I thought of the gelatinous deterioration of the unknown girl's hand where the *thing* had touched her. I thought of Gertie Glass's *empty*, green uniform. I stared at the creatures below. And I had to accept the crazy idea that, since the first disaster, had terrorized the minds of the people.

These girls *had* reverted to a lower stage of life. They *had* become mates of the dust devil. I could no longer deny it.

I had seen it with my own eyes!

CHAPTER FOUR

Satan Rides the Storm

THE big grey thing reached out one long tentacle and drew a white figure to him, letting the formless tip wander down the firm hollow of her back and then slip lower, and cling. Close against the filthy chest glowed the blond curls—Gertie Glass! No—it was what *had been* Gertie Glass!

Then the *thing* shoved the girl from him and insinuated a feeler among the surging feminine bodies, and drew another forward. He turned the beautiful body around, and pulled the snowy white back close to him. The obscene tentacle curled around her graceful body, moved with slow undulations around the slender waist, desecrating that loveliness with its unholy caress.

And the hapless creature was Kay!

Over and over I said those words: "That is Kay!" But for seconds the fact did not explode in my mind. It thumped dully, like a dud bomb, and lay sizzling uncertainly. Then it burst crazily, slitting my mind with red streaks of insanity.

That hideously lovely creature, whose movements were vague and aimless, whose skin had taken on a sort of ectoplasmic translucence, whose body was in the embrace of a grey rhizopodic monster—*that was Kay!*

With agonized eyes I measured the distance, then jumped into my car and raced around the dangerous, rocky edge of the coulee, losing sight at times of the awful group below, and then regaining it, only to lose it again. I had no plan, no definite thought. I only knew that now I had something tangible to fight, and my body was powerful with fury.

At last I skidded my car to a stop above the point I thought must be the pit where the monster was toying with the girls he had made his creatures. I

flung myself to the ground and started to plunge down the steep, rock-strewn slope. Despair stopped me in mid-stride.

Balanced grotesquely on the edge, I stared, unbelieving, into the coulee below. Yes, the pit was there—a black, slimy spot in that stretch of sere brown. But it was empty! Deserted! There was no monster! No creatures who had once been girls! No Kay!

Stumbling crazily, I plunged down the slope. My existence became a kaleidoscope of futile action. I examined every crack and corner of that shallow black hole. There was no way for anyone to disappear beneath it. I raced back and forth across that small, narrow coulee, tearing at the cliff walls with bare, bleeding hands, examining every stone, every dry shrub. And though I knew they could not have got out on top without my seeing them, I found in the gulch *no hiding place!* . . .

It must have been a long time before I tore myself away from my futile search, for the prairie night was falling swiftly before I climbed out and crawled dazedly into my car. And it must have been habit or a subconscious sense of responsibility that directed me back toward project headquarters.

The first thing I knew I had parked my car down behind the bunkshacks. All were dark except one where Bill Sharp, the old timekeeper for the day, sat in the door, whittling. As usual, the day-men had all gone into town. As I started up the little slope that carried me over to the almost-finished canal on the other side where the night shift must now be working, I remembered, uneasily, the powerful undercurrent of restlessness and queer excitement that had hung over the camp all day. I recalled with new emotion—new understanding—the snatches of wild conversation I had overheard at the table at noon. The laborers had dwelled too much on the disappearance of the

girls, and their unlettered minds had seized upon parts of the attempted scientific explanations mingling them with the worst of the superstitions. And in half-fearful obscenity, they had been speculating upon the terrifying pleasure of consorting with a dust-monster's mate.

AT THAT time, I had felt only deep disgust that the kidnaping of seven of the town's loveliest girls could breed such vile and insane thoughts. And I knew with fierce anger that some of them must be thinking of Kay in particular, for I had often brought her to the project, and seen these men, who had been too long in a men's camp separated from wives and sweethearts, look covetously upon her feminine loveliness.

The flood-lights that lit the night work were out of sight behind the hill, and the weird ruddiness that hung in the air just above was like the sullen glow from the forges of hell. The huge pistons of the well-drill thumped into the great empty night like a giant heart, and the earth shook under my feet with every impulse of the snarling drill as it bit its way into the earth seeking ruthlessly the water that the Creator had seen fit to hide from man. All the conventional world of cities, night-clubs, factories, homes, seemed to break off and drift away, leaving this bit of dry, dusty prairie an island to float helplessly in infinite space. It was as if—

Suddenly I was yanked back into reality. My cold, leaden heart leaped to my throat. And then I was running, running madly to the crest of the slope, for, as if set into motion by a hot, vicious puff of a monster's breath, on the other side toward the ruddy aura of light swept a small cloud of dust!

It was moving fast, and in a second it hovered over the little hollow where I knew the men would be working. Faster and faster my feet pounded up the slope. I

don't know what I expected to find, but my tortured, unreasoning mind told me one thing: Disaster and destruction ride the dust!

God! Could I get there in time? And, "Time? Time for what?" my whirling brain echoed. Still I ran. One flying foot caught on a mesquite root. I stumbled, recovered, and at last leaped to the crest of the slope.

The dust-cloud had just swept past, and the little hollow, halved by the canal with its high ridge of loose dirt alongside, was clearly revealed. I don't know what I expected to find, but the thing I saw was inconceivable. I think I cried out. I know my legs stiffened, became cold, dead props beneath me, as I stared at the panorama of horror below.

The girls! All of them! As I had seen them in the coulee! The protoplasmic translucence of their white skin. Here and there, smooth shoulder, rose-tipped breast, or full curving thigh accented by a wisp of greenish, slimy algal deposit. White, soft arms curving and waving aimlessly, like—boneless tentacles! Hideously beautiful, revoltingly alluring, they huddled together in an uncertain blob, like a cluster of microscopic life in a drop of water. And around their feet spread a thin wet splash, as if they had just been lifted from some alluvial pool!

And the men! Dirty-faced, horny-handed, clad in their greasy overalls, they stood opposite in a tense ragged semi-circle, staring wildly at those white, nude bodies. Astonishment . . . fear . . . and then—a beginning of something else. It flamed in their hungry, red-rimmed eyes, showed in convulsive hands and the nervous jerking of strong, muscular limbs.

Suddenly Butch Blunt broke the semi-circle with a lumbering step forward, head lowered like an advancing bull. And one of the nude creatures, with that queer, floating motion, moved from the little white cluster toward the man. With her

movement, a wisp of slimy green loosened from a translucent shoulder and slithered over the mound of breast and floated to the ground. With a deep, hungry bellow, Blunt leaped forward and snatched the girl's slender body to him.

And the sharpness of the horror broke through into my consciousness, for that girl—that creature who had surrendered—was Kay!

Tugging at my gun, I plunged down the slope and scrambled upon the high, loose dirt that flanked the narrow canal.

As if Blunt's advance had been a signal, the other men had plunged forward. The white creatures had broken from their group, and now all was one mad, milling jumble. Only one thought drove me—to put an end to the thing Kay had become at the dust devil's disintegrating touch!

My eyes searched the mad *melée*, caught sight of her. I raised my gun, finger to trigger. Then somewhere from behind me, a heavy, crushing blow thudded upon my head. And the hideous scene, the white, nude figures, the tense, advancing men—everything—was wiped from my consciousness.

MY BODY had no existence except as an anguishing heaviness without mobility or form. I could not move. I could not open my eyes. I knew only unutterable agony.

I felt a trickle of blood oozing from a red-hot streak across my head, slipping down upon my leaden eyelid. I tried to raise my hand to brush it away, but I had no hands, no legs, no feet. My body was a solid, imponderable fusion of pain and pressure—pain as huge and heavy as the universe.

Thin and far away in the cosmic void, I could hear the murmur of amorous voices, men's fast, excited breathing, and teasing, lascivious laughter of things that were once girls—the tantalizing pretenses that precede surrender. But it had no im-

port to me. It was only a part of this meaningless world in which I existed only as a titanic block of solid pain.

Then one voice separated itself from the others, became individualized. The travesty of a voice I had once known, in a deep ecstatic ripple of wordless passion—rose and then was smothered as if by the pressure of eager lips. A feminine voice—Kay's!

Kay! I knew then I must open my eyes. With an agony of effort, I forced up my burning lids. But the red pain obscured my vision, and the scene somewhere in front of me was a meaningless blur of moving forms.

Yet terror such as I had never known rose up in me as I became aware of a strangeness about myself. My eyes were almost on a level with the ground. My chin touched the earth. And I had no body!

Again I could hear that voice—the voice of the thing that had once been Kay—raising in amorous excitement. With almost superhuman effort, I slowed the mad whirling in my head, squeezed my eyes tight together, stretched them open. And for the first time since I had been struck, I returned to full consciousness.

I realized where I was, and madness seized me as I surveyed the horrible situation. I could not understand why, but I knew it was a *shrewd*, *human* hand that had struck me down and imprisoned me in such horrible way. And the girls—it was no weird and unnatural change that had come over them. But in some queer, crazed state, they, the loveliest girls of our community—Kay among them—were giving themselves to this orgy!

It was some fiendish, human plot!

Only a cruel mind could have conceived such incarceration—such entombment—as mine. My body had been placed upright in a hole, up to the neck, and dirt had been shoveled in and packed, tightly. The fiend had planned my torture shrewd-

ly, for I was on a slight elevation, forced to face a sight to drive any man to madness.

The little basin that had been the scene of our sane, scientific reclamation efforts was now a hellish pit of lewd bacchanalian revelry. God! I had never realized how action, even impotent or futile threshing around can relieve strain. If only I could have clenched my fists, lunged against rasping bonds, thrown my shoulders against restraining bars. But all I could do was look. Let my eyes communicate to my aching brain horrors too ghastly for comprehension.

The revelers had built a bonfire and, like savages, were flinging themselves wildly around it, the girls' translucent bodies floating, as if with primitive instinct, through an unspeakable dance, with tantalizing prolongation of each shameless gesture, like a picture in slow motion. The men's clothes were partly torn off, and their strong, muscular bodies jerked to some fierce, inaudible rhythm.

THEY made one twisting, writhing mass of violence and lust—these creatures who seemed mates of the dust monster and these men who had dreamed of their unholy love. But for my eyes there was only one—Kay, the girl I loved! And in its cruel grave, my body could find no expression of the revulsion it felt except the tearing pain deep down in my vitals.

Her white body threaded its way in and out of the moving figures. Every floating movement began slowly, languorously, with the smooth legs, ran up the round white columns of the quivering thighs, flowed over the soft swell of stomach, and slowly pushed up to the quivering breasts.

I felt I had suffered every weird, damnable thought of which man is capable, when suddenly the tempo of the bacchanalia changed. The group began to shift as with a purpose.

The Kelsy twins glided over and fastened themselves around the big hulk of Ed Sowl, the bright red of their curls mingling with the coarse, black hair on his dirty chest. Before Ed's huge arms could close around them, Slim Skile, tall, rangy, dived over and snatched one of them. She went to him, red lips uplifted, and entwined her lax body around his. Then the four withdrew from the flickering fire and sank down upon a bed of upturned earth.

That acted like a signal upon the others, and in a moment the wild dance had turned into something unutterably worse. Sixteen-year-old Jane Thomas stirred amorously in the arms of old Pete Barto and let his toothless, drooling mouth close on her fresh, red lips and his dirty, gnarled hands caress her young body. The taffy-haired, naive Bertha Christman and little Peewee Turner; Gertie Glass and. . .

God! It was too much! Anna Falk! And the lovely, black-haired bride of Lloyd Jones—all withdrawing in languorous embrace.

Until only Kay was left. Kay—and Butch Blunt standing aside, his red, snaky eyes upon her. With that aimless floating motion she continued to drift, alone, around the heathen fire, her body slowly turning as if spun by a whorl of languid air, the red glow painting, one after the other, every lovely curve.

She moved around until she was close to where he was standing. He never moved. She drifted closer, her soft, translucent hips arching provocatively toward him. Still he never moved.

She drifted over to him, and twined her white arms around his big, bull neck. He stood still, unbending, his arrogant eyes holding hers. Then she lifted his big, beefy hand and placed it around her waist. Fierce fire leaped into his eyes, a bestial triumph gurgled in his throat, as his huge hairy arm snatched her to him and he started for the shadows.

A bellow of rage and unendurable horror split my throat. Then I saw the amorous couples in the shadows stir, and Butch Blunt stop, throw his head up, as if startled, but still holding Kay close. And it took me a second to realize that it had not been my voice that had broken in upon their lewd love.

Not my voice, for I saw their eyes lift far above and behind me to the crest of the hill. Above and behind me, a wild, frantic voice had risen to drown out my own, and was whipping over my head to hold the frenzied couples below.

A frenzied voice and mad, mad words: "God is not mocked! This country belongs to the Dust Demon. Reclamation is sin. *You must destroy this unholy plan!*"

CHAPTER FIVE

Death by Wholesale

I COULD not turn my head, but I did not need sight to tell me that the voice belonged to John the Hermit. At that realization, chaotic thoughts arose in my mind and tried to combine into a new interpretation of the terror that had destroyed us all. But they made no pattern.

The voice rose higher and wilder, and that strange motley of ragged, rude men and lovely, nude girls rose up and listened, with gleaming, fanatic eyes. The pleas of the hermit grew more definite, took on the fervency of an inviolable edict.

"It must all be destroyed!"

And with his mad words, some of the fantastic pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place. This old street preacher, whom we had considered harmless, had somehow, with his fanatic fervor, thrown these men and girls into a horrible hypnotic state, and was driving them to destroy the project. They were under the spell of a lunatic!

Yelling in unholy glee, the men and girls broke for the unfinished canal and, with their hands and with shovels began

pushing the excavated earth back into the ditch.

"Fools!" the fervid voice cried, "The death-sticks are in the store-room!"

It took a moment for the thought to drive home. Then, like fiends out of hell, they raced up and over the hill. And I knew where they were going. Death-sticks, as everyone in the Midwest knows—mean dynamite! Handfuls of violence and death!

I could hear picks hacking at the door of the powder house. God! When would the day-men return? And where was Bill Sharp, the old timekeeper? In a moment, shrieking and laughing, the pack were running back down the hill, carrying sticks of dynamite. And all hell broke loose!

Agonized, I searched the mob for Kay, and there she was—waving a stick of dynamite in her flaccid hand, as if it were a child's fire-cracker! I cried out her name, again and again. But my voice seemed to mean nothing to her. Or else she could not hear it through the noise of high, obscene laughter that rose from the crowd, and the hermit's continuous, fervid exhortations. I cried out the names of these men who had worked so faithfully and intelligently on this job; but they paid me no heed.

Peewee Turner, like a prankish child, stuck into the flames of the dying bonfire, the fuse of a death-stick—stuck it in and held it there until it was well lighted and then threw it down the vale to the farthest end of the canal. It hit, exploded with a shower of dirt, and the neat canal end was a ragged, yawning hole.

Everyone was thrown to the earth with the shock. Screaming in idiotic delight, Gertie Glass and Bunk Hawk, scrambled up, ran hand in hand toward the scene of destruction. Then I saw Butch Blunt scratch a match, hold it to a deadly fuse, and then fling the stick high, swift, and true after the speeding couple. I watched

through a century-long instant as it sailed through the air over their heads—to burst in their faces.

The earth spouted, two bodies sprawled grotesquely into the air, and exploded into bleeding fragments.

The crazed revelers paid no heed to their dead comrades, but began to light their death-sticks and throw them, wildly, in all directions. And above all, the voice of the crazed priest of destruction shrilled, driving them on.

DEATH was bursting all around. God only knew why it did not strike again. The concussions of air almost split my ear-drums, the earth shook, huge rocks showered around me. And the bacchanal of destruction became more frenzied.

The hermit's voice grew more exigent; louder he shouted until a lull came and he could make his voice heard: "The well! The demon-well must be destroyed! Go to the well!"

But during the last few minutes something strange had begun to happen to the mad mob. For a moment they turned their eyes to where the well-drill chugged away in the darkness, but on their faces was no understanding, and no unholy zest. They looked back at the chaos around them, and one or two men lighted matches but, like bewildered children, let them go out again. Their movements were slow and dragging, like a phonograph record run down. As if some excitant with which they had been drugged was wearing off.

Hope rose in me. Perhaps I could get free before the victims did any more damage to themselves. I knew I could handle the poor, old, crazed preacher. Wildly I struggled in my imprisoning grave. And made a dizzying discovery. The dirt around me was loosened! The explosions of dynamite had rent the earth. I jerked one hand free. I knew that my tight-packed body was a long way from freedom, but my elation mounted.

Then, suddenly, on the far side of the basin, in the shadow of a clump of mesquite, I saw a figure stir! Grey, dim, vague. I strained my eyes into the distant shadows, but I could not see with any distinctness beyond the circle of the flood-lights.

For a moment, the frightful thought came that this was the revolting, shapeless creature I had seen with the girls in the coulee.

Then the figure moved forward. And I saw it was a man—a *masked man!*

EVEN as I struggled to free myself, I wondered what this man had to do with the scene of destruction before us. But the question was driven from my mind as I saw a restless stirring beginning again in the huddle of the lethargic men and girls. God! What now?

A single figure—a girl—detached herself from the group. Falteringly, but with seeming purpose, she began to drift away from the others, gazing like a bewildered child, out upon the ravaged basin. Then, as her face turned toward me, I saw it was Kay.

With hope that she might be recovering from whatever drug had enslaved her, I called out her name. For a moment, she hesitated. Then she went on. More loudly I called. She turned her head and looked in my direction. Again I called her name. She turned around, took one faltering step in my direction. Hope rose higher. Surely, somehow. . . .

Suddenly, the shadows at the edge of the basin stirred, and a figure stepped out of the dimness and seized her. The masked man!

More violently I jerked my racked body against the tight imprisoning dirt. What was he going to do with Kay? *How much time did I have?*

Harder I twisted and wrenched, my eyes on the two. He snatched his tie off, knotted it around Kay's slender waist, his

long, skinny hands lingering in vile carresses. God! What could be the meaning?

Too soon I knew the horrible answer! For he picked from the ground a long-fused load of dynamite—so huge that it made the small shots the others had used seem like toys—and stuck it into her improvised belt. Then directing her toward the group of men and girls so strangely and quietly huddled in the basin between us, he—struck a match! I knew that, when the fuse was lit, she would in her strange trance, do his bidding—go down to them carrying this messenger of death—their death and hers!

Directed by the will of this fiend incarnate, she would become a *living bomb!*

But there are things more bitter than death, even violent death. And it was the masked fiend who forced me to drink to the dregs.

With a sudden motion, he flipped his match out. Without touching it to the fuse, he whipped out its flame. And his long, thin arms drew Kay to him.

With surprising strength, he lifted her until her tiny feet no longer touched the ground, and his thick, slavering lips roamed over her lovely, white face, closed over her red mouth.

Frantically I dug with my one free hand. Then I had a shoulder uncovered.

For the first time the man seemed aware of my desperate struggles against my entombment, for he looked sharply in my direction. Then, regretfully, he relaxed his grip on the girl. He shot another look at me as I was gradually pulling one numbed leg from the soil that imprisoned me. And then, striking a match and lighting the fuse of the bomb which was still held by the narrow strip of blue silk that engirdled her, he raced down into the basin, dragging her with him.

Trailing the spark that slowly climbed toward that tube of death, he ran directly toward the pitiful huddle of humanity, and pushed her into the midst of it!

Death by wholesale! Death for my loved one.

My eyes upon my beloved as she stood dazedly watching the death spark eat closer, I scraped, and twisted, and pulled with my tortured body. And then God—the God who I thought had turned his back—was good. I felt my legs pulling free! In a moment I would. . . .

I tore my eyes away from Kay as I realized the masked man had run up the little slope, and was almost upon me. He catapulted his body across the ditch and lunged straight at me. We went down together in a shower of flying dirt.

He would be an easy adversary. I could feel that. But he was on top; my feet were sunk again in the loose soil, my muscles had already been wrenched almost beyond enduring, and my legs were numb.

And the deadly spark was crawling nearer to Kay! A second's delay and she would be. . . .

God! I forgot all the rules of civilized combat and kicked, punched, butted the masked fiend. We turned, twisted, and, locked in a murderous embrace, rolled over. And my feet were free of the bog of loose earth!

But Kay?

I tore myself free from the creature's desperate clutches, lunged past him, knocking him sprawling into the drainage canal. And then, with a prayer on my lips, I threw myself toward that helpless huddle of men and women, toward that tube of death that lay against Kay's white body—toward that flying spark!

How many thoughts can shoot through a man's mind in a split second of stress! The men! The girls! Kay! The primitive pleas for self-preservation! What if I should get there in time—but *just* in time?

I made the last wild leap, and then the dynamite was in my tight-clenched fist. My eyes held by the spark nibbling at the

nub of the stick, my fingers, tightened by a paralysis of fear, clung to it for an eternity. God! Could I never turn it loose?

Then I whirled, drew back my arm for the throw, knowing that I must hurl it far! But even then I think I knew I was too late.

The stick left my hand—and then it exploded. The world split into a million pieces, and I was blasted backward, into a sea of nauseous blackness. . . .

Dynamite, if it is not handled by an expert, is as unpredictable as it is dangerous. And, thank God, the shot which in my desperation I hurled so tardily, did not explode in all directions as was to have been expected, but shot most of its force forward, blasting the hill where I had a few minutes before been trapped.

Of course, we all suffered from shock and from flying rock—Kay, the other pitiful victims of mad greed, and I. But we are all well on the way to recovery now, and there's not even a scar left to mar my fiancée's perfect beauty.

But the explosion was fatal to the masked man. The masked man? Monroe Shelton, forced by Banker Jordan into a fiendish plot that he could not reject because the banker knew that the reclamation director had embezzled project funds. And, on the promise that Jordan would replace the funds, and make no report of the theft, Shelton had promised to frighten the people from their land and let it fall back to Jordan, the mortgagee—because the banker had recently discovered oil under those dusty wastes!

As he lay dying, Shelton told us that much. "But," he cried out hysterically, "he promised me there would be no violence. He promised me! He said the people would be easily frightened away; that all I'd have to do was to kidnap the girls in some way that would arouse superstitious fear, and the people would leave. We got the idea from the hermit's rantings. And then I saw by my special

weather reports that there was to be a siege of dusters. I thought everything would be easy, but. . . .”

But the plotters had underestimated the courage of the westerners, and Shelton had been driven deeper and deeper into crime, while hysteria and sadistic impulses rose crazily as he went on.

That is the heart of the tragic story, but it took many weeks to unearth explanations for all the details, interesting but tedious, necessary to the ever-growing plot. And there are some things that have still to depend on inference.

Destruction of the project had not been a part of the original plan, but when Shelton found out it would be necessary, he knew he would have to scheme carefully, for the project was never alone for a minute. So he put a drug—excitant and aphrodisiac—into the men’s supper and, under cover of the small dust-storm brought the drugged girls and the fanatic Hermit, also drugged, to the reclamation center.

The drugs wore off sooner than he had planned, and Shelton saw he was going to have to kill his dupes and finish the work himself, in order to create a confusion that no routine investigation could unravel.

The unknown girl who lay in a trance was the famous woman-photographer, Marie Gil-Martin, come to take pictures of the “Dust-Bowl.”

Out of the horrible maelstrom only one disturbing puzzle remains—the “monster” I saw in the coulee. Shelton admitted that he had kept the girls in a cave in the coulee wall, and that he had used the pit to prepare them with their coats of glutinous pomade. But he swore with his dying breath that he never had used a hideous, grey “monster” disguise.

Because the cavern had been caved in, we have not yet been able to follow it to its end. It seems to lead onward and downward into the bowels of the earth. And we never did find the grey disguise!

Yet, I saw Shelton’s lasciviousness express itself that horrible night at the project when he held Kay in his arms; and, of course, I believe he was lying—that he *did* use a disguise for some sadistic reason. Or else how can I explain the great, grey shape I saw with the girls?

Yet when I look down into that black, bottomless pit behind the caved-in hiding-place, strange thoughts crowd into my mind. Man’s knowledge of the stuff of life is so puny, that he must not be too quick to reject new ideas. And today when I think of Walters’ theory—that the creation of a monster rhizopod by the friction and static electricity of the dust storms is as plausible as the universally-accepted theory of spontaneous generation of the lower forms of first life in the primordial ooze—I can ask with the studious little pharmacist, “Why not?”

THE END

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HELP ME TO DIE!

By LEON BYRNE



That was my dead body they carried from this room last week—my body, yes; but I am not dead! Listen but a moment to my story, and then, if you can deny me still . . .

IN THE name of God, in the name of all you hold dear, I beg of you, I beseech you as no man has ever besought another—help me to die!

That was my body they nailed in the

coffin and carried out of here last week—my body, yes; but *I* am not dead. Listen but a moment and let me tell you, and then if you can deny me . . .

There never was a woman more beauti-

ful, more tender and fragile than the girl who had just become my bride, golden-haired, blue-eyed Stefanie. And because the love we shared was so great and so precious, I had brought her to this little village where we could be alone to savor to its fullest the blossoming of the tie between us.

That was why, when we first encountered the Ancient, my impulse was to turn back and avoid him. We were walking in the fields by the river—you can see the place from the window here. He was standing in the center of the path, staring down at the ground. There was nothing evil or alarming about his appearance, you understand—just the contrary. He reminded me of a venerable and kindly old patriarch, with his white beard and deep-set, pensive eyes—eyes that seemed to have been gazing at and appraising humanity with pity and tolerance for generation upon generation.

But, while Stefanie and I were still some distance away, he suddenly lifted his arms, as a man will do in a gesture of hopelessness, of resignation. Call me mad if you wish, yet I swear that, for an instant, I did not see a man standing there with outstretched arms—I saw a cross, a cross such as you will find in many a burial ground, standing as sentinel over a lonely grave, a cross that is a tombstone.

One moment I saw the cross there, limned in the glaring sunlight, a symbol of pain and death; then, as I brushed my hand across my eyes, it was gone. The tall, somber figure of the man had dropped his arms, lifted his eyes from the ground to gaze moodily at Stefanie and myself as we came up.

There was death there at his feet, tiny and immaterial death—but symbolic. It was a thrush, lying stricken on the grass, and when Stefanie saw it she ran forward with a little cry, picked it up tenderly in her small white hands.

“Oh!” she said impulsively. “The poor

little creature! What happened to it?”

The old man looked down at her musingly, said, “A snake caught it. It was dead before I could rescue it.”

Stefanie stroked the feathery little body, still warm. “Such a pretty thing to have to die,” she murmured.

“Ah, yes,” the old man sighed. “The mortal clay it not so appealing to the eye once the spirit has fled.”

I had said nothing all this while, and now, with a polite inclination of his head to Stefanie and me, the oldster turned and started away. But Stefanie, who is always loath to allow anyone to depart, said quickly: “Are you a stranger here in Brentwood? I don’t remember having seen you—”

He turned, appreciation of her friendliness lighting his somber eyes. “Hardly a stranger,” he said. “A newcomer, you might call me. I have taken the Farnsworth cottage for the summer,” and he nodded toward this house where we are now. “I find this peaceful countryside ideal for my work and my studies.”

The old man was so courteous, so obviously lonely, that, much as I wanted to be alone with Stefanie, I could not be rude to him, and I said, “What do you study, if I may ask?”

“Death,” he said quietly. Then, when he saw the startled, questioning look in Stefanie’s face he quickly added: “Death and its conqueror—life. I study the soul of man. I would be honored to receive you some afternoon when you have a few minutes to while away—you and the young lady, both.” Then he turned and was gone down the path, with long, impatient strides.

That was our introduction to Dr. Nathaniel Creighton, and if I thought at the time that it was a crack-brained eccentric we had encountered, I quickly changed my opinion when Stefanie and I called on him—for we did accept his invitation. Diversions were few in the little

village of Brentwood, where Stefanie and I had come to spend our honeymoon, and though we wanted nothing more than each other's company, there was something about the old man—an elusive sense of hidden and strange powers, perhaps—that we could not seem to forget and that drew us to him.

We visited the old man two days later, spent a pleasant afternoon—and the next day at his request, I returned, alone, to his cottage.

DESPITE his countless years, Nathaniel Creighton's mind was brilliant, razor-keen, and he possessed a store of knowledge as vast and illimitable as the many-starred heavens.

"Life," he said that afternoon, "and death are two things that no one can avoid. We see them but do we know what they are? We can say when an organism begins to function, it is what we call life; when it apparently ceases to function, it is death. But in man, there is something beyond this mere bodily functioning, something beyond the mind, even. We choose to call it the soul. Where does this soul come from before we are born; where does it go when we die?"

"I am a scientist, mind you, and scientists can explain life and death in terms of physics and chemistry. The soul they cannot explain. That is why all true scientists are religious men. Cold reason tells them there is a Supreme Being, a Guardian of the Souls, a God, because there *must* be a God.

"Yet there is still much about life and death—and the soul—that man has not fathomed. When life ends, the soul returns whence it came. But what happens when life is suspended?"

"We see a girl swimmer suddenly seized with a cramp, see her go under. Half an hour later her body is dragged up from the bottom of the lake, stretched out on the shore.

"Her body is cold, she has stopped breathing, no heart-beat is registered. We say that she is dead. Then what do we see? An hour of furious resuscitation, of massage, of heat and oxygen applied, and the corpse stirs, moans, begins to gain color as lungs and heart start functioning again. She was dead, and now she is alive. And where, when she was dead, was her soul? It had not gone back, irretrievably, to her Maker, for it has again entered into her body. Was it not hovering near, prescient, hopeful, watchful?"

He stared at me long and penetratingly. "I have worked for years," he went on slowly, "many years, to perfect an elixir—an elixir that will liberate the spirit, the consciousness, the soul, from its earthly shell, the body. Yesterday, I believe I succeeded. I do not know for sure, but I think so. Only one thing remains—proof by experimentation." He looked at me eagerly. "Will you help me with the experiment?"

My sudden apprehension must have shown in my face, for he went on hurriedly: "No, no, do not misunderstand me. I do not wish to try the experiment on you; I will be the subject. But I must have your help. After I have injected the elixir into my veins, after its powerful chemical action has reduced my body to apparent death—and liberated my spirit—after this has continued for a period of minutes, a second hypodermic, containing the counter-agent, must be administered. If the elixir is perfect, my body will resume its functioning, again become alive."

I protested vigorously at first that there were certain things which belonged to God, with which man should not tamper—but even as I argued with him I was mentally scoffing at his theories and his claims. Nathaniel Creighton's mind was brilliant, yes—but it had cracked, and he was talking of something that was impossible, preposterous.

But he was not talking now, he was acting, with the swift determination of a zealot.

"You have no choice in the matter," he said fiercely as he thrust a hypodermic into my hands. "If you fail me, I am dead—forever. In ten minutes, inject this into a vein. Now—"

He strode to a couch—that cot beside which you are standing now—stretched himself out on it and pulled up his sleeve. Then he plunged a second hypodermic into his arm, slowly but firmly pushed the plunger until it was empty. The needle dropped from his hand and almost immediately he seemed to fall into a deep slumber.

Then, as I watched intently, his breathing slowly diminished, and stopped. I felt his pulse. It was faint, barely perceptible. In a moment it too had ceased. His sightless eyes rolled back, his entire body seemed to collapse—in death.

IT was a torturing, seemingly endless ten minutes I spent here with that body, so recently pulsating with life, now an immobile piece of senseless clay. More than once I was tempted to plunge the life-giving fluid into his arm, to end the terrible suspense—but I waited. Then, when I did use the hypodermic, I was so clumsy and nervous I feared at first that I had made a terrible mistake, missed the vein with the precious antidote.

But it worked—it worked as though it were a necromancer's magic potion—and as Nathaniel Creighton had died he came back to life—he returned to full consciousness a trembling, eager, wildly excited man who leaped from the couch, seized me by the arms. His eyes burning with a mystic fervor, he shouted at me:

"I have done it! I have done it! I have severed the cord binding consciousness and flesh! I have torn the spirit free from its earthly bondage! I tell you I have loosed the soul from the body!"

He stopped, almost overcome with the frenzy of his exultation, and I helped him to a chair. He sat there a moment, and after he had become more calm he went on, in low and vibrant tones:

"It was a—a tremendous experience, almost incredible. I felt consciousness leaving my mind; I felt a terrific physical and mental dizziness. Then, just as I was about to slip down into a black void, it seemed the walls of darkness parted, and I was hurled like a straw blasted from the mouth of a volcano, up into a dazzling blue firmament.

"My mind, my consciousness, were *outside* my body. I was here, still here in this room, and I had complete awareness of the room and everything that went on in it—yet I was free."

Reason told me that what he was saying was preposterous—that he was either playing some fantastic joke at my expense, or that he was suffering drug-induced delusions. But no, the man was not jesting—if ever a man was in deadly earnest, it was Nathaniel Creighton.

You will wonder, if I was so skeptical, why it was that I permitted him to pour that same powerful virus into my veins. My only explanation can be that the old scientist's enthusiasm was so contagious, his description of the disembodied state so rapturous, that my curiosity was whetted to a white heat.

The experiment had taken but ten minutes, it had not harmed him in any manner—and if he was telling me the truth, then I would share with him the honor of discovering, of exploring, huge new vistas on the horizon of the human mind and consciousness.

And as I asked him, then begged him, to let me share his secret, a voice within me whispered: "Some things are man's—some things belong to God!" But the voice was a tiny one, quickly silenced, and the old man was as eager for me to test and prove his alchemy as I was to try it.

Soon I was stretched out on the couch, felt the prick of the needle in my arm, felt an overwhelming rush of bewildering, dizzying exhilaration grip me, then—it is impossible to describe to you the amazing, the incredible feeling I experienced in the next few minutes.

You have watched a tiny chick emerge from a shell, seem suddenly to leap out into life, full born, from nothingness. I, too, seemed to leap out into a new life. I awoke from my daze an omniscient being. I could see, I could hear, I could sense things as never before, yet I was not a slave to eyes, or ears, of that fumbling mass of grey tissue we call the brain. I had the all-seeing eyes, the all-knowing wisdom of a god, of The God.

I COULD see the pale, still piece of flesh lying there on the couch—the body of Robert Gregory. I could see the tall, tense figure of the metaphysician, Nathaniel Creighton, bent over it, studying it, watching with eager, hawklike impatience for any visible symptoms of his experiment's success or failure.

I could hear him muttering, over and over, "Immortality—immortality is within our reach. The mystery of death and of life—the secrets of the Creator—"

I could see from above, from below, from all sides—I could see with a thousand eyes and hear with a million ears, for I was not seeing and hearing through crude sensory organs—I was feeling, and knowing, as a god would know, and my consciousness, my spirit, was all-pervading.

I saw Dr. Creighton cast a nervous, speculative glance around the room, as if he were seeking the location of my presence, and I laughed—my spirit laughed—at his confusion.

I saw him take a pin, and thrust it into the flesh of my body there on the cot to see if there was any reflex action—and I laughed again at myself for having felt

a momentary pang of alarm that I was about to be hurt, for the body did not quiver, and I—naturally, I felt nothing.

I saw him fingering the hypodermic in his hand nervously, looking at his watch from time to time. I wanted to shout to him to stay the injection, to permit me further moments of this glorious freedom, of release—but I had no voice, and the lax grey lips of the body there on the couch had no volition of their own—they were as uselessly immobile as the rest of the fleshly abode from which the spirit had risen.

No, I could not stop him. The hands of his watch swung around to eight, and to nine, and on toward ten minutes, and he put the watch down on the table—that table there behind you—and stepped quickly back to the couch, started to bend down over my body, with the hypodermic needle poised in his hand.

Then the laughter, the impatience, the exhilaration suddenly went out of me, for Dr. Nathaniel Creighton faltered, shook convulsively an instant, and sank to the floor with a moan.

The hypodermic thudded to the carpet, bounced under the couch, and the old man's eyes dilated wildly as he made a feeble, despairing effort to reach it, to jab it into my body, even if it was his last mortal act. For Dr. Creighton knew, as I knew, that he was dying—that the tumultuous happenings of the last half-hour had been too much for his feeble old heart.

He died quickly, while I watched, and as he died he cast his eyes dazedly upward, into space, as if seeking my spirit, and he muttered with bitter anguish, "My God, what have I done! Forgive me—forgive—me—"

You can understand—I do not need to tell you—the flood of despair that swept over me as I watched his gaunt frame stiffen and grow cold, lying there on the floor beside that other body—my body. I do not need to tell you how the ticking

of his watch there on the table, tolling off the seconds, sounded as a funeral knell to me as the minutes and the hours rolled by into eternity.

It had been just after noon when I came to the cottage to visit him—it seemed endless centuries later, although the watch showed that only six hours had passed—when I heard a footstep on the porch, recognized with a glad surge of thankfulness the voice of Stefanie calling my name.

I remembered, suddenly, that I had told her I was coming here to visit the doctor but for an hour or so. I realized that she had become anxious and alarmed because I had not returned, and had come to find me.

Grateful joy welled up within me at sound of her voice, and I started to rush out to meet her. Started? Yes, my spirit rushed out toward her, but my body lay immobile. My spirit called out to her, but my throat, paralyzed in seeming death, would not move.

I waited, and my spirit became ever more frantic as it echoed the growing fear in her tones while she sped from room to room, calling for me, seeking me.

THEN she came running into this room, this room where we are now, and I cried out to her: "Stefanie! Darling! I am here—I am her waiting for you. There is but a moment's task for you—seize the hypodermic and push its needle into my body. . . . There it is, there, under the couch! Take it, darling, quickly—quickly—"

I cried out—but she did not hear me. She heard nothing—but she saw. Those violet eyes swept over to the couch on which lay a body—the body of Robert Gregory—my body.

With a wild, sobbing cry she ran to the couch, flung herself down on me. She ran delicate, quivering fingers over my face, felt the cold immobility of my features,

stared with growing terror at my staring, sightless eyes.

"He's dead," she whispered. "Dead!"—and she drew back as though she had been struck cruelly in the face. Her eyes wandered down to the ghastly grey features of Nathaniel Creighton, lying there on the floor, then back up to mine. Something seemed to snap in her mind, and she hid her face in her hands, sobbed uncontrollably.

"No—no—" she whispered—"I can't live without you, Robert—I can't—"

Then, while I screamed a voiceless scream, and my spirit writhed in impotent fury at my helplessness, I saw her spring up, stare wildly about her for an instant, then run quickly to the doctor's desk, seize a steel-pointed letter-opener from its surface.

I reached frantic fingers to grasp it from her—and my fingers were wisps of air. I shouted, with all the might of my lungs: "Stefanie—don't!" But my voice stirred not the slightest echo, for it was a voice from beyond, which she could not hear.

As I watched, and my spirit sickened and died with her, she plunged the blade into her breast, deep into her heart. She staggered, tripped over the body of Nathaniel Creighton, fell prone upon me—upon the fleshly shroud of me, there on the couch. . . .

That was a week ago. What has happened since is only a wild and jumbled pattern in my tortured consciousness. I know they found us, found our bodies, a day, two days later. I know that my shattered spirit was dimly aware of the excited outcry that arose in the village, the press of curious, horrified throngs surging in to stare, and wonder, and speculate in hushed whispers.

I remember the melancholy intonation of the professional man in black: "The verdict of the coroner's jury is death from heart failure for the man known as Dr. Creighton; death by a self-inflicted

wound for Stefanie Gregory; death from causes unknown for Robert Gregory."

I remember vividly, the brief and furious but futile struggle I made to prevent them from placing my body in a casket, as they had done with the others. Much else I do not remember, for grief can strangle memory as well as voice, but I remember calling out to them: "Wait! That is not a corpse you are carrying off to bury in cold earth! It is the body, the undead body of Robert Gregory—my body—and I am not dead! For me there can never be peace, never be reunion with my beloved in His realm until you have freed me from this bondage—"

They did not hear me.

But you can hear me—I can tell by your expression that you hear me, that you understand my plea.

There! There it is—that thing you have in your hand—that hypodermic! You know where they buried the body of Robert Gregory—my body. Get there quickly—use that injection as I have told you it should be used. Let my body become alive again—if just for a moment, so that I can die decently, as other men die, as God intended them to die.

No, don't tamper with it like that; you may ruin it! Look at me—I am talking to you! Don't you hear me? I am calling you! *In the name of God, listen to me!*

THE real estate agent opened the front gate of his yard, slouched wearily up the path to the door of his home just as dusk was falling. He went in, walked through the house to the kitchen, where his wife Hannah was preparing supper.

"Well," he said with a tired sigh, "I cleaned up the Farnsworth cottage. Not very pleasant work, messing around where three people have just died.

"It may sound crazy to you, but all the time I was there I felt as though I wasn't alone. There wasn't anybody there, of course, but, well—it seemed as though I could almost *feel* somebody or something." He went to the window, stared vaguely out into the twilight. "It seemed that someone was trying to talk to me, begging me to help him—"

"Now, now," Hannah Dickinson reprovved him, "don't you go letting your imagination run away with you. You finished cleaning up the place, did you?"

"Yes, it's spick and span. I boxed up all of the old man's things and put them away for the public administrator to dispose of—all except one thing, a hypodermic I found behind the couch. It was full of some funny-looking kind of stuff. Thought it might be poison, so I threw it in the river. Yes, I finished up everything; and yet, somehow, I don't know why, it seems to me there's something unfinished—something left undone. . . ."



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THE TOWN THE DEAD

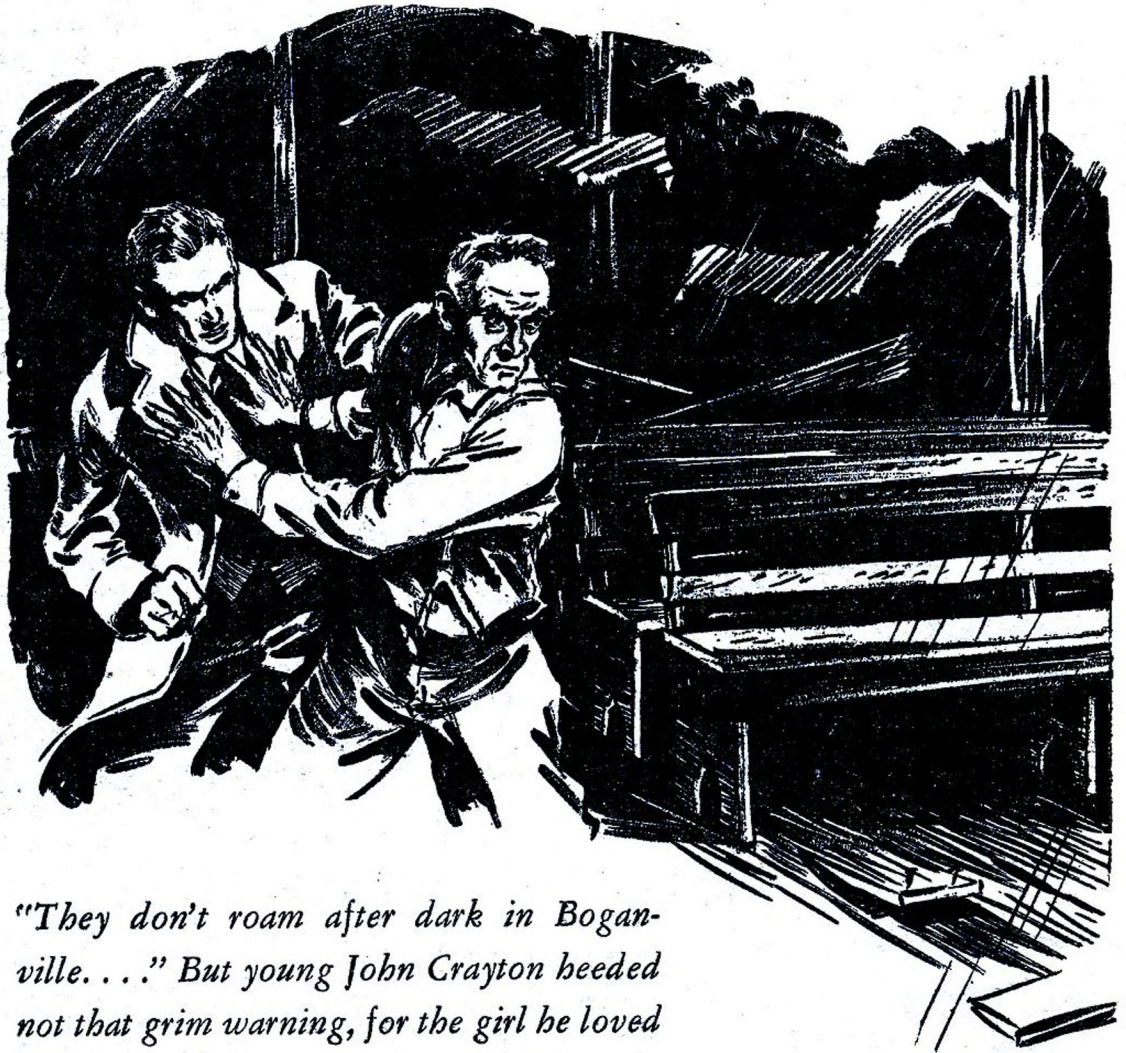
CHAPTER ONE

Death's White Wings

THE rain lashed down, seeming to claw at me as I stood under the dripping station eaves. Lightning split the midnight blackness. But I paid little attention to either. I stared at the

two things the flash revealed—the station sign that said Boganville, and the black bulk of the big house far up on the cliff overlooking the village—and I cursed through set teeth.

I looked around for somebody to take me to the damnable place, but saw no one. Naturally! I had come unannounced, so that no one could have been sent for me.



"They don't roam after dark in Boganville. . . ." But young John Crayton heeded not that grim warning, for the girl he loved had inexplicably married a man who revelled in unholy communion with the dead—and John had seen the figment of her spirit go forth to join the floating white things that cast a plague of grisly death in Boganville.

THINGS CLAIMED

By PAUL
ERNST

And the residents of Boganville, according to the train conductor, were hiding behind locked doors, these nights.

A funny sort of guy, that conductor. His eyes had seemed to avoid mine as he talked to me.

"You're stopping at Boganville? Oh, sure, we stop here on signal. Not very often. No freight or passengers, usually. Yesterday a girl came here from Hightown, forty miles over the hills. First stop we've made at Boganville for months."

He hadn't noticed the way my face tightened at the mention of the girl. He had

gone on talking, the queer look growing in his eyes:

"The people of Boganville are queer—unfriendly. I think maybe they're afraid



A feature-length novelette of
weird, unearthly horror!

of something. All of 'em! I don't know what. But they don't roam around in that town much after dark. Maybe you'd better not roam, either!"

The look of my surroundings bore out the conductor's vague warning.

The station itself was dilapidated and dark. Across the single railroad track from it was the little village. Not one light showed in any house. It looked like a ghost city in the lightning flashes. Far beyond, perched on the cliff edge like a buzzard about to strike, was the big Corse home which dominated the village at its feet as for generations the Corse family had dominated the lives of the villagers.

The Corse home! Stella was in there now, unaware of my arrival . . .

I could feel her telegram in my pocket like a stabbing blade. I'd gotten it in the city that noon.

"Married Fred Corse this morning. Forgive me, Stella."

Married to Fred Corse! But Stella and I had lived for each other for over a year. We were to have been married in less than a month. She could not have done this thing to me of her own free will. Something must be wrong. Terribly wrong!

Corse had been the one who introduced me to Stella. Her family had once lived near here, in the Kentucky hills. But there had seemed to be nothing but friendship between them. Now, a week ago, she had come down to visit her aunt in Hightown. And next thing I heard from her was the shattering telegram.

"Married Fred Corse this morning . . ."

Now I had come to this flag-stop at midnight to go to the Corse home and demand to hear from Stella's own lips why she had done this thing to me.

I pulled my coat collar up around my throat and stepped off the station platform into the mud. It was spring, and the rain was warm. Besides, the turmoil in my heart would have kept me from paying

much attention to even a worse night than this black, stormy one.

I started down the village's one street, past house after house—and not one light showed. And that was odd. Even in a small town there are usually a *few* people who are up at midnight.

"I think the people in Boganville are afraid of something." The conductor's words came back to me. "They don't roam around in that town after dark."

Afraid of the name of Corse, perhaps, I thought bleakly.

FRED, last of the Corses, was an aristocratic looking young man. Probably generations of almost feudal power over the ignorant, backward residents of Boganville had given the family that aspect. But there was something subtly disturbing about his slender elegance that had finally stopped my acquaintanceship with him, though I had let it drop with no open break.

There was a sort of serpentine grace about his body; a kind of veiled deadliness about his dark eyes and triangular face. Added to that, in college, had been the queerness of his library: one of the most extensive collections of books on after-life, spirit-visitations, and ghost-lore that I had ever seen.

A curious person was Fred Corse, full of contradictions; a dark mystic. When I'd come to know Stella better I had asked her what she really thought of him, and she had confessed to a suppressed fear and dislike of him.

And now—she was married to him!

"He forced her, some way," I swore, as I slogged through the rain and mud toward the cliff. "He must have drugged her—hurt her. I'll break his neck. I'll—"

I stopped. If Stella were indeed married to him, there was nothing I could do. I was all washed up.

If she were married to him. In that small word lay slight hope. Anybody can

send a telegram. Could Corse have sent that, signing Stella's name to it, for some crazy reason? He was arrogant enough to do it.

Oh, yes, Fred was arrogant enough to dare anything. The Corse family owned most of the land surrounding Boganville. The inbred, moronic villagers all worked for Fred. That feudal arrangement had made him insufferably arrogant.

But would he have dared to hurt Stella, or to send off that telegram if it were a fake?

Suddenly my thoughts were cut off as though by a knife. And the knife that cut them was a scream. A girl's scream! Once, twice, it split the eerie darkness, making the hair on my scalp prickle with the terror it contained. Then it stopped—and I was running toward the source of it.

The scream had come from the muddy road beyond me. I couldn't see any one there, but obviously a woman, ahead of me somewhere, was in danger of some kind and urgently needed help.

"They don't roam around in that town much after dark."

The lightning ripped a jagged splash in the black veil of the night, and I saw the person who had screamed, directly ahead of me in the road. I got to her quickly.

A girl of nineteen or so, she stood in the middle of the mud, with the rain plastering her brown hair to her cheeks and dripping unheeded from long lashes over wide, haunted eyes. She had on a white dress—but the garment was in rags over her shapely body, exposing her soft breast and graceful shoulders. Her eyes, beautiful eyes, glared at me with a haunted, stunned look in them.

She was staring straight at me as I grasped her bare wet shoulder, but she didn't seem to see me. It was very queer. I felt a cold sensation touch my spine. She was like a person in a hypnotic trance. No more sound came from her lips.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Are you

hurt? You called for help, didn't you?"

She said nothing. Not one thing. She just kept on looking at me—or, rather, *through* me—as if I didn't exist.

It was then that I felt moisture on the fingers that clasped the silky skin of her shoulder which was not the cold moisture of the rain. It was warm, sticky.

"After me . . ." she mumbled wildly. "The Dead Ones . . . *They're after me . . .*"

SUDDENLY she was running crazily from me in the rain, with her body looking like that of a naked woman because of the way the rain plastered her white dress to her. It was then, when the lightning flared, that I saw the thing on her back: a long thin stripe of ragged red, where blood had come from a kind of gash, or cut.

She didn't run far. At the end of the street was an old church. It was a hulking ruin with half its roof long gone, and with its steeple long since caved in. The girl ran toward that, and the lightning flared just in time for me to see her white, nude-looking figure dart within the sagging doors.

I followed her. The urgency of my own business was shelved for a moment in remembrance of the horror I had seen in the girl's streaming face. I heard her voice sounding ever more loudly as I neared the ruined church.

"Save me! Save me from the Dead Ones! Merciless spirits . . . I have done no wrong . . ."

The words broke once more into that keening, terrible scream that I had heard before. It stopped just before I got to the door and hurried inside.

It was as dark as the grave in the ruined church—till the brittle lightning streamed down from a drenched heaven.

I saw the girl, then. She lay down at the end of the aisle that led between broken, long unused pews. She lay before the overturned thing that had been a pulpit, all white and streaming, like a naked woman.

But the lightning revealed other red stripes on her white back now, besides the one I had seen as she ran from me outside. Other gashes down her snowy flesh. And it revealed for one brief instant something else which left me utterly bewildered as I ran down the aisle toward her.

Three vague white forms seemed to hover in mid-air near the body. At least I thought they were hovering there, like patches of mist in the blackness. I couldn't be sure that they weren't simply hanging strips of paper, or white blotches of plaster, on the wall behind the upset pulpit.

"They're after me . . . the Dead Ones . . ." the girl was babbling. "Souls of the dead . . ."

I bent over her, started to gather her up in my arms, to take her away from there. Then, in the lightning's incessant flaring, I saw a figure at the door. It was the figure of an elderly man, straight, spare, with lank grey hair and a fanatic's blazing eyes. He strode toward me, and I straightened up from the girl.

He, too, seemed to stare straight at me without seeing me at all. It was as if I were a ghost on that black night. He came to the girl and dropped on his knees beside her. I saw a resemblance of feature between them. He must be her father.

"The souls," he whispered—not to me. He was still paying no attention to me. "The souls of the dead, scourging those who sin . . ."

He whirled toward me with a strange madness shining in his eyes. He crooked his fingers toward me, like horns.

"Go! Get back to where you came from, and take your hell's scourge with you!"

I stood in hesitation as he glared at me. Then the fire died from his eyes, and he bent to pick up the body of the girl. He strode toward the door with her, and I slowly followed. I made no move to help; he was easily able to carry her. I simply left the ruin of the church, going into the lashing rain again.

What lunatic talk was this of Dead Ones? Of scourging souls? What had made those lone gashes on the girl's white back? I couldn't answer. Something prosaic and ordinary was at the bottom, of course; some natural thing distorted by the ignorant villagers into talk of the souls of the dead.

I shrugged it aside, telling myself that probably the girl was subject to seizures of some kind, and that in one of them she had inflicted those wounds herself, by convulsive clawing of her own nails. I started on toward the house atop the cliff—then stopped in my tracks. The lightning's flash was silvering the world again and in it, far ahead, I thought I saw three floating, wraithlike shapes. Like patches of mist drifting up the cliff path ahead of me.

Three things like great slow birds, yet unlike any birds ever seen before! Three things floating in an unhurried and soundless way toward the great house of Corse on the edge of the high cliff!

CHAPTER TWO

Can the Dead Scream?

I FELT stark evil pressing down on this black hill section in the black night storm. My fingers were trembling a little as I pressed Corse's bell.

I heard the peal clang hollowly inside, and started a bit as the door was opened sooner than I expected. I shrank back with a vision of the girl's streaming wounds before me. But there was nothing fearful or fantastic at the door.

A woman had opened it. She was about thirty, dark of hair and eyes, very attractive in a mature, voluptuous way. She stepped aside, with her dark eyes running questioning over me.

"I want to see Fred Corse," I said bluntly, with anger winning again over the sense of nameless dread that had dogged me to the house. All that counted now was that I

was in the home of the man who had somehow taken away from me the girl I loved.

The woman shut the door after me, shutting out at the same time most of the uproar of the storm. I looked more closely at her face. Was that pallor natural to her brunette complexion? Were her eye-pupils dilated because the light in this big front room was dim—or because of fear?

"Mr. Corse can't possibly see anybody," she said.

"He's got to see me! Where is he?"

She repeated firmly: "He can't see any one tonight. He wants to be alone, in his grief."

"I'm going to see him before I leave this house," I declared. "Also, I'm going to see Mrs. Corse."

It hurt to say those words. *Mrs. Corse!*

The woman's eyes widened, and her face grew paler.

"But that is the reason you can't see him. Mrs. Corse, I mean. She is dead. It happened just a few hours ago. Mr. Corse has shut himself up since then, and refuses to talk to any one."

She shrank back, startled, as I grasped her arm. I guess I must have looked frightening. I don't know. I only know that my mind was reeling at the shock of those words.

"Mrs. Corse . . . Stella . . ." I mouthed, sure that I had heard wrong—praying that I had heard wrong.

"She died a few hours ago, just as the storm was beginning. She fell over a low part of the cliff. It was not a long fall, but she . . . her neck was broken."

There was a big, stiff-looking chair in the hall. I got to it and sat down. The woman started toward me, hesitated, plainly didn't know what to do or say next.

I heard a man call, "Mary, who is out there?"

The voice was followed, before the woman could reply, by the speaker. I looked up dazedly to see a big man of about forty, with tanned face and strong jaw,

walking questioningly toward my chair.

"This is Doctor Jeanne," the woman said to me. "You—"

"My name is Crayton," I said vacantly. "John Crayton."

The man nodded. "Of course. I should have guessed. You came because of that telegram. Nasty shock. I wanted Mrs. Corse to break the news a little more gently, but she seemed to think a clean cut was best."

"This woman says she is dead," I said. I started to struggle to my feet.

"Easy, now. Easy," the doctor said, with a hand on my shoulder. "Yes, she is dead." He turned to the woman. "Fred will see this man, I think. We'll find out, anyway. Tell him that Mr. Crayton is here."

THE woman nodded, and started down the hall toward a wide door at its rear. She must be a superior servant, housekeeper, perhaps. A very good looking one. Ordinarily, I'd have smiled at the thought of such a housekeeper in a bachelor's lonely home. But not now. I was still numb from the shock of the news. Stella dead! I couldn't take it in . . .

The housekeeper came back. "Mr. Corse will see you," she said. There was sympathy in her dark eyes.

I started down the hall. Doctor Jeanne caught my arm for a moment.

"I'm here," he said, "as physician to Fred Corse as well as friend. He hasn't been well lately, and this thing has hit him pretty hard. Please be careful what you say to him. Don't upset him."

I wrenched loose. To hell with Corse and his tender feelings! How did Jeanne think the news hit *me*?

I opened the wide door I'd seen the housekeeper enter, and stepped into the library of the house. I saw a man's bowed figure in a big chair next to a dark fireplace.

The man lifted his head and I saw, with a little shock, the change in it. It was Fred

Corse, unmistakably, yet the man was a stranger to me.

It is hard to say what that change was. He seemed an exaggeration, a refinement, of his former self, that was all. His dark eyes had always been intense; now they were glittering like the eyes of a man who is very ill. His face had always been thin; now it was emaciated. He had always been nervous; now he quivered all over, like an old, old man. In spite of my grievance against him, I felt a momentary pity.

"John!" he said. "I didn't expect to see you after the telegram Stella sent. But I suppose you got the second one, announcing her death . . . No, you couldn't have. You must have left the city before it could be delivered."

"I got only one telegram," I said, unsteadily. "I didn't hear of the other till a minute ago. It's . . . true? It isn't a horrible joke?"

"It's true. At half-past seven this evening, scarcely ten hours after the marriage ceremony, Stella slipped and fell over the edge of the cliff outside." His hands clenched, and he paused till he could control his voice. Then, with his eyes glittering more wildly, he almost smiled. "She won't be gone from me, though," he crooned. "Her spirit will be with me. Her soul, robed in white, staying with me always . . ."

I could only stand there, speechless, before the man who looked ill almost unto death. And he stared up at me suddenly with the shrewd gleam in his eyes that comes to the eyes of one whose mind is on the thin borderline of sanity.

"You're surprised to hear me say that? Souls! Spirits! You used to sneer at my preoccupation with such things at college. I knew. And I knew that the reason you dropped our friendship was because you thought I wasn't quite sane. Well, you may get a chance to discover for yourself, tonight. Though I am not sure they will show themselves to you."

HE LOOKED into the fireplace, eyes glowing like dark, sinister jewels.

"For a long time I've been convinced that the souls of the dead—their spirits—can take a strange material envelope beyond the grave and return to us. They can protect us if we deserve it—and scourge us if we sin . . . Oh, yes, you stand there staring at me as if I were a madman! But I tell you such a thing is possible. *I know!*"

I brushed aside his crazy fantasies.

"All right," I said harshly, "there are materialized spirits. I'm not interested in such things now. What I want to know is how you induced Stella to marry you. *We* were to have been married. Why did she suddenly choose you?"

"Does it matter? She's dead now—"

"It matters to me," I rasped. "I want to know how you tricked her into marrying you. Or *did* you? Was that first telegram a lie, sent by you?"

Fred looked at me for a full minute. Then he reached into his coat pocket and drew out a crackling paper which he handed to me. I read it. It was a marriage certificate, announcing the union of Fred Corse and Stella Leigh in this, the hill county of Crile. It was dated this very day, and signed and sealed.

Somehow, the hope that the marriage story was a lie, had helped me bear up under the shock of Stella's death. I was left without that prop, now. The double pronouncement smashed me.

Fred was staring at me with something like contempt in his eyes.

"Now, for once," he said, "you can envy me instead of sneering at me. I'll have comfort and you won't. She'll appear to me, but not to you. Yes, appear to me! At last, in recent months, I have seen them—the white souls of the dead. In this house."

I retreated a step. His voice had risen. He was getting to his feet, waveringly, as an old man moves. And his eyes were

hideous. Glittering eyes of a madman. . . .

"In this very house—"

As I staggered back from him, with horror and sickness eating at my heart, there was a high scream of terror from somewhere below us. The scream of a woman in deadly terror.

I stared at Corse. His shaking hand had gone to his trembling lips. He started for the door, but I beat him to it. I leaped into the dimly lit hall. Steps pounded on stairs at the back of the house. The steps of a man. Doctor Jeanne, probably. I ran toward them and saw a rear stairway leading down. I started down them, then stopped. A sound at the back door had caught my straining ears.

The upper half of the rear door of the house had a glass pane in it. Framed there, I saw a face that I can still see in nightmares.

It was the face of an old man, maddened by rage. The lips were twisting under a long, curving nose. Heavy, grizzled eyebrows formed ragged lines over gleaming eyes. Eyes which glared balefully at me.

Then the face was gone.

I started toward the door, saw a wilderness of trees and shrubbery in a flash of the lightning, and turned back toward the stairs. The scream from the basement seemed more important than the face.

A woman's scream. The shriek of a human being in horror. Stella's wild cry? But Stella was dead. Dead!

I raced downstairs into the cavern of the basement.

CHAPTER THREE

The Locked Room

THE Corse home was very large. I came into a basement room that was at least thirty by forty, with doors at the end telling of still more basement space. But I didn't pay much attention to the door—then. My gaze was riveted to a sight in the center of the big room.

A woman lay there. Fred's housekeeper. The doctor was bending over her, holding a spoonful of some sort of dark liquid to her lips. Her face was as white as a sheet. Her breasts stirred with her gasping for breath. Beautiful breasts, completely exposed, for her dark dress had been ripped down the front almost to her waist.

There was a long gash between the white mounds.

"One of Them," I heard her pant to the doctor. "One of the Dead Ones. I have sinned! The scourge—"

"Drink this," the doctor was saying quietly. "It will help."

She forced the liquid down. I saw her throat move with the effort. Then she stared at Doctor Jeanne vacantly, started to say something, and relaxed in a dead faint in his arms.

Corse had come down the stairs and passed me. Jeanne looked at him for a moment. I thought I saw something like grim accusation in the doctor's level eyes. Then he nodded toward the unconscious woman.

"Help me carry her upstairs, Fred."

Fred, lips ashen with something that seemed to be more than fear, bent down. Together the two men carried the lovely body to the stairs.

I came after, apparently unnoticed by both men in that crowded moment. But in the first floor hall, while they carried the housekeeper to the library, I lagged behind. In a portion of the wall beyond the library door, I saw a curtain hanging as though it covered a niche.

I went to the curtain, glanced around. I was alone in the hall. I drew the shroud back . . .

A gasp came to my lips. There was a little statuette on a pedestal in the niche behind the curtain. It was a bizarre and lovely thing, of a woman all swathed in tenuous, misty drapes, with hands held forward as though in kindly benefaction.

Then I saw two things that sent a cold wave up my back.

Tipping those beautiful, outstretched hands, were long curved nails like the talons of a bird of prey.

The face of the misty apparition so cunningly chiselled in stone was the face of a beautiful demon—and was the face of Stella Leigh!

I HEARD my own rasping breathing as I stared at that thing of subtle horror. A statuette of Stella with a she-devil's face and with curving, clawing talons outstretched! The fact that at first glance the little statuette seemed to depict a kindly, benign being—and only at second glance was revealed as a thing of pure frightfulness—emphasized the shock its appearance gave.

So this was the kind of "spirit," of "white soul" Fred Corse saw in his sickly dreams! This was the way he had pictured Stella as she would look beyond the grave! Must have pictured her, indeed, before she died—for he could not have molded this thing, or had it done, in the short space of time *after* her actual death.

I heard steps then, and started rapidly toward the library door, letting the curtain fall into place again over the niche and its hellish contents.

Jeanne came from the library. He glanced absently at me.

"Is she all right?" I asked, nodding toward the library.

He nodded. "Yes. The wound was not bad. There must have been only one of them—" He stopped abruptly.

"Only one of what?" I demanded sharply. "What's the mystery in this damned place? What happened to her down there?"

He looked at me strangely, then shrugged.

"There are . . . rats . . . in the cellar. One must have bitten her."

He left, and Fred came from the library. His eyes rested on me with a little start, as though he had forgotten my presence here till the sight of me recalled it.

"John, I—let me show you to a room. You'd better get some rest. You probably need it. I know *I* do."

He started toward the front stairs. I thought of protesting, of refusing his hospitality, but closed my lips before words came. For into my mind had come a plan, born of the shock of seeing that little statuette, with Stella's face so subtly and horribly altered, and which had somehow caught in hard stone, the feel of an almost-disembodied wraith, or spirit.

"All right," I said, following him docilely.

We got to the stairs and started up.

What jerked my gaze in that direction, I do not know. But suddenly I found myself looking over the bannister toward the back door of the house. And there, once again, I saw the thing I had seen before.

The face of an old man, icily enraged, peering in at the streaming window. Then it was gone. But this time a lightning flash showed me a bent and gnomelike body running crabwise over the lawn outside for the shelter of a clump of trees.

HALF-PAST two in the morning.

I sat on the edge of the bed in the old-fashioned but comfortable bedroom to which Fred had shown me, and listened intently. There were still storm-noises to be heard in the night, though wind and rain were dying down. But it was not for those noises that I was listening.

I was straining to hear if any one was still up in the big house. Particularly any one in the hall outside my door. For it was time now to go through with the plan that had determined my staying in the house that night.

It wasn't much of a plan. It was simply a resolve to search methodically through this whole house, room by room, and see if I could find out the secret of the nameless horror that spread its wings over it.

Strangely materialized spirits! White souls of the dead, comforting those who de-

served it—"scourging" those who did not! What was the real answer to those *impossible* things?

Also I wanted to discover anything I could about Stella. They'd said she was dead. But no one had offered to show me her body. What was the reason for that?

I tiptoed to the door, out into the hall and to the stairs, cursing the ancient floorboards that creaked under my weight. I went up to the third floor first.

What insanity had Fred Corse been babbling of? What had attacked the girl in the ruined church—and the housekeeper in the basement? What were the three misty, wraithlike things I had seen floating ahead of me up the path—to this house?

Spirits of the dead—white souls from beyond the tomb?

Nonsense! Utter idiocy, I told myself. And as I was saying it, I felt sweat start out on the palms of my hands.

There was nothing on the third floor. I went into room after room and all were empty save one, where I heard the steady breathing of some one asleep.

Back on the second floor, I repeated the performance save for three of the six rooms there. Two were the rooms in which, I cautiously discovered, Jeanne and Fred slept. The third was my own, which of course I didn't bother to search.

The first floor . . .

There were kitchen, dining room, library, and two big living rooms with a double door between. All empty. But there was one more room off the main hall, and that, I found with a quick intake of breath, was locked.

I took out a knife to see if I could force the lock, then plunged it back into my pocket and turned.

Coming down the stairs was the housekeeper.

For a moment I was rigid with alarm. I had no right to search the house this way. I felt that there were dark secrets here for which some one might murder to

keep hidden. If the woman screamed . . .

But she didn't. She gasped with relief and said, "Oh, it's you. I heard a sound and was afraid . . ."

She didn't finish the sentence. She had a thin robe over her comely shoulders. As far as I could see, there was nothing under it. She was too agitated to realize that it hung open loosely in front.

"What's the matter? Why are you down here?"

I shrugged. "No important reason. I can't get to sleep. I wanted a cigarette, and found I was out of them. I came down to look for some."

"There are cigarettes in the library."

She turned and went toward the library door. I saw a gauze strip, a thin bandage, between her breasts, where I'd seen the thin gash as she lay in the basement. She snapped on a dim light and wordlessly pointed to a silver cigarette casket.

SHE took one too. I lit it for her, and sat down beside her on a broad divan. Here, perhaps, was a chance to get some information.

"You're pretty brave," I said, "to come downstairs alone to investigate a noise after what—happened to you."

Her hand went to the bandage, and her face whitened. She shivered in the thin robe.

"I thought the noise was made by a human being. And it is not human beings that I fear in this house."

I watched her sharply and said, "You thought the noise was made, perhaps, by—Stella Corse?"

She only looked surprised. "Made by a dead person? Oh, no."

It was hard to get out any words about it, but I forced myself to say: "It's odd that Stella died so soon after marrying Mr. Corse. Tell me—why do you think she married him? He isn't a well man."

"I think maybe that's the reason. She may have pitied him. Many marriages are

made for that reason. You must know that."

"Did she seem contented here?"

"Oh, yes."

That hurt. I said brusquely, "She wasn't bothered by the—whatever it was—that attacked you in the basement?"

Her fingers touched the bandage again. Her dark eyes peered fearfully into mine.

"I . . . I can't answer that," she gasped. "Oh, you must leave here! Get out the first thing in the morning. There is nothing for you here—with *her* gone. Nothing but death. Death on silent white wings."

"What's all this talk of the dead scourging the living who have sinned?" I persisted.

In answer, she got up and put out her cigarette.

"I can't say any more. You had better go to your room at once. And lock the door—tight!"

She stepped into the dark hall. I heard her soft footsteps as she went up the stairs. I stayed in the library for five minutes, and then went into the hall myself. But not to the stairs. I went back to that locked door.

I managed to shoot the simple catch with the blade of my knife, and stepped into blackness. I stood inside the doorway a few minutes and then began to see, a little.

I saw, dimly, many glistening cases standing around the walls, a table in the center, the vague oblongs of two shaded windows. Then I tensed suddenly as I saw a shadowy white shape standing between the windows.

I stood there with perspiration standing in clammy drops on my forehead, for the misty, wraithlike patch against the dark wall was all too much like the three shapes I had seen slowly drifting up the cliff path ahead of me. But it didn't move, and summoning all my courage I stepped slowly toward it to investigate.

I stopped. From behind me had sounded

a small noise. I stood with beating heart. The noise sounded a little like the faint swish of flowing draperies. At the same time, I seemed to feel a slight coldness behind me.

For a long moment I stood there. Then I turned—and a hoarse yell came from my lips. Behind me was another tall, dim white shape. But this one was *not* still. It was moving. It was coming, *floating*, toward me, with misty things like arms outstretched.

I tried to move, and couldn't. I got my head around enough to see a white shape looming slowly behind me, from the direction of the windows. I heard my breath rasp from terror-tortured lungs. Then the *thing* I had first heard was near enough for me to feel a sort of clammy cold mist touching my flesh.

I tried to crouch, tried to leap. But something crashed down on my skull and I sank into blackness.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cleansing Flame

I CAME back to consciousness knowing, somehow, that I was in the basement of the house. Perhaps it was the feel of dampness, the sensation of the cold concrete on which I lay. It was very dark.

I could barely see my hand as a dim blotch when I held it before my face. I touched my head, which was throbbing unendurably. What had struck me in the upstairs room where I had seen the ghastly white shapes?

Now, sound began to penetrate my consciousness. It was a soft murmuring, unlike anything I had ever heard before. It kept on, varying, now in one note, now in two or three, for all the world like an eerie conversation heard from afar.

The noise stopped. I got unsteadily to my feet. At first I could see nothing but the blackness around me. Then I saw one relieving spot of light, and started for it. The light came from a keyhole. I sank to

my knees and looked through the tiny space.

I was looking into another basement room. I saw bare stone wall, illuminated faintly by a bluish light. I saw the end of a table, or slab of some kind. I saw two dainty bare feet at the end of the slab, like things carved in snowy marble. I gasped at that, and the last shreds of fog fled from my dazed brain.

The shock of what I saw on the slab when my vision had cleared is with me yet.

On the black-draped slab as on a funeral bier, was a lovely white body. It was the form of a nude woman, with hands crossed on the breasts. So beautiful she seemed, and so peaceful, that you would think she was only sleeping there. But then I saw the throat and face, and knew differently.

The face was that of Stella Leigh! And the throat was almost covered over by one great bruise. It had been heavily powdered, but the bruise showed through it: the bruise of a broken neck. I closed my eyes for one shattered moment, then opened them again as I heard movement in the room.

Two figures came into my range of vision. One was Fred Corse, with his feverish eyes glittering like black diamonds. The other figure was robed all in black; veiled by a garment like a priest's cape. Over the face was a black hood, like that of an executioner.

Watching impotently through the keyhole, I saw Fred kneel beside the nude, alabaster body. His attitude was worshipful, but there was avid hell in his dark eyes.

Words came from under the black hood of the figure robed like a priest of Satan.

"Death, beautiful death! Death is not ugly. It is lovely, as this corpse is lovely. And it is not the end. From it springs life—the life of the soul."

I saw Fred's pallid lips move in answer.

"Prove to me just once more. I must be sure."

"It shall be proved once more, with this girl," the black-robed figure replied. The words, musical, liquid, were almost in a whisper; but they carried plainly to me.

"The soul is ever-living. Freed of its flesh, it becomes immortal, taking on pure substance and going where it pleases. It becomes heaven's scourge for wrong-doers. Each becomes a winged thing, as you have seen before, as you shall see again . . . Stroke the dead flesh, that it may release its spirit."

Corse rose from his knees. I could barely see him in the ghastly blue light. But I could see his eyes plainly enough, glittering, hard. His hands went out.

Slowly, lingeringly, they passed over the white, white body of the girl I had loved, halting on the graceful fulnesses, dipping to the soft hollows.

It was more than I could stand. I jumped to my feet, raving at Corse. I shook the door, bruising and gashing my knuckles as I pounded against the massive panels.

I HEARD all words cease abruptly in the next room. Then I heard something that even in that moment could stop my wild raving.

A renewal of the eerie, soft murmuring like the talk of strange beings far away. With this was a sound as of many soft forms moving, with gently swishing draperies, in the blackness around me. And in that blackness I barely saw looming white shapes slowly appearing and nearing me.

I screamed and tried to run, blindly, anywhere. As if it had been a signal, they were on me. The air was filled with the wraithlike whiteness, like mist patches floating around me. I felt as if a hundred whiplashes tore at me in the darkness, and the soft, hideous pressure of the white shapes crowding in almost suffocated me.

God, the feel of those things! Cold, dank, with floating garments that were like the touch of hideous membranes!

Again and again I screamed as I lashed out at the floating shapes. And sometimes

my screams were muffled, as one of the *things* smothered my face, and sometimes they ripped clear like the screams of a damned soul as I clawed the wraithlike shapes off of me.

I was on my knees, now, fainting, gashed in a hundred places as if by talonlike claws. I wavered on the threshold of death in the subterranean room. I knew that with a terrible certainty. I could feel the hot blood dripping from my face, as it had dripped from the rain-soaked body of the girl in the ruined church.

The Dead Ones, returning . . . Spirits of the dead, scourging those who sinned . . .

Reason returned to me for one brief instant. There was only one way out of this pit of white death. That was through the bolted door into the next room where Corse and the black-robed figure were. Just that one way out.

I was still near the door. I lay on my side, with my arms over my face to shield it from the horrible, softly murmuring white shades that pressed upon me.

"They've got me!" I yelled toward the door. "*They've—got—me—*"

I scratched at the door with bleeding fingernails, then was utterly still.

Over me, the white wraiths floated, and the agonizing torture of razorlike gashes continued. Every nerve in my body was writhing in pain and revulsion, but I managed to lie as motionless as a dead man.

And the ruse worked.

I heard bolts shoot back, heard the door open. Under my right arm I could see the doorway. Corse stood there, dimly to be seen in the weird light that trickled in from the other room. His eyes were stark mad, his body rigid with weird ecstasy.

"The scourging spirits have him—sinner that he is! The white souls are flaying him. I shall watch him die!"

The black-clad figure appeared behind him, and tugged at his arm.

"No, no! Come out of there!" it said. And the voice was not quite so musical

now. It was harsh and filled with fear.

"The spirits will not harm *me*," Corse said. "See how they rend him—"

I sprang then. I saw the unholy lust in his eyes turn to amazement and then to fear. I saw the black-robed figure try to shut the door in my face. Then I was on the threshold with Corse's throat between my slashed hands.

Horror and loss of blood had weakened me. But the weakness, for the moment, was more than compensated for by an insane rage. The figure in black clawed at me. Corse battered my face. But I held on.

THEN I saw something over Corse's shoulder, something that slowly weakened my grip as nothing else had done.

I was staring unseeingly at the bier on which was the milk-white body of Stella. It just happened that my gaze rested there, unwittingly, as I tilted my head to escape Corse's desperate blows. And I saw something white stir . . .

Stella's body? For one crazy instant I thought that. But it was not. The thing that stirred was something else, something that turned my fingers into nerveless sticks from whose clutch Corse was tearing himself free unheeded.

It was one of the dreadful, wraithlike shapes. *And it was rising slowly from the body of the girl itself.*

"Death is lovely, as this corpse is lovely. And it is not the end. From it springs life—the life of the soul."

The black-robed figure had said that. My God, had the spirit of Stella Leigh materialized before my eyes, coming from the white, dead body as a butterfly comes from a cocoon? I was blind to the other white wraiths looming around me again; and was numbed to their slashing attacks. I could see only the one white *thing* which had come from the body of a dead woman. I heard a roaring in my ears, felt my knees give under me.

The white shape floated toward me with

misty arms outstretched. And the face was that of Stella, with a demon's smile on the full lips, and the outstretched hands were tipped with cruel, avid talons.

I went mad.

I know now what is meant by insanity. I have been insane myself. It is a state where you laugh when normally you'd scream with horror. It is a state in which you have a strength beyond bone and muscle, and a quickness that makes lightning seem sluggish.

Corse was staggering toward me with a club in his hands. The black-robed figure had a knife that was rising to sink into my flesh.

Laughing, I hit Corse before the club could descend in his unsteady hand. Laughing, I got the club and struck down with it, on his head, as hard as I could.

I felt the sting of a knife-graze on my side and then turned to grab at the black-robed figure.

Even in the midst of my lunacy, and in spite of the odd shock of feeling a woman's voluptuous breasts under the black priest's robe, I heard the roaring from above grow louder and knew that it was actual and not just within my own skull.

And then a man screamed, above: "The people from the village! Every mother's son of them! Axes . . . guns . . . *Corse!*

Mary. Get away through the tun—"

The voice was stilled with terrible suddenness. I whirled the black-robed body from me. It fell to the floor and the hood came off. The face of the housekeeper glared at me. It was the face of a she-devil, with murder in her black eyes.

I could hear the smashing of glass upstairs, and something else far more frightening: a roaring crackle that I knew was fire, well advanced.

IRAN through the basement and up the stairs. In the hall was Doctor Jeanne and another man, on the floor. Jeanne was dead, with glazing eyes open. The handle of a knife protruded from his chest. The other man, elderly, was writhing in blood on the floor.

I recognized the bushy eyebrows and down-curving nose. It was the man I had twice seen peering into the glass of the back door. Furthermore—it was the father of the girl who had been attacked in the old church.

He glared at me with a hatred that faded when he saw the streaming wounds on my face and throat.

"So . . ." he gasped. "You are not one of them. I thought . . ."

He coughed blood and lay back. I bent over him.



"Tunnel from basement," he panted. "Go out that . . . safe . . ."

Red was glaring through the dawn-blackness of the hall. I heard the flames roar more loudly from a dozen spots in which the old house had been set afire. At the smashed windows and the open doors I saw the faces of men whose eyes were wide with idiot hatred. The faces of the villagers, scourged beyond endurance by some inexplicable thing emanating from this house and now rebelling by burning the house and all in it. Impossible to escape through door or window. The men would not permit that.

"Tunnel . . ." the old man gasped again. "In the coal bin . . . Take the girl that way . . ."

"But the girl is dead!" I cried wildly.

"No . . . take her . . ." He choked, and was still.

There was a crash as the back door burst down and men ran in. I got to the basement stairs ahead of them, and raced down. They didn't follow. They must have been satisfied that I was running down only to death in the flames when the building collapsed over me.

I got to the room where the white wraiths wheeled, and where Corse lay with his head battered in. I got there just in time. The woman in black was on her feet. She was bending over Stella's body with her knife in her hand.

I caught her white wrist on the up stroke, as the blade was poised to plunge down into Stella's white breast. Then I hit her—hard. She wasn't a woman—she was simply an incarnation of evil.

I gathered Stella's body in my arms and raced for the coal bin.

So cleverly was it concealed that I'd never have found it if I hadn't been told where to look. But in a moment I did find it—a black hole in the floor uncovered by pushing aside a mound of coal and raising a trapdoor.

There was a staggering trip down a dark

passage with a white body in my arms that somehow, incredibly, seemed warm. Then I was out in the rain, with the blazing house a hundred yards behind me. Dancing, maniac figures showed black against the red glare. But none of them looked our way; probably could not have seen us in the night if they had.

On legs that felt dead under me, I tottered to the road. A car seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was filled with men. One of them, with a sheriff's badge on his coat, got out.

That was all I knew.

IT WAS the old man who had told me of the tunnel, who rounded out the dreadful story. He didn't die till hours later, in the operating room of the Boganville Hospital, after being dragged by friends from the burning house.

He knew of the tunnel, built in Civil War days, that led into the Corse basement. Not as ignorant as the rest of the villagers, he pretended to be as frightened of the "scourging spirits of the Dead Ones" as the others; but all the while he was entering that house secretly and piecing together the chronicle of crime and horror it contained.

Doctor Jeanne was behind it. A biologist as well as a physician, he had developed, by selective breeding, albino vampire bats of the gigantic South American species. Things that had better than a five foot wing-spread and, seen in darkness, appeared to tower like white-draped wraiths as they floated near the ceiling of an unlit room.

Jeanne heard about Corse and his unbalanced belief in the occult and in embodied spirits of the dead returning. He got his great white bats into the house secretly and showed them to Corse in a dim room with suitable mumbo-jumbo. Corse saw "materialized spirits" and was almost in a state of mind to do anything Jeanne wanted. Almost—but not quite!

Jeanne wanted Corse to make a will leaving everything to him. And Corse demurred.

Stella Leigh dropped by to make a duty call. Jeanne recognized in her the inspiration for the little wraith in stone, in the hall niche. It looked like Jeanne's chance. If he could show Corse the materialized spirit of *this* girl, after death, the will was as good as drawn up. Then Corse could die and the family fortune would go to the doctor.

Jeanne drugged Stella while she went through a wedding ceremony with Fred. Then he doped her into unconsciousness, painted a deep bruise over her throat, and told Corse she'd died of a fall over the cliff. From the draped bier on which Stella lay, one of the great bats was to flutter up, convincing Corse that he had seen her soul take wing.

Then I got there. Corse's telegram had drawn me instead of keeping me away. Jeanne and the housekeeper—who was his sister—had tried to scare me off by faking an attack on her of the "scourging souls." Instead of leaving, I tried to investigate. Jeanne it was who knocked me on the head and left me in the room of the bats, to die there.

White souls—great white bats looming high in darkness with their tremendous wing-spread, their ghostlike fluttering. . . .

But sometimes the bats got loose. Unafraid of men because reared by one, they attacked the villagers—who saw in the wraithlike shapes whatever they wished to see, as I had thought to see talons and the face of Stella in the white form that had fluttered from under her bier. At last the people had risen and destroyed the place from which they knew terror came, even though they did not know the nature of that terror. . . .

"There isn't much left for you to take over except fire-charred ruins, darling," I told Stella, when she had recovered from her fantastic experience.

"Much for *me* to take over?" she repeated, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"You were married to Corse for a few hours. You're his widow—you get his estate."

She shuddered. "I never want to touch anything associated with that name!"

"There are other properties beside the house," I said, not looking at her. "A quarry, farms, some timber lands, a fair coal mine."

She put her slim finger on my lips.

"We'll sell it all and give it to charity," she said. "I'd choke on a crust of bread from that place, and you know it."

I kissed her, with my heart in my eyes.

"Yes," I said. "I do know it. And—thank God for it!"

THE END

Change to
Mint
Springs
and keep the
change!

A PRODUCT
OF GLENMORE

Ask for this quality Ken-
tucky Straight Bourbon. It's
easy on your pocketbook.

Terror Has No Face

Four men cowered in utter terror, for their lives were forfeit by a corpse's vengeance oath. They must pay for their crimes, and die as their comrade had, without a face—a prey to the grisly creeping death!



A novelette of an awful
creeping death which leaves a corpse—without a face!

By RAYMOND WHETSTONE

CHAPTER ONE

The Man Without a Face

DAVE WENDELL was within a block of his destination when a sixth sense warned him he was being followed. Without checking his stride, he glanced swiftly back over his shoulder. The street was dark, gloomy, imperfectly lit by the rays of a sputtering arc lamp, shining through amorphous, coiling tendrils of fog. In this dim, half-world of light and shadow the detective caught sight of a figure behind him, a figure that stole furtively along the pavement, dogging his footsteps.

Through the grey veil of the fog and night, the form of his pursuer was indistinct, shapeless, strangely terrifying. There was something about it that seemed abnormal and grotesque—something not quite human.

There was only one way to find out who it was that stalked him. He quickened his pace, reached the Benton residence where he had been called by tele-



phone that evening. The house was set far back from the street, surrounded by a tall hedge. Silently Wendell darted through the gateway, crouched behind the hedge. He fumbled in the pocket of his topcoat, drew out a small flashlight. His other hand closed around the butt of a revolver. With muscles tensed, every sense alert, he waited for what was to come.

Footsteps shuffled eerily over the pavement, drew nearer. Out of the gloom swam the figure. It hesitated, stopped directly in front of him. He jerked erect suddenly thumbed the button of his flash. A strangled cry broke from his lips as light sprayed over the nightmare creature before him.

It was tall, thin to the point of emaciation, its skeleton body outlined beneath the long, black cloak it wore. Bony fingers were lifted malevolently, shaping into talons. Underneath a felt hat, pulled low over the forehead, sunken eyes burned *in a skull without a face!*

That was the quintessence of the horror gibbering in Dave Wendell's brain. Where the features should have been there was nothing but scar tissue, with bits of dark skin still clinging to it. The nose was white cartilage, the cheeks eaten away. Teeth gleamed in the lipless mouth, fixed in a perpetual, frozen grin.

Even as Wendell stared petrified, the hideous creature snarled and struck at him viciously. The odor of kerosene smote his nostrils as he ducked the blow. He slipped on the dew-soaked grass, and went sprawling. He was on his feet again almost immediately, but that split second of time was long enough to give the thing a chance to escape. The sound of its footsteps thudded on, merged with the stillness. When Wendell reached the pavement, the monster had disappeared.

The detective cursed softly, the hair on his scalp still crawling at the memory of the horror he had seen. Who or what was

the faceless thing? Why had it been trailing him? Why had it smelled so strongly of kerosene? Unanswerable questions that must tie up in some way with George Benton's frantic telephone message. Benton should be able to clear things up for him.

Pocketing his revolver and flashlight, Wendell turned and followed the concrete walk to the house. He crossed the porch and rang the bell. The door swung open. Just inside stood a slight, middle-aged man with thin, tanned features. In the semi-darkness of the hall those features mirrored suspicion and a certain desperate fear.

"You are Detective Wendell?" the man asked tersely.

Wendell nodded, keen eyes studying the face before him.

"And you are not connected with the police department?"

Wendell gestured impatiently. "I'm a private operative, if that's what you mean," he said curtly.

The man sighed with relief. "I thought you were," he muttered. "But I had to make sure. A private detective can help me more than the police can. I—I'm George Benton. Come into the library and I'll explain why I called you here tonight."

The room they entered was wide and spacious, dimly lit by scattered lamps. Three walls were lined with books. The fourth was filled with glass cases, in which were mounted specimens of animal life, mainly native to tropical America. There were vampire bats, tiny monkeys, an armadillo, several kinds of insects, including the deadly tarantula. In the center of the room was a huge desk, and beside it stood a tall, young man whose sun-blackened skin contrasted oddly with his blond hair.

"My secretary, Paul Lambert," Benton said. "Paul is as much concerned with what I have to tell you as I am myself, Wendell," he continued hastily.

"Both our lives, as well as the lives of two others, are in terrible danger!"

"Danger?" The detective's eyebrows, lifted. "From what, may I ask?"

GEORGE BENTON didn't speak for a long time. When he did, his voice had sunk to a whisper. "We are being threatened—by a dead man!" he said hoarsely.

Wendell had schooled himself not to be surprised or startled by anything. But this was a little too much. For an instant he gazed angrily into Benton's haggard countenance. Then he turned and started for the door.

"Sorry, but I can't appreciate a practical joke," he said coldly.

"I'm not joking," Benton panted, clutching at his arm. "I'm telling you the truth, Wendell! The man who is going to kill us died six months ago! We're positive of that. And yet—we heard from him today! We got letters from him, threatening our lives. You've got to believe that. You've got to!"

The detective swung around, his forehead wrinkled in a puzzled frown. Benton sounded sincere. And certainly both he and his secretary were badly frightened. There might be something to the man's crazy talk, after all.

"Suppose you start at the beginning and tell me all about your trouble," Wendell suggested.

Benton swallowed convulsively. "As I said before, it began six months ago," he faltered. "We were in Brazil at the time, collecting specimens for the Museum of Natural History in Washington.

"Besides Lambert and myself, there were three others in the expedition. Professor John Brant, well known zoologist, was our leader. Then there were Dr. Melvin Shaw, on leave of absence from Columbia University, and Philip Drayton, a brilliant young pupil of Shaw's. We—we all liked young Drayton, thought

he'd be a great help to us on the trip. How could we guess that the time would come when we'd curse the day we took him along?"

"Then Drayton is the person you're so much afraid of?" Wendell put in.

Benton nodded. "Philip Drayton died while we were in the Matto Grosso, the wildest and most dangerous region in South America," he said huskily. "There's no question about it. And still, he's found a way to return from the dead and murder the rest of us!"

"It was his own fault that he lost his life," Benton continued hysterically. "If he had turned back when we wanted him to, everything would have been all right. We had spent weeks along the Amazon, were well satisfied with the specimens we had secured. It was the beginning of the rainy season, and the very breath of the jungle was laden with fever. Our quinine and other supplies were running low. Under the circumstances it was sheer insanity to keep on.

"But Drayton insisted. He had learned there was a rare species of butterfly, the *cyrestis thyódamas*, to be found in the interior of Brazil near the Rio Madera. He was determined to add the insect to our collection. And so he persuaded us, much against our will, to accompany him.

"I don't know how long it took us to reach the Madera. I—I can't remember. But it seemed ages. The river, a tributary of the Amazon, is navigable for only a short distance because of its many falls and cataracts. We left our boat at a small village along the stream and struck into the heart of the Matto Grosso on foot. We didn't find the butterfly we sought. We found only trouble—with the Catuquinas, a tribe of Indians native to that region.

"Apparently they had little use for white men, for they were unfriendly and suspicious of us from the start. They did not openly attack us. It would have been

a relief if they had. They kept out of sight after the first glimpse we caught of them. But as we went through the jungle, their arrows began to fall around us, flickering through the trees, getting closer and closer, driving us to the point of madness.

"A hundred times we tried desperately to catch sight of our invisible enemies and fight back. But we never succeeded. They were too clever for us. And then, one day, an arrow struck Drayton in the hip, crippling him. It was too much for the rest of us. We broke and fled—"

"And left him to the mercy of the savages?" Wendell said slowly. The scorn in his voice cut like a whip.

Benton flushed. "It was the only thing we could do," he whined. "If we had stayed behind and tried to save him, we would all have been killed. What was the use of sacrificing our lives for his?"

"As we ran, Drayton shouted curses after us, swore he'd pay us back for deserting him. We heard his shouts turn to screams of agony—and we knew the Indians had him. . . ." Benton's voice wavered into silence.

"And then?" Wendell prompted.

"There—there isn't much more to tell. The Catuquinas didn't try to follow us. I suppose they were satisfied with just killing Drayton. At any rate, we reached the Madera and our boat without being further molested. But we didn't feel safe until we left the jungle behind us and got back to civilization once more. And now . . . we are in danger again! Six months after his death, Philip Drayton is trying to make good his threats and revenge himself on us!"

George Benton stopped talking abruptly and fumbled in the pocket of his coat. He drew out a folded sheet of paper, creased and frayed at the edges through much handling. Without a word, he unfolded it and gave it to the detective. On it was written in huge and sprawling let-

ters the following mysterious sentence:
YOU SHALL DIE AS I DIED—
WITHOUT A FACE!

CHAPTER TWO

Death Is Kind to Cowards

FOR a full minute Wendell studied the message. Then he glanced again at Benton's pale, frightened face.

"When did you get this?" he asked tersely.

"It came in the regular letter delivery about two o'clock this afternoon. The envelope was postmarked New York. Drayton must have mailed it from a letter box or a local postoffice some time during the morning—"

"A dead man mails you a letter, threatening your life?" Wendell exclaimed. Be reasonable, Benton! Why are you so certain Drayton sent it?"

"The note is in his handwriting," Benton insisted stubbornly. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

"It might be a forgery," the detective interrupted again. "Someone else could have sent that note, who knew Drayton's handwriting well enough to imitate it. Someone who might have been with you on that expedition, and is using the dead man's threat against you now for some reason of his own. . . ."

"But that's impossible," Benton protested. "The three men who were with me when Drayton was killed—Professor Brant, Doctor Shaw, and Paul Lambert here, are entirely above suspicion. None of them would do a thing like that even as—as a practical joke. Besides, they all received letters just like this one!" He turned to his secretary. "Show him the one you got, Paul," he gasped.

Lambert's note was identical in every respect with that of his employer's. It contained the same single sentence, the same sinister warning that Benton insist-

ed had been written by a dead man.

"*You shall died as I died—without a face!*" Wendell read once more, this time aloud. "What does it mean?"

George Benton shuddered. "I don't know," he whispered. "Possibly the Catuquinas did something horrible to Philip Drayton's face before they killed him. They must have tortured him in some fiendish way—before he died! And now," Benton's fingers were digging into the detective's arm. "Drayton has come back from the grave to do the same thing to us! You've got to stop him, Wendell! You've got to save us!"

His voice faded away. He was trembling all over, his blood-shot eyes were piteous. And Paul Lambert seemed equally affected by the intangible aura of menace that hung in the room. Sweat beaded his tanned forehead, and he clung to the desk as if for support.

Wendell's eyes raked their features, his thoughts going back to the ghastly shape that had followed him through the night to this very house. It had been inhuman, awful. What was even more significant, it was without a face! Could that strange shape be the very thing these two men were so afraid of—the corpse of Philip Drayton, animated by some unholy power stronger than death, creeping through the darkness to fulfill its vow of revenge? A corpse trying to commit murder! It was fantastic. A dead man seeking vengeance on the living! Reason and logic rebelled against such an impossibility. And yet. . . .

With an effort Wendell shook off the eerie mood that gripped him, handed back the notes. "What about the two other men who received these threatening letters—Brant and Shaw?" he asked abruptly. "Where are they now?"

"I—I invited them to come here tonight," Benton faltered. "I thought it would be a good idea to have all of us together for mutual protection when

Drayton struck. They should be along any minute now. . . ."

"Did you tell them you called me in on this case?" the detective wanted to know.

"No. But—"

Benton's words choked off in a strangled gasp. Suddenly a voice was screaming—the voice of a man driven insane with horror and fear. Muffled, terrible, it sounded inside the room, seemed to come from the wall itself!

"Mercy!" it shrieked. "Dear God, have mercy! I don't have it! I don't have it, I tell you! Brant's the one who does! He's the man you want! Kill me if you will! But not like this! Mercy—"

The voice rose to a frenzied screech, stopped abruptly. Benton was staggering across the floor, face chalk-white, pointing a shaking forefinger at an almost invisible door beside a bookcase.

"It's Doctor Shaw!" he babbled. "He's in that closet! Something horrible is happening to him!"

WITH an oath, Wendell darted past the terror-crazed man, yanked the door open suddenly. A form bobbed there in the dimness, swaying a little with a ghastly simulation of life. It was the body of a dead man, dangling from a hook in the wall like the carcass of a sheep hanging in a butcher shop. And Dave Wendell felt black sickness churning and twisting in his stomach as he saw the hideous way death had struck.

The head and face of the man who hung there before him was entirely bare of flesh, as though picked clean by vultures! Only the skull remained, naked white bone, with not even a vestige of skin or hair clinging to it! Black holes leered at him from empty sockets where the eyes had been!

For one man at least the grim prophecy in those terrible letters had come true! Melvin Shaw, guilty with three others of

abandoning Philip Drayton to a horrible fate, *had died without a face!*

Fighting his nausea, Wendell drew nearer the gruesome corpse, forced himself to touch it. He turned away with a shudder, to explore every square inch of the closet space. He rapped on floor and walls with his knuckles, pressed onto panelling, but his search was fruitless. Aside from the dangling body, the closet was absolutely empty, its walls solid! There was no sign of the murderer, no evidence of any secret passageway through which he might have escaped! There wasn't even a clue to the grisly weapon he had used to mutilate his victim's face so horribly! Whoever—*whatever*—had killed Melvin Shaw had vanished utterly without a trace!

Wendell spun around unsteadily to glare at the pallid, stricken men behind him. "Well?" he grated. "What do you two know about this?"

Paul Lambert moistened his dry lips. "Drayton did it!" he choked. "He killed Shaw just as he threatened he would! He murdered him while we were standing here talking—"

"But if Drayton did it, how did he get away afterward?" Wendell interrupted harshly. "There's only one exit from that closet—through the door leading into this room! Drayton couldn't have made his escape that way! He couldn't have been in the closet at all—"

"But he *was* in there!" Benton panted. "We heard Shaw talking to him, didn't we? We heard the poor fellow begging for his life! And then Drayton—or the *thing* that was Drayton—murdered him and disappeared before we could open the closet door! I tell you, Wendell, we're up against something inhuman—something with unearthly powers! Something that can vanish through solid walls as though they didn't exist!"

"Nuts!" the detective muttered. "Ghost or no ghost, the killer's going to have a

hard time pulling a vanishing act when we get him behind iron bars!"

But his words lacked conviction. Once more he felt superstitious terror plucking at his nerves, threatening his self-control. Once more he was battling, fighting the worst of all fears—fear of the unknown! He had heard a man screaming behind a closed door. Barely five seconds later he had jerked open that door to find the same man a hideously mutilated corpse! Five seconds for some fiendish killer to strip the flesh from that man's face and disappear as if into thin air! It was all so utterly fantastic and impossible. It could not have happened!

"No, it couldn't have happened," Wendell mumbled to himself. "It must have been done in some other way." He wiped at the sweat forming on his forehead, turned to Benton again.

"Were you and Lambert at home all day?" he asked.

Benton looked puzzled, then shook his head. "We spent most of the afternoon in a museum," he said. "We were examining a collection of insects in the natural history department—"

"And I don't suppose you opened this closet after you came back?"

"No. We had no occasion to. We seldom use it—" Benton broke off suddenly, his face going livid. "What are you driving at, Wendell?" he gasped. "Do you mean that the murderer—that Drayton—brought Shaw to this house while Paul and I were away, forced him to go into that closet? Do you mean that both of them might have been in there since this afternoon?"

"It's quite possible that Shaw might have been, at least. . . ."

"But even so, that doesn't explain why the murderer delayed killing Shaw until just now! Or how he managed to escape from the closet afterward without being seen—"

"It doesn't explain another thing I'd

like to find out," Wendell snapped. "What did Shaw mean by screaming, 'I don't have it! Brant's the one who does!' just before he died? What was that thing he didn't have and the killer wanted? Have you any idea, Benton?"

"I don't know," Benton said hastily. "I—I couldn't even guess." But his voice didn't ring true, and he refused to meet the detective's eyes. Could the man be lying, keeping something back? "You'll have to ask Professor Brant," he added lamely.

"I'm going to," Wendell said grimly. "And right away. What's Brant's address?" He scribbled it down, turned to the trembling secretary. "Call the police, Lambert," he ordered. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"But you can't leave us alone," Benton whimpered. "You've got to stay here and protect us! Brant will be along in a few minutes anyway. He said he would—"

"Brant will never keep that engagement with you," Wendell interrupted harshly. "If he isn't dead now he might be soon! The police will take care of you and Lambert, Benton. I've got to warn John Brant before the killer gets him. Even now I may be too late!"

He heard Benton's despairing cry behind him, Lambert frenziedly telephoning police headquarters. Then he was outside the house, racing down the street to the corner. He hailed a cruising taxi, climbed in.

"Professor Brant's residence, 300 Olive Street," he panted. "And step on it."

CHAPTER THREE

The Crawling Death!

THE driver made good time. Scarcely ten minutes later they stopped with a squeal of brakes in front of a brownstone house. Wendell tossed the hackman a five-dollar bill, raced up the walk without wait-

ing for his change. The front door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open, entered a dark, shadowy hall. Light sifted out to him through drawn curtains hanging before a room to his left. Cautiously Dave Wendell crept toward the source of that light. He yanked the curtains apart, recoiled with a sick gasp of horror at what he saw.

Near the doorway lay the body of a man, legs bent, hands clenched even in death in a spasm of agony. The face was gone—obliterated! As in the case of Melvin Shaw, the flesh had been stripped away, leaving only a bone-white skull whose jaws yawned open as if in silent, hellish laughter! And bending over the hideous corpse, frantically searching its pockets, was the slim figure of a girl!

Wendell must have made some sound, for suddenly she jerked erect and whirled on him. For a moment she stood perfectly motionless and rigid. Then a strangled cry broke from her lips and she cowered back, eyes dilated with terror.

The detective reached for his revolver, leveled it at her menacingly. "Sorry to interrupt your little murder party," he said grimly. "But I think the police would like to have a talk with you. That," he gestured toward the thing on the floor, "was Professor John Brant, I take it?"

The girl nodded, her face a white, frozen mask. "But I didn't do it," she whispered. "I didn't kill him. I—I don't even know who did. I just got here a short time ago—"

"And proceeded to go through his pockets?" Wendell's lip curled. "Just a common, little thief, robbing a dead man?"

Angry color flamed in her cheeks. For the first time he noticed how pretty she was. "I'm not a thief!" she cried furiously. "I was only after something that didn't belong to him—something he took from my husband. Something that means everything in the world to Phil!"

"Phil?"

"Philip Drayton, I mean. I'm Mary Drayton, his wife."

Dave Wendell gaped at her foolishly, his mouth hanging open. Philip Drayton, according to George Benton's story, had died six months ago in South America! Philip Drayton, or so Benton said, had come back from the grave to exact a terrible vengeance on four men who had left him to a horrible fate! Two of those men had already been murdered, dying as Drayton was supposed to have died, without a face! And now here was this lovely girl, who said she was Drayton's wife, searching the pockets of one of Drayton's victims, looking for something she claimed meant everything in the world to her former husband! What in this world could be important to a dead man anymore? It didn't make sense!

"Let's get this straight," Wendell said feebly. "First of all, what is this 'something' you want so badly?"

The girl's lips set in a thin line. "It's none of your business," she said defiantly. "But if it isn't on Brant's body," her voice hardened, "one of the others must have it. I'll get it if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"So you're planning another murder or two?" Wendell rasped. "I don't think so! Not if I can help it, at any rate!"

"Murder?" she gasped. "But I didn't murder anyone! I just told you I—"

Her voice broke off suddenly and relief flooded over her face as she caught sight of someone over the detective's shoulder. "Philip!" she cried joyfully. "Thank God you're here!"

The rank odor of kerosene, more than what she said, warned Dave Wendell of the horror that lurked behind him. He whirled around, his blood turning to ice in his veins. One split-second glimpse he caught of the inhuman shape that had trailed him to George Benton's house earlier that evening—the ghastly, faceless creature that must be the corpse of Philip

Drayton! Then a club in the thing's hand swept up and descended with crushing force on his head. Crimson lights whirled and danced in front of his eyes. Pain exploded inside his skull, snuffing out consciousness as a strong wind snuffs out a candle. . . .

IT SEEMED hours later when Dave Wendell opened dull, suffering eyes once more. He was sprawled on the floor, his revolver lying a few inches away from his outstretched fingers. With the exception of the mutilated body of John Brant, he was alone in the room. Both the girl and the faceless thing had vanished!

Wendell staggered to his feet, picked up his revolver. Drums of agony boomed inside his head. He rubbed a shaking hand across his aching forehead, tried to think straight. The thing without a face was behind these murders. He was positive of that now. Whether it was human or inhuman, a living creature or a corpse, didn't matter. It was killing, destroying life!

The girl must be its accomplice! She had declared that she knew nothing about the murders, but she must have been lying. She and the thing had already killed two men—Melvin Shaw and John Brant! They would kill two more—George Benton and Paul Lambert—unless they were stopped!

He'd stop them! He'd save Benton and Lambert! With that determination seething in his brain, Wendell stumbled from the room and out into the night air. He could never recall afterward how or when he reached Benton's home. The next thing he remembered was running up the path to the house, dark and silent as a tomb. Even before he burst through the front door he knew death had preceded him! Even before he rushed into the library, he knew he would be too late!

The body of a man lay there in front of the desk. Like the bodies of the others

who had died that night, it was hideously mutilated, the face and head stripped clean of flesh! But by the clothing it wore, Wendell identified it as the corpse of Paul Lambert. Lambert who had died, too, without a face! Lambert who was the third to be hunted down and murdered to satisfy a dead man's lust for vengeance!

But where was Benton, the fourth victim marked for slaughter? There was no sign of him in the room! Had he escaped? And why weren't the police there? Lambert had telephoned them to come! He had been calling them when Wendell rushed away on that wild goose chase to Brant's home.

Or *had* Lambert called the police? With an inarticulate cry, Wendell leaped for the telephone, snatched it up. Dangling wires trailed across the desk as he lifted the instrument! The killer had made the phone useless so that Lambert couldn't get help that might have saved his life!

Wendell returned to the corpse, knelt beside it. Lambert had been dead only a few minutes; his flesh was still warm to the touch. The detective got to his feet, brow furrowed in thought. Significant happenings of that night of horror whirled in a stream of lurid pictures through his mind. He recalled the two ominous notes he had read that evening. He thought of another corpse he had seen. He remembered a man screaming in terrible fear—a man who was found dead and hideously mutilated seconds afterward. These fragments of a jigsaw of mystery should form a completed pattern of crime if only he could put them together.

Again Wendell was at the desk, running his fingers underneath its edge. He straightened up finally, waited. Suddenly a voice was shrieking in the room once more—a voice so muffled and terrible that it froze the blood with horror. "Mercy!" it shrieked. "Dear God, have mercy! I don't have it! I don't have it, I tell you! Brant's the one who does! He's the man

you want! Kill me if you want! But not like this! Mercy—"

It was Melvin Shaw's voice! Shaw had screamed those same words once before! But Shaw was dead—his corpse dangled from a hook in the closet! Dave Wendell was pale and shaking as he listened. But a moment later he smiled grimly as the hideous voice rose to a nerve-tearing screech, and rasped away into silence.

"As simple as all that!" he muttered aloud. "Just a recording of Shaw's voice—what a fool I was not to spot it! What a fool to let the real murderer escape when I had my hands on him! But he must be still in the house! And this time his tricks won't help him!"

Whirling, the detective went plunging out into the hall. The other rooms in the house were dark. They were vacant, too, Wendell switched on lights as he ran. He reached the kitchen, stopped in front of a door leading into the cellar. Dim light filtered up to him as he opened the door. Down below the killer must be lurking, preparing his next move in this desperate game of life and death.

Cautiously Wendell descended the staircase. His hand was thrust deep in his pocket, gripping the butt on his revolver. He reached the concrete floor of the cellar, and moved across it on tiptoe. There was no trace of the killer.

But on a table in the center of the floor was a transparent, circular object that reflected the light—a huge, glass jar. And inside that jar was a dark ball that moved and swayed with hideous life.

WENDELL'S breath was frozen vapor in his lungs as he drew nearer and saw what that living ball was. It was made up of dark moving bodies, millions of tiny insects. They were vicious South American ants, the vilest scourge of the tropics! They devoured everything that was unfortunate enough to be in their way—leaves, plants, other insects, and living

creatures many times their size! All animals even man, fled in terror at their approach! They were more to be dreaded than the most savage beast that roamed the jungle!

This, then, was the hideous murder weapon the killer had devised! There was a wooden bottom to the jar, and, in it, a hole large enough to admit a man's head. Once fastened in there, the victim's face would be exposed to the ants. They would devour skin, flesh—everything, leaving nothing but grinning bone behind! This was why three men had died—without a face! No wonder Melvin Shaw had screamed in horror when he saw what was to be his fate!

Sick, nauseated, Dave Wendell stared at the swarming insect horrors. So fascinated was he that he failed to notice that a door was opening inch by inch at the other end of the cellar. He didn't hear a black, furtive shape creep from its hiding place and start silently toward him. He was aware of no danger until a vicious blow struck the side of his head with terrific force. Arrows of anguish shot through his brain. He felt hideous darkness envelop him. He felt his limbs turn to rubber, and the floor rushed up to meet him as he fell. . . .

Consciousness returned to Dave Wendell slowly, consciousness filled with agonizing pain. His head throbbed excruciatingly, and there was the flat taste of blood in his mouth. He groaned, opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor, bound hand and foot. Near him stood the shadowy figure, watching him through the slitted eye-holes in its masked face.

"You should be punished for interfering with my plans, David Wendell," the figure droned. "But I am inclined to be merciful. I am succeeding in what I set out to do in spite of you. I have already revenged myself on Melvin Shaw, John Brant, and Paul Lambert for the wrong they did me! There remains only—"

"Stop it!" Wendell cried hoarsely. "You're just wasting your breath by trying to feed me that nonsense! I know the whole cursed scheme! I know who you are and the reason for your hellish crimes!"

"Really?" A snarling note crept into the gloating voice. "In that case it may be necessary to include you in my list of victims, after all! But go on, Wendell. You interest me."

An icy wind seemed to blow through Dave Wendell as he caught the menace underlying the masked fiend's words. He knew too much. He was in the way. Unless a miracle happened, he would meet the same hideous end as the others. Already the insect horrors were scurrying around more rapidly in their glass cage as if scenting the flesh of another victim!

"Yes, I understand the whole devilish plot now," Wendell continued, sparring desperately for time. "I know what really happened to Philip Drayton on that expedition to South America. You wanted me to believe you had been forced to leave him behind when you fled from an Indian attack, didn't you? But that was a lie to cover up your own guilt! You and the others *did* leave Drayton behind—but to a fate infinitely more horrible than anything a tribe of savages might have done to him. You tied him up in the path of an army of ants, knowing what would happen when the insects reached him, planning to murder him by the same means you used to murder your three accomplices tonight! I have no proof of that, of course. But I am just as positive you did it as if I had been there to watch you.

"But why did you and the others wish to murder Drayton? There could be only one motive—greed for wealth. Drayton had something the rest of you wanted—something so valuable you were determined to kill him to get it. Something, I found out a short time ago, that was small enough to be concealed in a man's pocket.

What could be so tiny and still be of such value that you would commit murder to possess it? Only one thing—a jewel of some sort, a precious stone. . . .”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Mask of Horror

“YOU'RE much too clever, Wendell,” the masked figure snarled. “Too clever for your own good. You're right, Drayton *was* left in the jungle for the ants to devour him. He did have a precious stone—a diamond known as the ‘Eye of Light’ and worth a small fortune. It was given to the poor fool by a rich Brazilian whose life he happened to save while we were in Rio de Janeiro. From the moment I saw that diamond I knew I had to have it for my own. The money I could get from selling it would leave me in comfortable circumstances for the rest of my days. And I did get it at last! I have it now—”

“I thought so,” Wendell interrupted harshly. “But it didn't really come into your possession until tonight, did it? For after you and the others robbed Drayton of the diamond and disposed of him, the jewel disappeared. You found out then that there was no honor among thieves, let alone murderers! You knew one of your three accomplices had stolen it, but you weren't sure just which one. And so you thought of a scheme that would not only frighten the thief into giving up the diamond, but would also eliminate him and your two other confederates so that the proceeds from the sale of the jewel would be yours alone!

“Ironically enough, you decided to use Philip Drayton in that scheme. When you and your three partners in crime left Drayton to die in the jungle, he had screamed threats after you, vowed he would find a way to get even. You knew your accomplices remembered those

threats. If you could convince them that Drayton actually had come back from the dead for his revenge, you could break down the nerve of whichever one had stolen the diamond to such an extent that he would be only too glad to give it up. Once the diamond was in your possession, you could murder all three of your confederates and pin the blame on a dead man!

“And you did it well. You started your terror build-up by imitating Drayton's handwriting in the notes you sent to your victims, warning them they were going to die as he had died—without a face. You also mailed one to yourself, of course, to keep them from suspecting you. And since you lived in the same house with one of your intended victims, you got your note the same time he got his and could study his reaction. You pretended to be just as panic-stricken as he was, even agreed with him that I, a detective, should be called in as a protective measure. You knew the police were bound to find out what was going on anyhow, and hoped to convince them through me that a supernatural influence was actually at work.

“You did go to a museum this afternoon. But you didn't stay there long, as you wanted me to believe. You slipped away after a short time and went to find Shaw, your first victim. You brought him here, compelled him to enter this cellar with you. Then”—Wendell shuddered as he glanced again at the hideous, swarming death in the glass jar—“you showed the poor wretch the murder weapon you had devised to carry out the threat in those letters. You had brought the colony of ants in that jar from South America for just such a purpose.

“Shaw went crazy with terror when he found out what was going to happen to him. He vowed he hadn't stolen the diamond, accused Brant of taking it instead. You let him rave on for a little while before you killed him. You had rigged up

a dictaphone outfit in the cellar which was making a record of what he said. You figured even then that you might need such a device to pull the wool over my eyes a little later on.

"When the ants were finished with Shaw, you went after Brant next. Wrapping up the glass jar so that no one could tell what it contained, you drove with it to Brant's house. But before you murdered him, you found out he didn't have the diamond either. Only one person could have it—the third man who had helped you take it from the original owner in the jungle.

"You had gone with that man to the museum earlier in the afternoon. He was still there, not knowing that death had already struck down his two companions. You rushed back here then to set the stage for the performance tonight. You dragged Shaw's corpse up from the cellar and put it in the closet. Concealing the dictaphone record of the dead man's voice behind a bookcase near the closet, you connected it with an electric switch underneath the edge of the desk. You could stand beside the desk and start the record without anyone noticing what you were doing. You were all ready now for the little drama of horror you played this evening.

"And I swallowed the bait you had set for me, hook, line and sinker," Wendell went on bitterly. "When you clicked on the switch and I heard Shaw's voice apparently coming from the closet, I reacted just as you hoped I would. I thought, of course, that someone was in the closet with Shaw, murdering him. And when I yanked open the door and found the poor devil's body hanging in there, that belief was intensified. Your little trick helped you in two ways. In the first place, it gave you an ironclad alibi, since obviously you couldn't have just killed Shaw when you weren't even close to him. Secondly, it sent me racing out of the house in a

foolish attempt to save Brant who was already dead, leaving the third victim of your hellish scheme completely at your mercy!

"I didn't get wise to you until I came back here again from my wild-goose chase to Brant's house," Wendell continued harshly. "Then when I found the body of your last victim lying in front of the desk and the telephone wires cut, I began to smell a rat. Why should a supernatural killer need to take the precaution of cutting telephone wires so that its victim couldn't call for help? I remembered, too, that Shaw's body had felt cold when I touched it, instead of being warm as it should have been if he had just been murdered. I knew then that both he and Brant had been killed hours before and your alibi wasn't worth a nickel. I pried around a little bit more and discovered how you had apparently made Shaw talk long after his death. Those murders hadn't been committed by an inhuman thing, the corpse of a dead man avenging an old wrong! No, a human agency was at work: you, a fiendishly clever murderer, who would stop at nothing to accomplish your purpose! But I had found that out too late to do much good—"

"**A**ND you came back here too soon for your own good, Wendell!" the black shape interrupted viciously. "After you left for Brant's home, my last victim went to pieces completely and confessed he had stolen the diamond. He surrendered it to me and began to plead for his life. But my little pets soon stopped his yammering, the damned, sniveling thief! I was getting ready to destroy the incriminating evidence—the murder weapon I had used and the dictaphone record of Shaw's voice—when you interrupted me. You just gave me time to hide in the back part of the cellar when you came rushing down here. But though you've discovered who I am, I'll still get out of this mess

with a whole skin, Wendell! I'll still save my hide—by killing you! And I might as well use the same weapon on you I used on the others—”

“You can't get away with it!” Wendell cried hoarsely. “You needed me to prove your alibi! The police are sure to find you out now!”

“Don't be stupid, Wendell,” the robed figure chuckled. “I don't need an alibi! The police will never dream I committed the murders, and you know it!”

How true that was, Wendell realized bitterly. The fiend would escape and never be punished! If only he could stall the killer off a little while longer! The masked shape had lifted the terrible glass jar, was coming toward him with it. Inside it, the dark ball burst into a thousand scurrying horrors, ready to devour his lips, his tongue, his eyelids, strip the raw, red flesh from his skull! Sweating, panting, Wendell struggled with his bonds. They were giving slightly, but not enough for him to reach the revolver in his pocket. He needed just a little more time! Something *must* happen to stop the murderer for a few more seconds!

And something did! Suddenly the stairs leading down the cellar creaked ominously. A thing was descending those stairs—a thing of horror! It was gaunt, hideous, faceless—the corpse of a dead man! The corpse of Philip Drayton, returning at last for its revenge! Slowly, remorselessly it drew nearer the fiend who had murdered it!

The masked man must have heard that slow approach, for he whirled around to confront the horror stealing upon him. A jangling scream rasped from his lips and the glass jar with its awful contents dropped from his fingers and splintered into fragments on the floor. Whimpering, crazed with fear, he cowered back, shaking from head to foot, his red-rimmed eyes rolling wildly in their sockets.

“You have come back!” he bleated.

“You have made good your vow! No, it can't be! It can't be! Stay away from me! For the love of God, stay away from me!”

The thing that had been Philip Drayton didn't answer. It was as though death had robbed it of speech. In ghastly silence it continued on, fleshless jaws open in a snarl of hate, skeleton fingers shaping into claws to bury themselves in the masked figure's throat.

“No!” the fiend screamed again. “I killed you once! I'll try again, make sure this time! If the ants didn't finish you in the jungle, a bullet will now!”

The murderer was pawing wildly inside his coat, striving to jerk out a gun. But Wendell's hands were free at last, his own revolver in his fingers. Orange flame stabbed suddenly through the gloom of the cellar. The masked figure shrieked, weaved back and forth uncertainly, crumpled in a grotesque heap to the floor.

Swiftly Wendell untied the thongs around his ankles, bent for a moment over the form of the murderer. “Too bad my bullet only stunned him,” he muttered. “But perhaps it's just as well. The electric chair will be a better punishment.”

The detective straightened up, turned to the hideous creature behind him. He saw now that the thing's features weren't so badly mutilated as he had supposed. Enough of the face was left to indicate that its owner had once been handsome and manly and young. A girl had entered the cellar and was standing beside it now—the same girl Wendell had seen at John Brant's home a short time before.

The detective went toward them, gripped the thing's hand. “Thank God you came when you did, Drayton,” he said fervently. “You saved me from a horrible death. You”—he hesitated as he forced himself to look again at that ghastly remnant of a face—“you weren't killed in the jungle, after all?”

It was the girl who answered. “Philip can't talk very well yet,” she explained

huskily. "No, he wasn't killed as his enemies thought he had been. He was rescued by a tribe of friendly Indians before the ants finished him. But even now, he hasn't fully recovered from his terrible experience. Even now"—her voice broke—"he imagines the awful insects are still crawling on him and insists on dousing himself with kerosene. . ."

"I understand," Wendell said gently. "I've heard that people in tropical countries use kerosene to keep the horrible little beasts away. I"—he tried to grin—"I was wishing for some kerosene myself tonight."

Mary Drayton shuddered and drew closer to her husband as she glanced at the unconscious form of the murderer on the floor. "And to think George Benton planned all this," she whispered. "To think any man could be so cruel and fiendish—"

"Benton?" Wendell interrupted. "That isn't Benton." He stooped once more over the black-clad figure, ripped off the mask. The thin, tanned features beneath were distorted with fear and rage.

"**P**AUL LAMBERT!" the girl panted. "I—I can't believe it! I saw his body—"

"That was George Benton's body you saw upstairs in the library," Dave Wendell said grimly. "Planting Benton's corpse there to be mistaken for his own was another of Lambert's tricks to keep everyone from finding out he was the murderer. He killed Benton, destroyed his face to prevent recognition. He then changed clothes with the dead man, knowing that Benton's body would pass for his, since they were both approximately the same height and weight. Lambert, you see, wasn't sure he could convince the police that a supernatural killer had committed the murders. But he figured he could still make a clean getaway by having it appear that he himself was a victim of the killer.

With Paul Lambert apparently dead, he could take the diamond he had schemed so hard to get, adopt an assumed name, and go to another country where he would never be suspected.

"I fell for his gag myself at first," Wendell continued harshly. "Then I remembered the two threatening letters Benton had showed me earlier in the evening. The one Benton had received was worn and frayed, indicating it had worked on his nerves so much that he had looked at it countless times during the day. The other note—Lambert's—had hardly been handled at all. In other words, Lambert hadn't been terrified by the ominous warning in those letters because he was the author of them himself. I recalled, too, how Lambert had hung around the desk all the time, waiting to turn on the record he had made of Shaw's voice. I knew then that Lambert was the killer, saw through the devices he had used to shift suspicion away from himself. . ."

"Letters?" Mary Drayton gasped. "Devices? I—I don't understand."

Briefly Wendell explained to her and her husband the part of Lambert's scheme they hadn't heard. "The whole thing originated in the brain of a madman, driven insane with greed," he added. "Thank God he didn't succeed."

He bent again over the killer as he talked, found a hidden pocket inside of the coat. He drew out a small, square box, flipped open the lid. Inside, on a mound of cotton, rested a magnificent gem, glittering, sparkling with dazzling radiance. It was the diamond, the "Eye of Light"! But there was something sinister about its loveliness, something evil in its cold, scintillating beauty. Because of it three men had died. Because of it still another man—Paul Lambert—must go to his death in the electric chair.

"Yes, it is evil," Dave Wendell murmured. "And yet good sometimes comes out of evil." He turned to Mary Drayton,

saw her slim fingers tremble as he put the great jewel in her hand. "I think I know now why you wanted it so badly," he said softly. "I think I know why you told me it meant everything in the world to your husband. . ."

"We need it to make Philip look like a human being again," she whispered. "We've consulted a plastic surgeon who is sure he can restore Philip's face through a long series of treatment. But those treatments will cost a fortune. We need the diamond so that we can sell it and pay for them. . . ."

"Tonight Philip followed you to Benton's home, because he suspected that some scheme was afoot. He ran away after you saw him, and came to find me. We decided we had to act quickly or we might not get another chance to recover the diamond those devils had stolen from him. You caught me going through

Brant's pockets, and Philip had to knock you out so that we could continue our search. We went next to Melvin Shaw's house, but we didn't find him at home—for a very good reason. As a last resort we came here—and, thank God, Philip got down into the cellar just in time before that damnable fiend . . .

"Let's not talk about it anymore," Wendell interrupted kindly. "There's still a little job for me to do. It's time Lambert was brought to justice—"

He turned, recoiled with a sick gasp of horror as he stared at the unconscious form of the killer. Grim, poetic justice was already being meted out to Paul Lambert! The ants! They had crept out of their shattered glass prison, were swarming over the fiend's body! Lambert's own murder weapon had turned against him! He was dying as his victims had died—*without a face!*

THE END

**THE JULY-AUGUST
ISSUE!**

The awful whistle of the Doom-train shrilled out over the black hills of Manitou Ridge as Lorry Borland fought his way through searing flames to look down into that cavern of Damnation. What he saw there made him curse the mother who bore him—for he watched his lovely wife chosen as a willing passion-mate for a mad monstrosity from out the womb of Pandemonium! Don't miss—



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LOVE ME—AND PERISH!

By LYLE D. GUNN

I little thought as I watched the famous star commence her erotic Dance of Doom, that all too soon my sweetheart would be in her place—a willing partner to an invisible monster come out from hell to choose a victim for the Devil's torture mart!

CLAIRE LADD'S dressing gown fluttered to the studio floor, and the glare of the arc lights picked out and accentuated the ravishing body that had made her the idol of a million men and long kept Eldorado Pictures out of bankruptcy. Under the maze of girders, cables and overhead lighting equipment, the stage was set to represent an Oriental seraglio, but no fabled caliph ever possessed so alluring a slave as the smouldering redhead who graced this jumbled version of the *Arabian Nights*. In the glaring illumination, even the sheen



of her famous milk-white skin was heightened by her filmy costume, the Hollywood version of a harem girl's attire—an open-fronted blouse that but partially hid the swell of her firm breasts and failed by eight inches of softly molded flesh of meeting the silken pantaloons that hung low on her voluptuous hips. Her full thighs, rounded and perfect, seemed a natural continuation of the alabaster amphora, a tall urn-like vessel of peculiarly suggestive shape, before which she halted.

Again I had the feeling of imminent disaster that had been growing steadily sharper as we approached the last day's shooting of this picture. I could not even characterize the danger I sensed; all I knew was that strange menace hovered over this set. And as my eyes sought out Mary Boyne, for once I wished that the girl I loved were somewhere else.

Mary was Claire Ladd's stand-in and therefore wore the same revealing costume but her refreshing sweetness and the clean grace of her figure made it appear charming rather than suggestive. I might have been prejudiced, for we were engaged to be married whenever I rose from the nonentity of an assistant director, but I found her far more attractive than Claire Ladd.

At last Bogolowski, the director, tore his pig-like eyes from the alluring body of the nearly-nude star and signaled he was ready for the "take"; Castelon rapped his music rack to bring the studio orchestra to attention; and Claire Ladd dropped to her knees before the alabaster amphora, ready to begin the dance that was the climax of the picture and was supposed to invoke "The Jinni in the Bottle." Then it was that Abou Malik, the wealthy importer who had consented to act as technical adviser on this production, slowly shook his head and as the black silk tassel on his red tarboosh cast a flitting shadow over his swarthy face he softly said "It is dangerous to trifle with these things . . ."

His eyes were on the alabaster amphora, and suddenly all my vague dread was crystallized. It was the amphora from which seemed to flow the aura of malignant power! I remembered the peculiar *aliveness* I had felt in its smooth stone when I had helped Quigley, our ancient prop man, fill it with the chemical that was to simulate the materialization of the jinni. And suddenly the fantastic thought came to me that perhaps it *was* in rapport with some unearthly power! Malik, who had lent it to the studio from his private collection, had claimed it was actually a relic of the Second Caliphate, the fabulous age of Scheherazade and the Caliph Haroun El Raschid. Who could say where in legend was the borderline between pure myth and time-garbled truth . . . ?

I attributed the vagaries of my mind to the strain under which we had been working to finish the last two scenes today on schedule. Then the cameras began to grind and as the orchestra went into her number and Claire Ladd started the exotic dance, my only thought was that I was glad it was not Mary who was kneeling and gesturing before that alabaster symbol of evil.

I did not know that all too soon my sweetheart would be in Claire's place, doing that same dance before all these eyes—and one more pair come out of hell to choose a victim for a strange desire!

THE kneeling girl's dance began with a slow undulation of her torso that rippled the soft conformation of her bare waist and stirred even her firm breasts into a subtly sensuous quivering. She added a snake-like writhing of her supple arms, then her contortions became still more abandoned as her stomach muscles shuddered and she slowly rose to her feet, swaying and undulating to the sensuous rhythm of the music.

Then, each part of her body continuing its unique, provocative motion, she slowly

began to bend over the amphora; through the sheer pantaloons could be seen the bunching of her thighs from the pull of her lowering torso. Then her hand snaked down to unstopper the amphora—and abruptly stopped!

Her eyes widened with fear, a sudden dread seemed to grip her. Yet it was so swiftly overcome by her trouper's instinct to go on that the pause was nearly imperceptible. Quickly she composed her face, reached down, unstopped the amphora. And then *I* felt it—something evil, something malign, something that came out of hell through the narrow neck of that sinister bottle!

The very air seemed to throb with a terrible destructive force. But when I flashed my gaze over those near me, I saw no surprise or fear. On Bogolowski's face was an expression that might have been satisfaction at the scene he was getting. For the rest—except Abou Malik, who was not to be seen—there was only desire inflamed by the provocative spectacle; even old Quigley showed it, as he licked his thin lips hungrily.

Yet it was with a sense of horror that I watched the smoke billow from the bottle's neck, rise sluggishly, flatten, and drop into a spreading grey cloud on the floor. As the smoke continued to pour out, the cloud mounted higher, seemed to grasp Claire's legs venomously, to claw at her thighs in rage. But any emotion she might have felt was now well under control and she continued to dance smoothly as the curtain of smoke steadily rose before her. Then, as it suddenly thickened, she was completely hidden from view.

I breathed a sigh of relief; the scene was over and nothing had happened.

But why didn't Bogolowski yell, "Cut!" The cameras still ground at that opaque greyness and my forebodings returned swiftly as it seemed suddenly to stir with life, to gather into a myriad of ectoplasmic globules that shifted and writhed and

formed fantastic shapes and swiftly changing patterns. For a second, it seemed, the illusion persisted and then there was only smoke again, settling and thinning, revealing . . .

God! I can still hear the screams that arose, the hoarse cries, the horrified shouts. For this shapeless flesh weltering in blood, this twisted figure with torn breasts and ripped throat, was all that remained of Claire Ladd!

SAM GOLD, Eldorado's president, climbed to the stage from which Claire Ladd's mutilated body had been removed an hour before. His manner was harried, his heavy-jowled face grey as he faced the assembled cast and staff.

"We must be practical," he said tersely, "even at the risk of being considered callous. The continued existence of my company is at stake. So are your jobs. Despite this—accident, the picture must be finished today!"

Mary's slender body trembled inside the curve of my arm and from the others, except Bogolowski, rose a shocked murmur. But it soon changed to a chorus of grudging agreement, marred only by the director's sharp, "How?"

"Only the sequence in the cave is left," Gold answered, referring to a shooting script. "That scene can be taken as a medium long shot and if we keep the face of the girl taking Miss Ladd's place away from the camera, there need be only a superficial resemblance." He hesitated. "We have such a person in Miss Boyne."

A faint gasp came from Mary and I was already half out of my chair to protest when Gold swept on.

"You may be sure I would not suggest this," he urged, "if I felt I were placing anyone in danger. Granting that a murder had been committed and that we do not know by whom, there is no reason to believe anyone else in danger from that person . . ."

But was it a *person*? That was my chilling thought as Abou Malik's warning ran through my brain again in an insidious whisper: "*It is dangerous to trifle with these things.* I wished he had returned, so that I could ask what he thought of this. A girl killed without a sound heard or anything but a patch of smoke seen by the score of people within a dozen feet of her . . .

"As for any other idea," Gold continued, as though he read my thoughts, "a woman is not torn—is not killed without human hands touching her. In a few minutes the film of that scene will be developed and we can look at the rushes. The inexplicable will be explained, I am sure, by the camera's less emotional eye . . ."

He was right, I supposed, and I had no right to deny Mary this chance. She was eager for it, now that she had gotten over her reluctance to double for a dead girl. Yet I could not shake off my dread, could not keep from feeling that there *was* some connection between Claire Ladd's death and the sinister amphora. But at least that scene was done; the amphora was not used in the one in which Mary would play. A little ashamed at thus admitting to myself that I did fear the thing, I was still glad that Mary would not have to perform the ritualistic dance of invoking the jinni.

Then it was that one of the men from the developing room rushed through the crowd, caught Gold as he was walking off the set. His agitated whisper cut through the sudden silence: "The film must have been exposed. There was nothing on it!"

Gold swore, groans rose, Bogolowski exclaimed, "Then we're licked!"

"I'm damned if we are!" shouted Gold. "We'll still finish this picture today!" A roar of approval went up as he issued his order: "If it takes all night, shoot *both* scenes!"

Only then did the full significance of this accident strike me. *Mary must re-*

peat the dance that had brought Claire Ladd a strange and brutal death!

FOR three hours Bogolowski rehearsed Mary in the dance, and for three hours I struggled with a dilemma that kept growing more frightening but never became clearer. Unquestionably Gold was right and any other attitude was insane. But there was still this horrible thought to torture me: if the other, the incredible, *were* true—Mary was doomed! I couldn't risk it . . .

In the end, my change of feeling came about paradoxically. Abou Malik suddenly was walking beside me as I paced the floor nervously. Into my hand he thrust a smooth, dark object—like an amulet without any inscription. "A charm against certain evils," he said and quickly left my side. An instant later his tall figure passed from the building out onto the lot. And suddenly I felt very foolish; his melodramatic manner and his "charm" had cured me of my ridiculous fears.

But when they were ready for the take, I went to the stand at the side of the set, near Mary but out of range of the cameras. That was just a precautionary measure. I had satisfied myself that there were no trap doors in the stage floor, but I was going to stand where I could see *behind* the screen of smoke.

Then the take began and I was quickly lost in admiration at Mary's performance. It did not have the heavy sensuality of Claire Ladd's, but it seemed to strike closer to the meaning of the dance. She actually seemed a devotee of some ancient cult, sincerely supplicating the jinni to manifest himself. That ring of authenticity robbed the dance of all obscenity and as she rose from the first kneeling position before the amphora and her whole undulating body was revealed, I felt that this was more than wanton exhibitionism. There seemed a real ritualistic significance in the devotional, entreating gesture with

which she unstoppered the evil amphora.

Then I felt it again—some emanation that spread from the amphora in great powerful surges! Yet it was different this time, different in a way I could not characterize until suddenly, as if in response to it, a wave of sheer wantonness seemed to sweep over Mary.

In a second she seemed to have a more lavishly endowed, more provocatively shaped body than Claire Ladd's. And the movements of that body changed at the same time, became slower but stronger and more stirring, seeming to pick up the fierce, deliberate rhythm of passion's own surge!

One part of my brain said that she had only been caught up by the spirit of the dance. The other shrieked that a demoniacal spirit had found her pleasing, that she was responding to his demand, giving herself to a fate *worse than Claire Ladd's!* God! Why didn't I listen to it and stop her before it was too late? But I poor fool, *knew* my thoughts were mad; I could not spoil the take, which would be over in another minute, now that the smoke was rising before Mary. And, from where I stood at the side, I could see that no one else, *nothing* else, stood behind the thickening curtain a foot in front of her.

She was safe, I told myself; the only difficulty was with my imagination. The smoke once more seemed to be gathering into misty shapes that swirled in exotic patterns and strove avidly to press against her body. And she seemed to shudder with ecstasy; her thighs trembled, her soft waist swelled and flattened with her heavy breathing, her whole body began to tremble—as if in the amorous embrace of a lover! God! I was able to endure it only because I *knew* it was smoke I was seeing. And there was a definite space between it and Mary. As two separated things I could see her pulsing white body and the curtain of smoke. Two separate things. I could see them both.

And then I could see only one! The madly gyrating smoke. Before my very eyes, Mary had disappeared—as though she had been *erased* . . .

THE huge, giddy clouds of multi-colored light that filled the sky slowly receded back into my own brain and then I saw that I was walking along upper Hollywood Boulevard. It was nearly midnight, but the five hours since I had left the studio were a blank to me. I remembered the first consternation when the lowering smoke had shown the others what I knew already, the panic that had ensued as the fruitless search went on; the police, their questions, the discovery that again the films were mysteriously spoiled; Bogolowski arguing with Gold, who had been called back, and at last convincing him that nothing could now be done to finish the picture on schedule; everyone being kind to me as together we left the lot for what I knew was to be the last time.

Then I was alone, *thinking* of it for the first time, and I remembered no more.

And now my thoughts began to spin insanely again as I faced the incredible truth—Mary was gone! Gone to the embrace of a creature of hell-born desires and deathly corruption!

I fought for a saner view but it was difficult. Claire Ladd was one matter; there were ways, even if I could not say how, that she could have been killed. But Mary had vanished into thin air! And before she had disappeared with my eyes upon her, I had felt the perverting power from the amphora, seen Mary's passionate response to the embrace of an invisible lover.

Perhaps my subconscious mind was directing my stumbling feet for I was nearly to the Eldorado lot when the wild thought came to me. Where would Mary be but in the grotto where the jinni was supposed to have transported her?

It was insane, but as I broke into a

run I was cackling gleefully. To my shaken mind the thought seemed perfectly logical and evident. Even after I had let myself through the gates and was flying past the false-fronted buildings of a frontier town followed by an English Village, down a street in Montmartre at whose end stood a plaster Taj Mahal, and round a corner through a section of the U. S. Navy Yard, it did not seem incongruous that on a Hollywood movie lot I should be seeking the lair of a demon out of the legendary *Arabian Nights*. I slowed up as I passed the studio building where the weird affair had had its beginning. Quietly I opened the door of the adjoining studio, crept toward the end where the artificial grotto had been built.

It was only partly roofed and as I entered its narrow mouth, far ahead I could see the pale moonlight that pierced the skylight of the building. I went toward it over a thick carpet of moss and gradually I made out the monstrous figures incised on the wall, the huge rocks at the grotto's end. Then, standing beside them, I saw Mary! Exactly as I had seen her last; with one sweep I took in everything from her half-closed eyes to the unmarred beauty of her profiled figure in the flimsy costume that was not even rumpled. She was unharmed, had not been touched!

An exultant cry rose to my lips—but was never uttered. Mary had tilted back her head, lifted her lips, extended her arms—as if in invitation! *But no one else was there.*

Incredulously, I watched her torso arch provocatively, her body sway forward. I could not understand. Against this screen of light there was nothing visible except her body, standing out in fine detail. Yet she was seeking an embrace, begging caresses.

Suddenly the silk taut over the curve of her breast was indented—by the print of a man's hand! *The print but not the hand . . .*

PERHAPS I hadn't really been convinced until that second. All I know is that with that physical evidence of a hell-born being who was material yet invisible, fear closed over my heart and chilled its beating. My breath oozed out, my strength trickled away. The jinni actually stood before Mary! The jinni, invisible, yet capable of dimpling Mary's breast with the touch of his hand, capable of fondling her, of—God! It was the horror of that thought which rooted me to the ground, made me look upon the weird wooing as though in a trance.

The separate indentations made by the monster's fingers slid together and I could see her soft flesh firming at the touch—flattening, suddenly under a pressure that could not be seen! An ecstatic shudder rippled Mary's body and she inched forward, her arms curving about empty space, as if enfolding a material lover.

My own hoarse shout snapped me out of my trance and I lurched forward awkwardly. What happened in the next split-second seemed composed of many separate events. Mary stiffened, started to turn. A form shot past me. Mary's turn was arrested and the cloth across her waist tautened, as if a restraining arm had encircled her. The figure ahead of me stopped, whirled, faced me. I saw Sam Gold!

The first thought that flashed through my mind was that Gold, though he had no conceivable motive, had staged this whole weird affair, that I had been mistaken in what I believed I had just seen. Then I looked at Mary again and her provocative expression and sensuous gestures could allow only one meaning. The jinni *did* exist! And Mary was mad with desire for his unholy love. . . .

I sprang forward—but Gold stepped in front of me, blocked my way. I didn't understand, not until I really looked at him for the first time. In the dim light I could see his eyes were black with hate

and in his hand—he held a revolver! “My God!” I cried. “You don’t think I—?”

He did think so! His lips curved into a sneer. He believed me what I had for a second thought him—a fiend who had engineered these crimes! And he was raising the revolver to point at my heart!

“Wait!” I shrieked. “Look behind you! You don’t understand—*look behind you!*”

Mirthlessly he laughed. “For the ‘jinni’—while you jump me?” His finger tightened on the trigger . . .

God! It was coming, coming quickly even as my eyes darted to Mary for one last look. She was turned toward us and no longer could I see the imprints of invisible hands on her! But her eyes were shifting, *as if watching something stalk toward us . . .*

I heard a click. The revolver was cocked! I braced myself for the shot . . .

Gold fired!

But as he did his arm jerked down spasmodically and the bullet hammered into the grotto floor. He had gone stiff all over—as *if in the bone-crushing grip of an invisible giant!* And without a hand that could be seen touching his throat he began to gag and his eyes bulged monstrously in a face that quickly turned livid, then black!

Something that had been pushed far back in my mind made me plunge my hand into my pocket for a small object there, but it was forgotten again in the horror of what I next saw. Suddenly, as if released from support, Gold’s body crashed to the floor, jerked convulsively once and was still, while from his mouth and nostrils gushed rich claret blood. Then I felt the first crushing agony of the death hold . . .

SUBCONSCIOUSLY I must have been prepared for it, for even as sharp twinges of pain shot through my arms and legs, I was able to fall back a few steps. But the invisible force followed me, pinned me against the grotto wall, and I felt as if

my entrails were being pulped, as if my arteries were swollen to the point of bursting. Iron bands bound my chest and each breath of air I sucked into my lungs was a searing flame. My head pounded and from the excruciating pain deep inside of me, waves of blackness rolled up over my brain. This, I thought, is the end . . .

But I was to live for a far greater agony.

The pressure subsided and though I retched violently I did not lose consciousness. But I could not move; completely paralyzed, my body stood against the wall while my dulled mind struggled to understand why I had not been killed. Then I understood when suddenly I saw Mary raise her arms once more, saw her blouse buffeted under an invisible touch. The monster had been too eager to return to her!

Her thighs were bunching, her torso was inclining backwards, bending her waist into a voluptuous curve; I could almost see the missing parts of the picture, the monster’s hand in the hollow of her back supporting her, his vile body leaning over her white form—causing that sudden flattening of her waist. Her hands swept to her blouse, tore it from her gleaming flesh, then she rose to her toes and as her bare bosom was lifted and arched provocatively—her meaning could not be mistaken!

God! I even stopped struggling then to move my paralyzed limbs. Mary was lost beyond recall. The monster had complete possession of her soul—as *it would soon her body.* Then it was that Mary straightened, for the first time stepped backward!

Wild hope fluttered in my breast—and died, as slowly, languorously, Mary sank down upon a bed of moss! A sound that was half sick horror and half impotent rage filled my throat but I could not give utterance to it.

Time lost all meaning and it might have been one minute later or ten that again

I became conscious of the amulet in my knotted fist. Bitterly I thought that if it were a potent charm, if I did know how to use it, it was probably too late now—

It *was* too late! God! I wished her dead. I *thought* I did—until suddenly she moaned in pain! And then I shrieked as I saw her body stiffen, her eyes begin to bulge. The monster had tired of her and now was going to kill her—crush her to a pulp like Gold!

Like a maniac I struggled to move, and when I had failed and Mary's face was turning livid, I actually became a maniac for a moment, blaspheming, shouting insanely, screaming. But I fell abruptly silent when the blood began to trickle from the corner of her mouth. She was dying. Fiercely I clenched my hands, as if I could hold her back. I barely realized the amulet had broken in my crushing grip. Her color changed again. Her face became black. It was the end . . .

Suddenly an acrid odor was all around me, I was breathing sharp fumes—the paralysis was leaving me! And as my brain swiftly cleared I realized that the broken "amulet" must have been a glass capsule containing something to counteract a poisonous gas that had caused my paralysis and killed Gold and—*Mary?*

On legs that were stiff from inaction I stumbled across the grotto and the acrid fumes seemed to have spread ahead of me. Then I had Mary in my arms and tears filled my eyes—tears of joy as color slowly crept back into her cheeks. . . .

TO me, the most amazing thing is that we knew how it was done before we knew who did it. When the amphora was

unstoppered, a noxious gas was released which was capable of causing unconsciousness and total loss of memory for a few minutes. During that time the fiend did his work unseen. It was one of his chemicals, poisonous in the free gaseous form in which it was escaping from a broken container stored in the grotto, that had endangered Mary and me and killed Gold, whose exertion as he ran past me had caused him to breath deeper.

It was not until the motive had been discovered that we knew the villain had been Gold. Certain that the picture would lose money and plunge him into bankruptcy, he had killed Claire Ladd for the heavy insurance his company carried on her. Mary, he had intended to kill later in the grotto to further the idea of a weird, inexplicable crime and to thoroughly complicate the case.

The "invisible monster", so far as I will ever know, was conjured by my wild imagination solely from the stirring of Mary's costume by currents of air and her own amorous movements, themselves caused by drugs Gold had given her.

—But I wonder sometimes. Abou Malik remains an enigmatic figure. He has never been seen since he gave me the means of saving us both! Even his priceless amphora he left behind. *Why?* Has he some knowledge he is *protecting* us from? . . .

Often, too often, his words come back to me, "It is dangerous to trifle with these things."

What really happened in the grotto? Mary has never spoken of it. And though she is now my wife, something—delicacy, and perhaps fear of the answer—makes me hesitate to question her.

In the Big August Issue!

BEASTS THAT ONCE WERE MEN

by Edith & Ejler Jacobson

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**DIME
MYSTERY
MAGAZINE**



Goddess of the Half-World Brood

By HENRY TREAT SPERRY

This glorious woman I held in my arms: was she a dread arch-fiend, the mistress of those vicious, snarling beast-like things who now surrounded us with drooling fangs bared in dreadful anticipation of a coming feast—while I strove to fight off the spell of her weird allure?



A spine-tingling novelette about a creature incomparably beautiful—and more mysterious than life itself!

CHAPTER ONE

Horror's Broken Body

I STILL don't know how we made it to the beach. There was a devilish undertow backing up against the coral reef, and we were swept back time after

time before we suddenly found ourselves in the clear and riding a foam-edged comber into the shore.

I dragged Marion up on the sands and for awhile we stood there, while she clung to me, sobbing with exhaustion. Then we slowly started walking up the narrow



strip of beach, my arm around her waist.

I kept glancing back over my shoulder at the somber wall of vegetation which loomed about us in the darkness like a huge, cupped hand. Flashes of lightning split the sky at about two-second intervals, and the ghastly white light made the tossing palm trees, the huge-leaved bananas, and hibiscus plants with their pallid, bell-like flowers seem like the hysterical inhabitants of a strange planet.

But it was the intervals between flashes which sent icy tremors vibrating up my spine; for as the blackness closed down I could see bright pinpoints of light down near the ground where the shadows were thickest—fiery sparks which occurred always in pairs, and seemed to my overwrought imagination to be pregnant with infernal, deadly significance.

The eyes of beasts, made phosphorescent by the inky darkness, undoubtedly. They would promptly retreat as we approached them. I knew that—but for some reason they aroused something like an instinctive terror in my heart.

I looked out to sea, and as the heavens cracked open with a tremendous sheet of vivid white fire, I saw the last of the gallant little yawl which had carried us almost half-way around the world. A giant comber lifted it free from the coral reef, tossed it high on its crest—and then brought it shatteringly down on its forward strakes, crushing it like an empty pecan shell, to be gulped into oblivion by the succeeding roller.

That was the last of the *Marion T.*

The hurricane had shipwrecked us on an island which the compilers of my admiralty charts had apparently never heard of. We'd sighted it just before the storm struck us, and, after figuring my bearings, I discovered the chart indicated a sounding of 115 fathoms in the precise spot occupied by this speck of land in the South Pacific!

The lightning showed a splintered section of the forward hatch tossing about

in the surf. I waded out and secured it, broke off half of one of the split boards. It made a fairly serviceable weapon—in case those beasts in the bush were not quite as harmless as I hoped they were. Then, with an arm about Marion's slender, drenched shoulders, I started slowly toward the tropical jungle which hemmed us in.

I BATTERED a path for our stumbling feet through dripping leaves, bushes and vines. Fortunately the undergrowth was not as dense as it had seemed from the beach, and soon we emerged into a practically open area which I was surprised to see, as the lightning flamed again, resembled a carefully cultivated park. We paused in the middle of it, our shoulders hunched against the driving rain, clutching each other like lost children—and again I felt a tremor of weird foreboding race up my spine.

We were completely encircled, now, by those eerily luminous eyes. As we stood there I counted twelve pairs of them ranged almost symmetrically about us. Marion squeezed against me.

"Don't be afraid of them," I howled above the clamor of the tempest. "They're harmless. Wild dogs, maybe—"

But I knew that was ridiculous. These oceanic islands are almost completely without animals, having been so long separated from the continents that all fauna except birds, bats, and sometimes reptiles, have long since become extinct. The animals that are found are descendents of imported beasts. It was unlikely that anyone had imported dogs to an uncharted isle in mid-Pacific.

Still—something was there; and my nerves got a shock as I suddenly realized that the only reason I had mentioned the possibility of their being dogs was because the eyes seemed to be about dog-distance above the ground. Actually they looked much more like human than canine eyes!

My imagination was beginning to take a dangerous turn. I cursed myself, and holding Marion closer, forged straight ahead across the clearing toward the pair of eyes opposite. They disappeared before we had come within ten feet of them—and the lightning showed a well-made gravel path where they had been!

"Oh look, Jim—a path!" Marion exclaimed. "The island's inhabited!"

But I couldn't share her joy. For some reason I felt mysteriously reluctant to meet the tenants of this lost, unknown islet; but I followed her as she slipped from under my arm, grasped my hand and began running ahead.

A minute or so later we saw the yellow gleam of a lamp through the foliage, and shortly after that we came to the end of the path and found a rambling but well-made two-story cottage of bamboo standing in a large clearing.

In what appeared to be the living room of the place a single lamp glowed; the rest of the house was in stygian darkness. We stumbled up the steps onto the verandah, and I pounded resoundingly on the door of solid oak panelling.

There was no response. I tried again, and still the silence of the place held, save for the steady drumming of rain on the roof. I glanced back into the darkness from which we had emerged. The twelve things which had stalked us through the forest were there, in a semicircle thirty feet from the porch steps, their human-appearing, luminous eyes glaring at us steadily as though in cold, emotionless curiosity. And now, as the lightning hissed again, I got a flashing impression of the bodies behind those eyes—humped, hairy masses without recognizable contour; but with the same sort of indefinable *humanness* as their eyes possessed.

I hurled my club at them and turned back to the door. I tried the latch and the door swung open.

"Come on," I said, and pulled her in.

"Jim, do you think we ought to do this—" she began. And then she screamed, horribly.

She clutched my arm in a frenzy of terror, and I saw it, too.

It was in the center of the floor—a thing which a short time ago had been a human body. Now it was an all but unrecognizable mass of bloody, torn flesh; exposed, mangled viscera, and gleaming bones.

QUICKLY I turned Marion about. Guiding her around two sides of the room I forced her into a chair on the far side, where a table blocked her view of the thing. Then I yanked a batik covering from the table and threw it over the mess.

I saw the body was that of a native, probably a Negrito, from what remained of the face. The covering immediately became blotched with the blood which seeped through it.

I looked around, weighing in my brain the advisability of searching the house in the hope of finding a key to this grisly mystery—and decided against it. Marion would be in danger of hysterics if I left her alone with that gruesome corpse. I went over and put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Brace up, sweetheart," I murmured, and she made an effort to control her sobbing. Poor girl, plucky as the devil most of the time, her nerves had given way under the tragedy of losing our gallant little boat. And now—this . . .

I heard the door open softly behind me, and whirled. I found myself staring into the barrel of a large-calibre pistol held unwaveringly on my midriff by a deeply tanned young man of about my own age.

"Put up your hands," he said.

I did so promptly, and then he saw Marion. His gun half-lowered, and his eyes came back to me. "What are you doing in my house—and how did you get here?" he asked.

"We got here by being shipwrecked on

the coral reef at the north end of the island," I said. "We found a path which led to your house. We were unable to rouse anyone, so I tried the door, found it unlocked, and came in. There is a dead man lying there on the floor—"

He said, "Quite," and thrust his pistol back into its holster. He came toward us, skirting the corpse without giving it a glance, and stopped in front of us.

"Forgive my inhospitable gesture," he went on. "Since no one has landed here during the past ten years, I was naturally startled." He held out a tanned hand. "My name is Richard Wanderleigh."

I took his hand. "Mine is James Towne. This is my wife."

Wanderleigh stared at Marion an unnecessarily long time, it seemed to me, before he bowed and murmured some banal acknowledgement of the introduction. Only then did I realize that the girl might as well have been naked for all the protection her gown afforded her. A sheer silk one-piece dress, it was all she could stand aboard ship in those latitudes, and she wore nothing at all beneath it, the sandals on her feet being her only other articles of clothing. Now, drenched by the seas we had fought through, it clung to her deliciously rounded, slender body like a coat of paint.

"If you have any dry clothing for my wife—" I suggested—"a pair of ducks and a shirt, perhaps—"

Wanderleigh smiled. "I can do better than that. My sister would be delighted to loan Mrs. Towne a frock. Come with me, please."

He picked up a lamp from the table, lit it, and led the way into a corridor that opened off the living room. Wanderleigh, himself, was dressed in white shorts and shirt, and carried a pith helmet, all of which were dripping wet. What had he been doing out in this storm—while a mangled body, to which, as yet, he had made no reference, lay in his living room?

Apparently his sister was not at home. He entered her room without knocking, opened a closet door, revealing a number of dresses.

"You are welcome to any of these frocks, Mrs. Towne," he said, and again his brilliant black eyes clung to the contours of her figure in a manner that began to make me see red. "We will await you in the living room."

We went back to the front of the house and Wanderleigh, for the first time, looked down at the corpse on the floor.

"Poor Nara," he murmured. "They got him at last—just like the rest."

"A native of the island?" I asked. "I was wondering what frightful thing had happened to him."

Wanderleigh looked at me with a strangely calculating expression in his eyes. "This island has no natives," he said after a moment. "It's been in existence only about fifteen years. Volcanic, you know. We, too, were shipwrecked with a baker's dozen of a crew. I had chartered a junk to take us from Rapa Island to the Marquesas where we hoped to catch a liner for England. Judging from the size of the largest trees, the island had been in existence about five years at that time. The south end is riddled with lava pits, boiling soda pools, and is covered with pumice and volcanic ash. How there happened to be fertile soil on this end, God only knows. Probably the island has emerged above the surface of the ocean intermittently for millions of years."

I nodded. "It certainly didn't appear on my charts," I said. "That seems strange, too, since they are supposed to be revised every year."

Wanderleigh shrugged. "They're revised with respect to the main maritime routes. It would take the entire British fleet five years to make a complete geodetic survey of the two million square miles occupied by the South Pacific archipelagos.

... But here—lend me a hand with this fellow, will you? Too bad your wife had to see the mess. . . .”

CHAPTER TWO

Beasts of Frightfulness

THE body was in a condition which made it difficult to pick up in one piece. In the end we gathered the grisly cadaver in the covering I had thrown over it and carried it outside.

It had stopped raining, and with that characteristic abruptness of tropical storms, the clouds were clearing away and the moon was beginning to edge out of the hurricane wrack. At Wanderleigh's direction we carried the body about half a mile below the house and left it on a small grass-tufted hummock.

“Burials are impossible here,” he explained. “The earth is only eighteen inches deep. Below that there is soft rock which the tree roots grow into and somehow find nourishment. Anyway, the jackals would dig up anything you buried—and they dispose of it all the more quickly if you leave it top-side where they can get at it without any trouble.”

I shuddered in spite of myself as we left our gruesome burden on the mound. I turned and looked back before we had gone more than a dozen yards—and already those twin, glowing beacons were beginning to appear in the undergrowth near the cadaver.

“But how did the jackals get here, if—”

Wanderleigh cleared his throat. “As a matter of fact,” he said with queer hesitancy, “I don't know what they are. They look something like jackals—and also like something else. I have a theory that some zoological expedition was wrecked on this island before we were, and that these beasts, picked up God knows where, are the only survivors. . . .”

It was obvious to me that Wander-

leigh had no faith whatever in his alleged “theory”—but somehow I didn't feel like pressing the matter. Instead, I changed the subject.

“I hope I'm not being unduly inquisitive,” I said, “but I was wondering where your sister is. Isn't it dangerous for her to be out—with these beasts on the prowl?”

“Oh, they never attack you—unless you're asleep or dead,” Wanderleigh explained carelessly. “Apparently they caught Nara snoozing on the verandah. I dragged him inside and went gunning for the beggars. I still have a few bullets left, but ordinarily I hate to use them on the beasts. They're extraordinarily hard to hit, and as they become more numerous—”

He stopped suddenly, biting off the last of his sentence as if he had said too much. I looked at him and noticed how white and drawn his face looked. But perhaps that was only the effect of the moonlight.

“‘More numerous?’” I echoed. “Then they have been multiplying since they landed here?”

Wanderleigh laughed shortly. “Yes,” he muttered, “I guess you would call it that . . . But you were asking about my sister. She went out, too—east, while I went west. She should be back soon. . . .”

He hesitated a minute, and then went on. “And while we are on the subject, I may as well prepare you for Sicily—my sister. She is—well, rather a strange girl. Don't put too much faith in the things she may tell you. I'm afraid that our enforced isolation has had an unfortunate effect on her mind, and she is beginning to have strange fancies. . . .”

“What a pity,” I murmured. “But probably when you get her back to civilization again—”

I left the sentence unfinished, as we had reached the front door—and at my words Wanderleigh turned suddenly and looked at me for a moment in silence, while a

faint smile curved the thin lips beneath his short, black mustache.

"Oh—quite!" he said at last, with unmistakable sarcasm in his tone. Then he opened the door and ushered me into the living room with a slight bow.

MARION had put on a plain blue dress and looked fresh and relaxed. The recuperative powers of women are marvelous—especially when they are given the chance to don fresh clothing.

"Hello," she greeted us. "I'm—I'm glad you're back." I felt that she carefully avoided looking at the bloodstains on the carpet.

Wanderleigh smiled at her. "You look charming, Mrs. Towne."

"I hope your sister doesn't mind," she said.

Wanderleigh's smile became a bit twisted. "As a matter of fact, she has peculiar ideas regarding her costumes, nowadays," he murmured. "I have just been warning your husband, Mrs. Towne, that my sister has developed a few odd idiosyncrasies during the past few years. This utter isolation, you know—"

"Oh!" murmured Marion, "I'm so sorry—"

She was interrupted by an infernal clamor which suddenly arose apparently just outside the cottage. The next instant the front door burst open to admit the slender, sun-browned figure of a girl, clad solely in a sort of brassiere and girdle of what I took at first to be white fur—but which I subsequently learned was made of the breasts of small white birds, cured and cleverly stitched together. The girl carried a long leather whip in one hand. She whirled about and slammed the door shut, falling back against it as though to brace it against the attack of some pursuer—and an unearthly howl arose outside.

"Damn you, Dick," she began, "you fed them that—" and then she noticed

Marion and me for the first time, and fell suddenly silent.

"We have visitors, my dear," purred Wanderleigh. "Mr. and Mrs. Towne. They have been making a world cruise on their yawl, which unfortunately came to grief on the coral this evening."

The girl had a wild, indescribable beauty. Taller than Marion, she was as exquisitely, if more voluptuously, formed. The outside corners of her dark eyes had an upward tilt which gave her a slightly Oriental appearance. The tips of her small ears, exposed by her tossed-back, raven hair, came almost to a point—like a faun's. Her full breasts, only half-covered by the downy bandeau, rose and fell with the violence of her breathing.

The girl's eyes widened as she stared at us for several moments in silence. Then, "Oh, my God!" she murmured in a low, husky voice. "Two more. . . ."

"My dear!" put in Wanderleigh quickly. "Calm yourself. They're quite safe, as you see."

But somehow his remark seemed hardly appropriate to her exclamation. She turned on him suddenly.

"They're not safe!" she cried. "None of us is safe—not after the shrouds have eaten human flesh. I can't handle them any more. God only knows if I ever will be able to, now. Why did you do it? You knew I pulled Nara's body inside the house so they wouldn't scent him and come—you knew that. But the minute my back was turned you took him out where they could get at him. You've ruined them. Oh, damn you!"

The girl's voice broke on a sob. Then suddenly she wheeled, jerked the door open again. She sprang outside and slammed the door shut behind her.

Involuntarily I started forward and Marion jumped from her chair with a startled cry.

Wanderleigh calmly stepped in front of me with his hand uplifted. "See here," I

protested, "we can't let her go out there with those beasts—"

"Heavens, no!" exclaimed Marion. "Do go out and get her—please—"

"It's quite all right," said Wanderleigh in a soothing voice. "Please don't worry about her for a moment. She always acts like this when one of the men has been attacked—or died and been eaten by the things. The poor child has formed a strange affection for the beasts and refuses to believe that they have ever attacked a human being. She would much prefer to believe that I had killed them all. And strangely enough, the things seem to reciprocate her feeling for them. Ordinarily they fawn upon her like big dogs, and obey her with an intelligence that is weirdly human—although they always become a bit intractable after they have—dined—as they have tonight."

"Good heavens!" breathed Marion, and sank back in her chair.

SOMETHING in Wanderleigh's attitude told me that he would resist with physical force any persistence in my attempt to get out to the girl. Not wanting to precipitate a crisis unless it were really necessary, I went to a window and looked out.

In the moonlight, in front of the house, a strange scene was being enacted. The girl stood in the center of a ring of cringing beasts—the animals she had called "shrouds." They had stopped their infernal howling, but now and then one of them would turn toward the house, as though about to slink off toward it. At that her whip would flick out, and the animal would jump back toward her, whining, with its tail between its legs. She seemed to be talking to them, and gradually they quieted down entirely, squatting or lying in a ring around her, as if listening intently to her words.

For the first time I had a good view of the beasts, and I could understand

both Wanderleigh's reference to them as jackals, and his reluctance to insist on such a designation for them. Actually they were much larger than any jackal, and their bodies were thicker in proportion to their length, especially across the shoulders. Their heads, although terminating in a typically pointed jackal snout, were wider across the cheek bones, and deeper from cranium to jaw. On the whole they resembled what might result if an ape were successfully crossed with a wolf.

As I watched the weird tableau, the term the girl had applied to them again crossed my mind. *Shrouds*. Shrouds are the clothing of dead men. Why did she call them that? I have often wished I had never learned. . . .

The next morning Marion was too listless and drowsy to get up, but the heat drove me from bed early. As no one else seemed to be about, I made myself a cup of tea—which Wanderleigh, I learned, had succeeded in cultivating on the island—and went for a stroll, heading for the south where my host had said the volcanic formations were.

Naturally, the island looked entirely different than it had during the night and the storm. It was a riot of color and light—but somehow its air of other-worldliness, its mysterious faculty of seeming a bit of land from some strange planet, remained. This island harbored some dark secret, of which I had no hint, as yet. I knew that, and itched to get at the root of the puzzle as soon as possible. I swore to myself that I would.

It was one of those resolutions, cheerfully and easily made, with which we bolster our egos when confronted with an enigma. But a wiser, more intuitive part of my brain was whispering that I would be happier if I curbed my curiosity. Naturally, I disregarded that. . . .

My mind was full of the weird spectacle I had witnessed last night in the

moonlit dooryard of the house—Sicily Wanderleigh taming her fearsome shrouds—when suddenly I rounded a huge volcanic boulder and came upon the actors in that strange drama.

The same actors—but an entirely different scene, this time. Sicily lay stretched in the sun, lying on a little green hummock, while one of her ugly pets dozed with its shaggy head resting on her bronzed right thigh. The rest cavorted about like ungainly puppies at play, wrestling, rolling on the ground and chasing each other about. Sicily's dark head rested on her clasped hands and she would have appeared asleep, except that she was humming a strange, wild tune which rose and fell on the still morning air like the sound of a distant brook murmuring over pebbles and treet roots.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fire-God Speaks

IT WAS only a moment before the nearest shroud saw me. He leaped to his feet and came stalking stiffly toward me, while a savage growl rose from deep in his throat. I thought of the condition in which we had found Nara's body, and tensed my muscles. But at the sound of the animal's growl, Sicily looked up, then got to her feet. She called out sharply to the beast which was making for me, and the thing slowed to a halt; then with seeming reluctance turned about and went back toward her.

"Come on," she said to me, "they won't bother you."

But I kept a vigilant eye on the beasts as I advanced. They had closed in around her in an attitude of protection, and there was a gleam of unmistakable venomousness in their eyes which did nothing to strengthen my faith in their harmlessness. I realized that just one of them could, if he wished, make mince-meat of an unarmed man in considerably less than a minute.

Their paws were armed with claws as big as a grizzly's, and the huge canine fangs which showed beneath their lower jaws looked as though they could have ripped my throat with a single slash.

Apparently sensing my distrust of her pets, Sicily turned and spoke a few words to them in an authoritative tone, and as I drew nearer they slowly slunk off into the jungle of greenery at the foot of the hummock, casting baleful glances back at me over their shoulders.

Sicily resumed her former position on the ground and motioned for me to sit down beside her.

"Do you like our island?" she asked carelessly.

"It's very attractive," I said without a great deal of enthusiasm.

"I hope you will learn to like it very much—because you will probably be here for a long time. Unless, of course, the sea suddenly decides to swallow it up again."

"I suppose there is always a chance of that."

Sicily's slender, all but naked body rippled into action as she restlessly rose to a sitting posture and clasped her arms about her knees. She was silent for several moments, gazing abstractedly off into the bush where the shrouds had disappeared.

"There's a much worse danger than that," she said finally. "My brother. You must watch him."

I looked at her quickly. "Would you mind explaining?"

She turned the perfect oval of her face toward me, and I saw that her strange, tilted eyes held plumbless depths of tragedy.

"He has already killed thirteen men," she said in a low voice, "and for years has been trying to drive me insane. Sometimes I think he has succeeded."

"Good God! Are you sure he murdered all those men?"

She nodded, and her eyes again sought the jungle. "We left England in Dick's schooner twelve years ago, when I was sixteen. We shipped with a crew of twelve men. You will be safer if I don't tell you the purpose of our voyage. Finally we got to Tuamotu and picked up Nara, the Negrito boy, as a general roustabout. Dick didn't kill him until yesterday because he has been useful about the place. We got caught in a hurricane, and a water-spout flung our ship on the reef. We all landed safely and managed to salvage practically all the ship's gear and stores, as well as the—the thing we had come down here for. Then it began—the killings, I mean.

"First Chips, the carpenter, died. That is, he disappeared. The next day, two of the seamen were missing. Then the cabinboy, the cook, and the quartermaster. All but Nara were gone inside of two months. And there was never a sign of what happened to them. But as they disappeared, the shrouds began to be noticed. It seemed that as the number of men decreased, the shrouds became more numerous. A terrible superstition grew out of that—and the last men to disappear were sure that some weird magic of the island was turning them into beasts. Then Anderson, the mate, died in horrible agony. He was poisoned, I think. The rest were probably thrown into the lava pits. He was the only one I saw actually die—and he was the last of the white men. . ."

She paused a long time, and when she spoke again her voice was so low as to be almost inaudible. "He said that all the men had been secretly in love with me, and that I had known it. He accused me of being a witch—of turning them into beasts. He cursed me and called me—Circe. . ."

CIRCE—the siren of ancient Greek mythology who changed her lovers into wolves and lions; who transformed

the followers of Odysseus into swine. . . . I wanted to smile at this idea of a modern reincarnation of the ancient fraud—but somehow I couldn't.

"Actually, you think it was your brother who killed these men? But what reason could he have had?"

"One of the best reasons in the world," she said, getting lithely to her feet. "But I don't intend to tell you what it was. Not yet, at any rate."

She started to walk off in the direction the shrouds had taken. Then she suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Was there anything salvaged from your ship?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Not a thing but ourselves."

"You had a sextant aboard, of course. It might have been washed over the reef and come ashore?"

"It's possible, naturally. I haven't been down to the beach yet."

"Dick has," she said. "I saw him wade out and get a box about a foot square and eight inches deep. Could that have been the sextant?"

"It's quite possible. I kept it in a walnut box about that size."

Sicily bit her lip and seemed on the point of saying something else. Then, apparently, she changed her mind, turned back toward the jungle and walked into it swiftly, disappearing without a backward glance. I heard a few muted, animal yelps and the sound of several bodies moving about in the undergrowth. Then the slight rustlings died away in the distance and I was left alone in the silence of the tropical morning. . . .

The first tremors began as I was walking back to the house after my strange talk with Sicily. They brought me to a standstill with my heart in my mouth. It wouldn't take much of an earthquake to wipe an island of this size out of existence—and we were helplessly marooned on it, hundreds of miles from the next island

and thousands of miles from civilization.

A muffled *boom* sounded faintly behind me, and I whirled about in time to see a column of black smoke ascend rapidly into the sky, and then mushroom out into a gigantic black flower over the southern end of the island.

I started for the house at a dead run—and hadn't taken a dozen strides when the world seemed to move sideways under my feet and I was thrown to the ground with stunning force. As I got to my feet, the sound of low rumblings came, apparently from deep in the earth, and another explosion boomed out behind me.

I knew, from past experience with volcanic earthquakes, that this was going to be a serious one. The shocks were coming at two- or three-second intervals and rapidly increasing in force. I fell a half-dozen times before I finally reached the house, which was still intact, and burst in at the front door. I shouted Marion's name at the top of my voice—and received no answer. I dashed upstairs to the bedroom we had occupied—and found it empty. I was about to leave, when I noticed a thing which brought me to a breathless halt on the doorsill.

Marion's clothes were still neatly piled on the back of a chair, as she had left them the night before. The bed was a riot of disordered blankets and sheets—and beside it, on the floor, lay the nightgown which she had borrowed from Sicily's supply. It was ripped from neck to hem!

The severest shock of all came, then, and I had to hold onto the jamb to keep from being thrown to the floor. The house swayed as though in a high wind, and joists cracked like fireworks. I staggered down the stairs, and suddenly the beams supporting the ceiling gave way. The walls swayed inward. The staircase behind me collapsed and I had just time to get out of the door when the house folded up like a paper bag and crashed to the ground.

It had not been more than five minutes since the first quake, but already the skies were becoming overcast, a wind was coming up, bending the palm trees and scattering a shower of ashes and pumice from the exploding volcano all over the island. I stood looking at the ruins of the house for a few stupefied moments, trying to decide what direction to take in my search for Marion, but I had not the faintest clue to work on. I shouted her name repeatedly, but the noise of the wind and the approaching cataclysm made my yells all but inaudible even to my own ringing ears.

I was frantic with indecision, but at last I decided on a plan. Having no idea of where to look for Marion, the best thing I could do would be to start a systematic search of the entire island. God only knew if it would remain above the surface of the ocean long enough for me to cover half of the territory which would have to be explored, but it was the only course of action that seemed to have the slightest chance of bringing success.

I plunged directly into the jungle, heading east from the house, intending to keep on until I reached the beach on that side of the island, then make a circuit of the north end and work back south, criss-crossing through the brush. It was clear enough that Wanderleigh had kidnaped Marion, and I cursed my negligence in leaving her unguarded in the house of a homicidal maniac—but of course, I hadn't any idea of what he really was when I left the place that morning.

AS I fought my way through the jungle the shocks continued with gradually increasing force, and the wind rose steadily. The thicket was in an uproar, with bats, stirred from their daylight slumbers, fluttering about blindly in the tree-tops. Time and again I was thrown to the ground, or forced to cling to a swaying tree trunk as terrific shocks shook the

island. Already I could hear the accelerating beat of the surf, licking ferociously at the shoreline as if in eagerness to beat it into oblivion.

Then simultaneously I emerged into a small clearing, and the shocks subsided. This, I knew, would probably be no more than a brief intermission, and I could expect even more violent tremors to follow it. But it gave me a chance to get my bearings.

I was about to strike off through the other side of the clearing, when suddenly one of the shrouds appeared directly in my path. The beast came to a halt and sat back on its haunches, regarding me gravely for a moment. Then it turned to the right and began to walk off. I started on in my original direction—and instantly the shroud turned about and came running after me. I whirled to protect myself, expecting an attack, but the beast merely turned again and started off in the direction it had first taken, halting, after a few steps, to look back at me.

As plainly as though it had spoken, I saw that it wanted me to follow it. I played a hunch, then, and walked over to it. The animal immediately sprang into the bush, with me close behind it.

Straight to the south, the shroud led me, through jungle, across occasional open spaces and over rocky, black outcroppings. We skirted a small lake which had been formed within the past few minutes when a landslide had dammed off a creek, and presently reached the foot of a rugged, black escarpment at the foot of which stood Sicily and the rest of her ferocious looking pets.

"Hello," she greeted me calmly. "Do you think this is the end?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "but I'm afraid it is. We'll know—if we're still alive—within a half-hour or so. Have you seen Marion—my wife?"

She looked at me for a long time without speaking. Then at last, "You love

her very much, don't you?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, of course."

"You would like to return with her to—the outside?"

I laughed shortly. "There's a fine chance of that! But naturally I would like to be near her when this speck of land begins to slide into the sea."

She fell silent again, gazing at me with her weirdly beautiful eyes—and there was something in her expression which began to make me feel vaguely uneasy. Then suddenly she came up to me and slipped her brown, rounded arms about my neck.

"Listen," she said, "I have never known what love is. I have always been afraid of it. My brother—and the men who died—they have made it seem a horrible, nightmarish thing. My brother knew what those men thought—he knew of their belief that I was a witch, a Circe who changed men into beasts. He has pretended to believe that, himself, all these years. He wanted to convince me that it was true—to drive me mad. He doesn't dare kill me, as he killed those men, for he knows that the shrouds would tear him to pieces. He found a treasure, before we were shipwrecked, and he wants it all to himself. He has built a boat—he thought secretly, but I came upon him many times unsuspected, and saw him at work on it. He needed only a sextant to guide him over the ocean—and now he has that. The one that was on your ship. He is ready to sail—and he is taking your wife with him—"

I cursed aloud and grasped the girl's wrists. "Damn his soul! Where are they. *Tell me!*"

I took her by her slender shoulders and shook her violently. She looked up at me with a sad, slow smile, then she gently freed herself from my grip. The shrouds had growled menacingly as I shook her, and now they closed in about us, looking up at me with baleful lights in their eyes and showing their fangs in savage snarls.

"I'll tell you," she said. "You know I'll tell you."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pit of Doom

BUT she didn't, for a moment. She stood before me with her eyes upon the ground at her feet, her young breast rising and falling swiftly. Then suddenly she turned around, so that her smooth back was toward me, and said in a barely audible voice, "Come."

The pack of shrouds sprang ahead of her, leading the way up a narrow trail which ran along the escarpment, and I followed, silently raging at the slowness of the pace. Would we get to this boat of Wanderleigh's before he had time to weigh anchor?

The path ascended steeply for awhile, then suddenly broadened out into a wide ledge. In the side of the cliff a narrow cleft showed a faint yellow light. Our weird cavalcade came to a stop, and Sicily pointed into the cleft.

"In there," she said.

I brushed past her, abrupt in my eagerness, and entered the crevice—only to come to a startled halt as an eerily beautiful sight met my eyes. Beneath my feet, a narrow path fell steeply away to a little lagoon enclosed in a vaulted cavern at the far end of which daylight showed faintly. Tossing on the agitated surface of the lagoon was a tiny, queerly shaped boat bearing a single mast rigged with a small gaff-mainsail and jig, both of which had been sheeted home and hung flapping listlessly. Two lanterns stood on boulders near the water illuminating the scene—and now from behind the rock which supported them came a man, his arms loaded with objects which I could not distinguish clearly from that distance. I started to descend cautiously.

Wanderleigh deposited his burden on the cambered deck of his curiously con-

structed boat, and again disappeared behind the boulder. By the time he reappeared I had reached the bottom of the path and was waiting for him. His arms supported a large crate which he immediately dropped as he saw me.

"Where's my wife, damn you!" I said.

Instead of answering, he snatched the pistol which hung at his right side, snapped it up and fired. The bullet struck me in the right shoulder and flung me back against the boulder. He fired again, but missed, near as he was to me. He had time to pull the trigger once more, before I was on him, but the hammer clicked harmlessly on an empty chamber.

He slashed at me with the revolver butt as I closed with him, laying open the scalp over my right eye for several inches. We crashed to earth, with me on top. I had only my weight to hold him, as my right arm was useless. I swung at his jaw with my left, but missed as he dodged, and caught him in the right temple, instead.

Wanderleigh screamed like a woman. He tried to fling himself sideways, and struck at me again with the butt of his pistol, hitting me in my wounded shoulder. The pain made lights dance crazily in front of my eyes, and I knew that if I didn't get him within the next few seconds he would have me licked.

With an effort which nearly cost me consciousness, I managed to force my right arm into a position where I could clutch his hair with my hand, then once more I swung my left fist. This time I connected squarely with his jaw, and felt his body go limp beneath me.

I sprang up and staggered to the boat, which floated flush against the rocky ledge of the shore in deep water. I pulled myself aboard and descended a companionway leading down into the cabin. There, bound hand and foot, lay Marion on a bunk. She cried out joyfully as she recognized me, and I began fumbling with the ropes about her ankles.

"Darling—are you hurt badly? Let me—"

"No. He got me in the shoulder—missed the bones, I think. Cut my scalp a little."

I HAD her free in a couple of minutes, and she insisted on bandaging me up with some gauze we found in a foot-locker.

"You stay here," I said when she had finished. "I've got to go back and get that girl and Wanderleigh. We'll keep him tied up until we make a port—then I'm going to bring murder charges against him. Tell you about it later." I ran up the companion—and came to a shocked halt as I hit the deck.

Instead of the unconscious man I had left on the shore, there was now a gruesome, bloody corpse—such a corpse as Marion and I had found the night before lying in the middle of the Wanderleighs' living room. While I was below the shrouds had come down here and . . .

There was no sign of the beasts, now. They had done their bloody work and disappeared. I seized the cadaver by one ankle and hauled it behind the boulder where it would be out of sight when I brought Sicily down. Then I started back up the trail.

As I reached the opening to the grotto, the second series of tremors began. I hesitated for a moment. Was I justified in risking Marion's safety by not putting to sea immediately? Then I caught sight of Sicily down below in the ravine. I shouted to her, and began running down the path.

She stood in the midst of her beasts waiting for me, the animals milling restlessly about her.

"Come on, Sicily," I said. "We're really in for it, this time. This island may blow itself apart any minute—"

She shook her head and put her hands behind her back as I reached for a wrist. "No," she said. "I'm going to stay here."

"Damn it, you can't stay here. I tell you the island's going under. You'll be blown up or drowned—"

She shook her head again. The tremors began to come more rapidly and increase in strength. I decided there was no more time to waste on words. I grabbed her and swung her up in my arms, turned to start back up the trail.

Instantly the shrouds leaped for me. One grabbed the heel of my boot and nearly threw me. The rest blocked my path, growling savagely.

"Sicily, call off those brutes!" I demanded. "We've got to get out of here."

She smiled up at me faintly and shook her head again. "They won't let me go," she said. "You might as well put me down."

Another shock hit the island, and I fell to my knees, still holding Sicily. But she immediately struggled out of my grasp. I got to my feet and lifted her up.

"Good-bye," she murmured and slipped her arms about my neck. Her lips met mine and clung. I held her smooth, slender body close for a long moment. Then she broke away from me and fled down the ravine, followed by her beast pack. She stopped for a moment as she reached the entrance. She turned and waved briefly, then quickly disappeared around the wall of the escarpment. With a wild, bitter emotion I dared not name raging in my heart, I turned and made my way laboriously back up the path. . . .

The little boat stood out to sea in a quartering, puffy wind. The waves were high and broken, as in a circling storm, and giant peaks of water would suddenly pile up without warning and threaten to swamp us. I pulled in as close to the wind as I dared, striving to pull directly away from the land—which was, of course, the chief source of danger.

Within the past five minutes a great cone had arisen at the extreme southern tip of the island, and from its mouth there

belched a solid column of fire which lit the sea for miles with a weird, infernal glow. It was necessary to skirt that end on the first tack, and it brought us closer than was comfortable to the flaming cone. I kept a narrow watch on it—and that was how I happened to witness the ghastly drama which took place on the blackened hillock to the right of it.

FROM the glimpse I had caught of it while on the path leading up the face of the escarpment I knew that it was no true hillock, but the side of a small crater, in the center of which raged and tossed a lake of boiling lava. The molten rock cast an eerie green and yellow light upwards, which illuminated several figures standing along its western rim. I called Marion to take the wheel and turned my whole attention to that group on the lip of the crater.

The distance was great, but I knew that it was Sicily—and twelve other beings—who stood there, etched by the weird light into high relief against the smoke-curtained sky. But a curious change had taken place—so that I could not be sure that my eyes were not playing tricks.

As I watched I felt an icy hand closing about my heart, and unconsciously my arm rose in a gesture of protest against what I sensed was about to happen—what I sensed was inevitable.

The girl's arms raised slowly above her head, and she stood poised there for a minute, her nude, slender form painted in shimmering greens and yellows by the sulphurous flames below her. Then, suddenly, her body arced forward—and launched into space!

A small geyser of flaming lava sprang into view—and subsided. I covered my eyes with my hand for a moment, and when I looked again I saw Sicily's twelve weird companions plunge downward. And in that next instant, twelve small geysers leaped up. . . .

It was many moments before I had the strength to go back to the wheel; and when I did, Marion, whose intense preoccupation with the handling of the ship had mercifully saved her from witnessing what I had just seen, looked at me with anxiety written on her face.

"What is it, Jim?" she said. "Don't you think we have a chance?"

"Go below, Marion," I muttered. "Make everything fast. We've got a chance—but things are going to happen. And damned soon, too!"

As if to verify that, a terrific rumbling arose, seemingly from the very bottom of the sea, and a huge wall of water rose off our port bow. Quickly I lashed the wheel and lowered the mainsail, furling it on the boom. Then I went forward and took in the jib. Next I freed all the stays and sheets, unstepped the small mast. Wanderleigh had built a couple of supports fitted with straps, and I hoisted the mast onto these, so that it lay along the deck on the port side. I buckled the heavy straps over the mast and went back to the wheel.

Wanderleigh had built his little boat well—for the purpose he had had in mind. It was completely turtle-decked, and with the hatch battened down, would be as streamlined as a submarine about to submerge. And that, as he had foreseen, was precisely what it was going to do, if the island sank.

The wind now appeared to be coming from every direction at once, and I couldn't tell whether we were bearing down on the island, or going away from it. But enough was occurring on the island, itself, to drive consideration of everything else out of my mind. For a moment I forgot about the boat.

Suddenly the crater-lake into which Sicily and her followers had disappeared, boiled over. At the same moment, the new cone next to it emitted a blast of fire, steam and smoke which seemed to cover

the whole sky—and a tremendous, livid crack appeared in its side, out of which poured a torrent of flaming lava.

The air quivered with terrific detonations—and abruptly a portion of the island's surface, at least five acres in extent, leaped into the air, propelled by a torrential column of billowing steam and lava.

The end was approaching. I went below and battened down the hatch. I lay down on the bunk beside Marion and used the leather thongs attached to it to strap us in. If we were still living at the end of the next few minutes, we would be safe. . . .

* * *

But it was nearly an hour before I dared venture above-decks. In that time the ship had tossed madly, gone on her beams' ends, and turned completely over more than once. But she had lived, never breaching a seam or shipping a pint of water. And the mast was still in its brackets when I came on deck. In fact, I could find no part of the little craft that had not

withstood the fury of the tormented sea.

All signs of the island had disappeared, except, in the distance, some floating wreckage—perhaps up-rooted trees or other refuse of the cataclysm. The seas were still high, and faint rumblings came from deep beneath the boat at wide-spaced intervals. I stepped in the mast and sheeted home the jib. The wind had steadied, but it was still too strong to risk hoisting the mainsail. I sat at the wheel, and looked back over my shoulder at that floating stuff far astern.

I cannot tell you all the thoughts that came to me, then—but this I will tell you; and you may believe or not, just as you wish:

I said, before, that after Sicily had leaped to oblivion in that lake of boiling lava, her companions had cast themselves into it after her. There were twelve of them, as I have said, and they were there with her—but they were not shrouds. If some strange fantasy of my brain did not distort my vision, it was not a dozen beasts who leaped to death after their mistress. . . .

It was twelve men. . . .

THE END



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The Werewolf of Wall Street

By EDITH and EJLER JACOBSON

I saw the ghastly man-thing fresh from his feast of blood, and I knew that if ever again I hoped to see Terry Ramsay, the beautiful girl I loved, I must follow the monster to his resting place—that Limbo where ghouls hold awful revelry in the grisly hours of the night.





A pulse-stirring mystery novel of a ghastly thirst that could be quenched by neither water nor wine!

CHAPTER ONE

The Monster Strikes

IT WAS a hot August, and I was driving a bakery truck. I got the job in June, when I was graduated from college. On the hottest afternoon of them all, I parked the doughnut truck on Wall Street, and went up to the air-cooled offices of Wallace, Brown and Gaines to

inquire about my investments in Standard Cereals of America.

Now, I'd been sitting in the open cab of my big bus since eight that morning, and I was wet and grimy; but I didn't look anywhere near as bad as the boys in the office building. Just one more degree rise in temperature would have turned them liquid. They can't take it, I thought with fine scorn, as I asked to see Chet Wallace, head of the firm.

"Your father's been expecting you," said a weary-eyed switchboard girl. "Hot enough for you, Ronnie?"

I nodded briefly, and went into the huge cool inner office where Dad, who looked about as near melting as the Em-

pire State, sat behind the big mahogany desk with a white handkerchief carefully tucked into his breast-pocket.

"You look like a bruiser," Dad said appreciatively. "If I didn't know better, I'd say your family had been driving trucks since the Civil War."

I stretched my bare arms. That air-conditioning felt good. "Driving trucks doesn't support a wife," I told him. "And it's a wife I'm after. Terry Ramsay, to be exact. So I came to ask you about that hundred shares of Standard Cereal I bought last year."

A startling change came over Dad's face. That doesn't happen often, and when it does, it means something's up. "Your stocks have gone crazy," he said tersely, "along with everybody else's stocks." He was silent for a minute, looking at me as though I were a business proposition, which surprised me. I'd never been that to Dad. Even after I got out of school, with his millions behind and ahead of me, he'd refused to give me a job in the firm. Chet Wallace just wasn't the kind who'd have even his own son grubbing on him.

"Ronnie," he said as last, in a flat, heavy voice, "I'm thinking you're just what I need around here. You look like a man, which is more than I can say about anyone I've had business with for a long time. For your information, the market is practically on the verge of collapse. And there's no reason for it, except that people have gone wild. Wild and panicky, and I can't tell you why. Take that ass Harry Gaines, for instance—my own partner—bought two hundred shares of Atlantic Copper three days after the newspapers announced that Atlantic was going into bankruptcy. He's crazy—dangerously crazy! All over the country, these fools are playing hopscotch with the nation's finances! And I can't handle 'em, Ronnie. Maybe—if I took you into the firm—you could check up on what's going on."

For a minute, I thought one or the

other of us had gone queer with the heat. Understand, for twenty-two years, I'd been brought up to think that my father's position was none of my business, that I'd have to make my own way up. I felt the way any kid truck-driver would have felt if a big-time financier had offered him a big-time job. Just—floored by the luck of it.

I guess I enthused pretty incoherently, because Dad's heavy lips went grim, and he said, "It's not going to be fun. That's not why I want you. There's something damned wrong around here, and nobody in the Street can find out what it is. Maybe an outsider, a hard-handed day laborer like yourself, can get to the bottom of it. I can't. Exhibit A will be Harry Gaines. He's what you're supposed to bring around. Do it, and I'll buy you a seat on the Stock Exchange for a wedding present."

Bringing Harry Gaines around didn't sound like a tough assignment. I'd known him since I was a frosh at college. A thin, likeable, high-strung cuss who'd kidded me unmercifully about my attachment for his wife's sister—and then slipped me a twenty to take her out, when my allowance ran short.

And then—Harry Gaines came into the office. I stopped feeling enthusiastic, and there was nothing in me but a queer spontaneous sickness, not unlike the queaziness I'd had a year before, when I stepped onto the mat for the intercollegiate wrestling finals.

Because Harry looked like the ungodliest job I'd ever tackled.

"I'M TAKING young Ronnie into the firm," my Dad said in a tight voice. "He'll have the other desk in your office. We need new blood in this outfit."

Gaines was considerably leaner than I remembered him, shoulders sagging with sheer emaciation, his narrow face white and taut as though he'd been digging

ditches all day in the August heat instead of sitting in an air-cooled office. He answered in a weary monotone. "New blood, Chet? Yes. We need—new blood."

He barely looked at me, but there was something just not *right* about the way he said it. "New blood." He thinks I'm a kid. I told myself angrily, Chet Wallace's kid, and nothing more. I'll show him, yet But what I really felt was—half-sick.

"Mind—if I take some water, Chet?" the lean man continued. "Parched—in this heat."

I stared at him as he drank cupful after cupful from the water-cooler, till I thought he'd burst. Dad started saying something about Atlantic Copper, and Harry went on drinking, as though he didn't understand. At last, he finished with a gurgle, and shambled toward me, extending a bony hand.

I shook it—and dropped it hurriedly. The white hand was like ice. Actually cold and dry as that, not like any other human hand you'd touch in a New York August, unless—you happened to be in the City Morgue.

I turned to Dad, when Harry left, and said, "He's sick, Dad. He's the sickest guy I ever saw standing on two feet."

"Sick or crazy," Dad dismissed it simply, "Or both."

But it didn't seem as simple as that to me. I'd been hired to get a more comprehensive answer. Suddenly I remembered all the tired-looking people in the outer office, and I thought, they looked that way because they've been trying to find out. The scientifically air-cooled offices of Wallace, Brown and Gaines was thick with an intangible hopelessness. I got out, in a hurry, into the comparative normality of ninety degrees in the cab of my doughnut truck.

I knew Dad was having company for dinner that evening. Very private company—Sandra Howard, in fact. So I

picked up dinner somewhere in the Village, and then continued uptown to Terry Ramsay's place. I had a lot to tell Terry that night.

If I put her onto it, would she coax her sister Marcia to take Harry away for a few weeks' vacation? If she didn't, I had the darndest feeling that the Ramsay père and mère would be burying a son-in-law before they acquired a new one. God, how I wished Harry would leave town! For his own sake—and for ours. Even then, with nothing to go by but that persistent queaziness at the pit of my stomach, I felt more than a little uncomfortable at the thought of Harry. It wasn't something ordinary he'd picked up, I thought, like a cold or the mumps—it was a disease without a name.

And Terry—she was fair as an angel, and just as good. But the remote, troubled look in her grey eyes when she met me at the door—that was something new.

"Ronnie," she told me, her warm voice just a little strained, a little harsh, "I'm standing you up tonight. You'll have to excuse it."

"Terry, what's the matter?" I asked sharply. I felt a momentary pang of jealousy—and then I realized from the expression on her face that she wasn't breaking this date because she *wanted* to. It wasn't anything as simple as another man in her life. She seemed worried, frightened, and as alone as I've ever seen a girl look.

Well, she hadn't any right to look so alone! I was there, wasn't I? I guess she saw the way I felt, because her lower lip trembled, and she slipped into my arms, clinging to me as though I were her salvation. That didn't make me feel much better, because I still didn't know what the matter was.

"**R**ONNIE darling, have you—have you seen Harry?" she whispered. "I—don't know what it is, but Marcia—

I promised to go to Marcia's tonight. I must go. She needs me."

Marcia *needs* me. Still only a partial explanation. Later, I was going to curse myself for an inhuman beast, remembering how I thought, then, that even future in-laws were a bother.

"Yes, I've seen Harry," I told her coldly.

"Then," she whispered, "you know almost as much as I do."

The look on her face would have melted a rock, and I wasn't a rock. I didn't even mind that *almost*. "You can't go there alone," I told her. "If you're in trouble, I'm in trouble too. That's how we are, Terry."

I felt like a dog, seeing that gratitude and love in Terry's eyes, and knowing I didn't deserve it the least little bit. As though it weren't my primary business to be beside her when she needed me

We were sitting in the roadster I'd been given for graduation with my arm around her. It was much cooler driving than a bakery truck. That angel-fair face was warm against my cheek, as I told her cheerfully that my truck-driving days were over, and here I'd just march in tonight and give Harry a good lecture, bring him to his senses, and thus earn my seat on the Exchange.

". . . and we'll all be happy ever after," I concluded, though that queaziness in my stomach was acting up again, "if you just trust Ronnie the giant-killer." That made her smile.

She smiled, and I smiled back, and all the time, I half-sensed the nightmare that was to come

There was no answer to our ring at Marcia's apartment. Terry looked at me anxiously, and pulled a latchkey from her purse. I don't like breaking in on people, even your future sisters-in-law, so I rang again. This time there *was* an answer.

"Aa-ouw!" The scream rose icily, clearly, broke on a note that I heard with

my spine rather than my ears. I shouted, "My God!" and pushed Terry away as I took the key from her. She wasn't going in there, not while I could help it!

No lights, I stumbled through the living-room to a lamp. The room was empty, and undisturbed. I shouted, "Marcia! Marica, are you hurt?"

A thud sounded beyond the bedroom door. I burst in, snapping on the wall switch as I went. The first thing I saw was—a white rag of a face, snarling at me from outside the bedroom window. Words shrieked through my brain; *Skin doesn't look like that*. Human beings don't have twitching purplish eyes, and thin liver-colored lips curled back on—*red teeth!*

I stepped toward it—and stumbled over something softly solid on the floor. When I looked again, the face was gone. And when I looked at the thing that had tripped me, I guess my own face stopped being a thing not good to see.

My hands were wet and cold with a sweat that had nothing to do with summer heat, and my mouth was dry and soundless as a desert.

That *face* through the window—I could have sworn it, though I couldn't have sworn to my own sanity—had belonged to Harry Gaines.

And inert—a twisted thing on the floor—lay the body of his wife, Marcia.

Her thin nightdress lay in shreds over her body. Under the tatters, pulsing in tempo with the aorta, blood oozed down her white side, forming a widening, dark stain on the carpet. I picked the girl up, and blood smeared my linen suit, covered my hands.

I soaked every towel in the bathroom, and tried to wipe the blood away. It was after the towels had been changed three times, after I'd called a doctor, that my stomach began to churn in revolt.

As soon as I relaxed for a moment all

the horribleness of it crashed home to me.

Marcia's right cheek was gone. It had been gnawed away, as though by rats. Long strips had been torn from her throat, and there was no tip on her right breast. Here some mad Shylock had claimed his pound of flesh. Then blood had filled the wounds again.

The woman on the bed stirred. She was staring at me now, eyes wide, lips parted in an unvoiced wail of intolerable pain that was turned into a gurgle by the rush of blood.

"Take my hand," I told her, in an agony of helplessness. "Squeeze it hard—that helps, sometimes."

Her finger-nails dug into my wet palms, her eyelids dropped, and a scream started through her tattered throat. There were words scattered through the piteous sounds . . . "Harry! No . . . my God! It can't . . . be . . . Harry . . .!" Harry. Her husband, the lean likeable fellow who had become a devil—a monster. He had done this to her.

I'd seen his face at the window, and then it was gone. There was a fire escape, and Harry Gaines was free. *Terry!* Terry was outside, alone. I threw a sheet over Marcia's poor white body, and stumbled out.

There was a doctor in the corridor, walking toward the apartment with an elevator man. But of a girl with grey eyes, fair as a Botticelli angel, there was no sign anywhere.

CHAPTER TWO

Another Tryst With Death

I SHOUTED at the doctor to go inside, and collared the elevator man. No, he hadn't seen Terry go out . . . but then, he'd just come on duty.

No Terry. No Terry anywhere. I called at her home, asked futilely for her, and shouted at her mother and father

with unconscious cruelty that they'd better get over to Marcia's. I went back to Marcia's myself, pounding up and down the staircase of the apartment house. I shouted Terry's name till a cop came out of Marcia's door and told me to shut up.

The cops—God, how I needed them now! But even in the crazy panic that rode me that night, I realized that it was *I* who'd been seen coming out of the butchered woman's apartment—I who was covered now with her blood—I whose finger-prints were all over her place. I hadn't time to explain to the law. It was more important to find Terry. I beat it down the staircase and got to a corner drug-store in a matter of seconds.

"Dad," I called into a pay-phone. "I don't care what you're doing, but stop doing it. Terry's gone, and I think Harry's got her." I gave him a brief outline of what I'd seen in Marcia's apartment. "Dad, I can't report her missing when she's only been out of my sight for an hour. In fact, I don't dare go near a cop. But you've got drag. You can make 'em look for her right now, if you want to."

"Steady, son," he cautioned me. "Sure. I'll get them after her. And you come home. You'll be better off here."

I wasn't going to be better off anywhere but where Terry was, but there wasn't much sense in saying so. If I didn't get away, soon, the law would see to it that I wasn't even free to look for her. So I went home

SANDRA HOWARD, looking like a sophisticated schoolgirl in spite of her two marriages and her grown-up daughter, was perched there on the sun-parlor settee. She screamed when she saw the blood which covered me. Dad patted her shoulder with the half-condescending affection he'd shown her always, and said to me, "You'd better change your suit, Ronnie. And take a shower, too. You look like a butcher."

"Terry," I pleaded with him. "You called the cops about Terry?"

Dad nodded, slowly. Sandra started to weep, softly, and Dad talked to her the way you'd talk to a child. He had the fondness for her that big men always have for people they've been kind to. Since Sandra had cracked up in that motor accident a year ago, and Dad had come forward as a blood donor to save her life, she'd been a pretty constant visitor at our quarters.

He snapped her out of it quickly enough, and she grew tearfully maternal toward me. "It's—just so ferrible to hear all this, Ronnie, and to see you—looking that way." There was something brave about her, as though she sensed an imminent peril that would warp all our lives. "I'm getting you a drink," she told me firmly.

It was the most sensible thing anyone could have done for me at that point. I gulped it down with a gasp.

A respectful face, full as the moon, showed itself at the door.

"Mr. Brown, your partner, to see you, sir," announced Jason, our butler, and then Dad shooed me into my own room to clean up.

I did as good a job as I could, but my finger-nails were still dark with clots of Marcia's life-blood. Maybe Sandra knew a way to clean them—women often did—

I paused in the doorway, because it was useless to ask Sandra anything any more. She looked—panic-stricken, half-mad with fear. And Bob Brown, standing between her and my father, wasn't at all the full-bodied man I'd met six months earlier. He was a ghost of a man, an emaciated wreck with a white face and feverish twitching eyelids. He was *sick*—in the same ungodly way Harry Gaines had been sick.

"Get the hell out, Bob," Dad's voice rumbled. "I said, *Get the hell out!*"

Sandra's small nervous hands caught

Dad's wrist, stopping a sure blow at the sick man. "I'll go with him," she whispered. "I've *got* to go, Chet—maybe there's a reason"

And then, she reached for her purse. Even as Dad cried after her, she was gone. Out into the night . . . holding to the reedy arm of a man who was evilly sick.

Dad stood there, tense and white. He was impotent with rage. "Dad, I'm following them," I shouted.

"I'm coming with you," he said. "My God, she didn't *want* to go"

I was out the front door as I shouted back to him, "You stay where you are, They may phone you back—about Terry."

I THOUGHT I saw Sandra's silver-blond head through the rear window of a cab that was waiting for a red light to change, and that was good enough lead to follow. I raced my car down Park Avenue after the cab, lost it in traffic, and found it again at Union Square. I was following the wildest of hunches, but then, everything that happened was wild, and unbelievably horrible.

First, Terry had been frightened, and she had gone someplace she didn't *want* to go—because of a sick man, Harry Gaines. Now, another sick man had turned up, and summoned another woman who was obviously panic-stricken at the thought of accompanying him. Somehow, I felt Bob Brown and Sandra might lead me to Terry. Bob was stricken by the same disease that cursed Harry Gaines. I had to stick to him—he was my only clue!

If there'd only been time—if I'd only had a breathing spell in which to convince the cops about seeing Harry's wild face at the window—I might have had allies in my search. Now, there wasn't time, and I had to handle it alone

Terry. God, I prayed, don't let me lose track of that cab again *down-*

town. Why were we going downtown? Brown didn't live downtown, I knew, and neither did Sandra. Nor was it likely that either of them knew a soul south of Fourteenth Street. They weren't that kind of people. That cabbie was some driver—he shot through a light at Astor place, and I was stopped for trying the same thing.

I don't think I heard a word the traffic cop bawled at me. I was in a fever of impatience to get going . . . and when I realized that the bawling-out was likely to take some time, I stepped on the gas, and while a whistle shrilled imperatively behind me, I did some fancy stretching with the New York City speed limit.

It was gone. It might take me all night or all year to locate that cab again in the maze of little alleys that make up old Manhattan.

But—this was familiar territory. I'd covered it the day before in my bakery truck . . . and then I knew where Brown was going with Sandra, the one possible place they could go in that part of town. It was insane, at this hour, for anything to be going on there, but something was going on—in the Street. In Wall Street, after hours.

Terry. Terry with her grey eyes and angel's face No, there wasn't a sign of an angel's face on the deserted alley that by day was the richest little lane in the world. For at night the skyscrapers are dark, their doors locked, and from the areaways come the drunks, the derelicts, and all the spawn of the waterfront nearby.

No window of all those thousands was lit. Brown—Sandra—Terry—where in God's name were they? Or was this darkness hiding them?

I saw a girl walking slowly ahead of me, a girl I hadn't noticed before. There was something oddly familiar about her gait . . . I ran to her, and she turned.

The dark face, garish with cheap cos-

metic, assumed a tired smile. She said, "Hello, Mister," and stood still. So did I. Damn you, I told myself, this is one case where you *don't* say, Haven't I seen you before. But it was exactly what I wanted to say, even while I knew that I couldn't possibly have known a woman like that at any point of my life.

The girl shifted to her right hip. "Well?" she said. There was an odor of perfume coming from her, and it wasn't five-and-dime stuff either. I stepped back, involuntarily. She shrugged her shoulders, and walked on.

Maybe it was because she was the only living thing that I could see. I was up against a stone wall. Anyway, I followed her. I had to do *something!*

I pussy-footed close behind her, keeping as much in the shadows as she did. Once I had to step aside, into the gutter, because the pavement was too narrow for me to side-step a swaying drunken sailor who barred my path.

She was going toward the building—our building. The entrance was barred and padlocked, but she had a key to the gate. I ran now, not caring how noisily my heels thudded.

IT MISSED me by inches, breezing against my face with a harsh whoosh, and then it hit the pavement with a dull crack. I looked at the thing that had come from the window, and important small matters like nerves and blood-vessels stopped working inside me.

In a smear of broken flesh and trickling blood, it lay on the pavement, face up. That face might have been lovely once—I didn't know. It was a young girl and she was stark naked. I didn't know whether she had jumped, fallen, or been pushed to her death. I didn't know who she was, or why she should have been in that darkened building.

The barred gate opened again, and shadowy images emerged, with a far from

shadowy speed. I recognized the girl who had accosted me earlier, saw two others stoop to the thing on the sidewalk.

Whatever, whoever they were, they hadn't any business there. I sailed into them tooth and nail, only to be repulsed by what I touched. I tell you, it wasn't human flesh that my fists pounded—too cold for that. It was the icy cold of death. These creatures weren't *alive!* They faded away like mist before me, and I was alone in the deserted street. The body of the girl was gore. I heard the click of the closing gate.

I rattled at the padlock, shouting hoarse vain threats. A dim procession was vanishing down the corridor, toward the elevators, but there was steel between us.

Out of the echoes of my own cries and of those ghostly footsteps thudding on bare stone, came a dim call. My own name. "Ronn—" It was cut off, muffled in mid-air. But I knew it. Knew that voice as I knew that I was alive.

It had been Terry Ramsay, calling to me from the shadows, out of unspeakable and unknown hell, with cold relentless steel between us.

I was clinging to that gate, shouting at the things within, when something hard struck me between the shoulder-blades. There was a cop behind me, the third to take a dislike to me that night, and this one seemed ready to do something about it.

Some remnant of reason warned me that he was the wrong person on whom to resume wrestling practice, much as I felt like it. "What you think you're doin'?" he asked, collaring me intolerantly. "Better make it good, brother. . . ."

I tried to shake him off, but I couldn't. This time, I had to explain. "A girl," I told him. "She jumped out of the window, and they took her inside . . . get me in there, officer, for God's sake!" It was all I dared say. If I'd told him that I was

trailing the second woman to disappear that night in the vicinity of a man namelessly sick, I'd have had to identify myself as the man who found Marcia's butchered body. That might mean months of proving to a jury that I wasn't a murderer.

And I didn't have months! I didn't have—minutes to spare. "I've got to go inside!" I shouted at the officer again.

He gave me an odd look, wavering between credence and disbelief, but with the balance all on the side of disbelief. God, if he were going to do something, why couldn't he do it in a hurry! He sniffed at my breath, while I cursed silently, and then rapped his nightstick against the gate. A sleepy-eyed watchman shambled up to us from the shadows, and inquired, "Wha's going on?"

"This guy says he saw a girl jump out of a window in this building," said the officer. "He says somebody came and picked up the body and took it back inside. Seen anything like that, Pop?"

The watchman sniggered, a senile stupid snigger that made me want to kill him. He sounded so sleepy, I was sure he'd been doped. "He's dreamin', orfisser. I oughta know what goes on here. Been here every night for twelve years, and ain't seen a girl yet. Wouldn't be so bad, at that."

"Thanks, Pop," said the officer. To me, he added, "You've had a snifter, haven't you? Say, do you think I ought to take you to the precinct or the nut-house?"

"Make it the nut-house," haw-hawed the watchman.

I saw red. Dammit, a girl had *died* here, five minutes earlier, and they were laughing . . . a girl had died, and another girl might die, if I didn't find a way of getting to her. I slipped out of my jacket, let the copper have one on the chin as he came after me, and tried to take myself elsewhere. Instantly, the Street was loud with whistles, alive with blue-coats, and I

knew in a kind of hopeless agony that I wasn't going farther without police escort.

Dad came down to the police station as soon as I called him; but by the time he got me and my roadster out of hock, having convinced the Department that I'd been a good son and a good citizen all my life, it was almost dawn.

Dawn—for everyone else in the world. For me, it might mean only the day of judgment. Because I had been too late the night before. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

They Have no Blood!

"SON, forgive me." That was all my father said, sitting heavily beside me in the roadster. He looked old somehow, and the white breast-pocket handkerchief was crushed and crumpled. Over the darkness, grey visibility crept from the east; there was a hot wind blowing from the sea.

"Why, Dad?" I asked.

"I've gotten you into a hell of a mess, wishing that job on you—maybe a murder rap. But I'll stand behind you. . . ."

That wasn't what bothered me. Dully, like a clock tolling in purgatory, Terry's name went through my head. "Dad," I said, "got a key to your own office? I've got to get in there—got to find her!"

"You mean Terry?" he asked. "Terry's all right—thank God. At least I can give you that much good news. Sandra called me a little after one, last night, and said she was home. Brown had taken her—down to the aquarium. Said he was going to introduce her to the fishes. Crazy. Like all the rest. She gave him the slip.

"She found Terry at her own place when she got home. Her own daughter, Maxie, met Terry in a bad nervous state outside Marcia's corridor. They live quite near each other, you know. Maxie made Terry come home with her."

I yelled, "I'm going to her. Right now."

Dad said, "I wouldn't do that, son. Sandra said Terry doesn't want to see you—just yet. She's under some kind of misapprehension—thinks it was you who butchered Marcia. Sandra used to be some kind of nurse—she's keeping Terry quiet for the time being. Says the child's not in a state where she ought to see anyone. Says the only reason Terry hasn't informed on you, is that she's prostrated with the shock of it."

"But, Dad—" No, I couldn't believe that. Terry to think me a butcher? How had she found out, between the time I'd gone into Marcia's apartment, and the time I found her gone? No, she'd been out there till she left, where she could see nothing . . . but what if she *had* seen, had slipped in past me somehow? Wasn't that evil suspicion exactly what I'd feared would come into every mind?

"Sandra believes in you, Ronnie," Dad went on. "She won't let Terry talk till the girl's calmer . . . and the whole Ramsay family's too upset about Marcia to mind leaving Terry in capable hands. If you'll just sit tight, son . . ."

Sit tight? After the previous night's horror, a kind of numbness had come over my brain. Everything had been too incredible, too beyond belief—was it my senses that had gone mad, and not the outside world? I half-believed that. I tried to tell Dad.

"It doesn't make sense," he sighed. "Harry Gaines mutilating his own wife—I'm taking your word for that, Ronnie—girls plopping out my office window at midnight. Maybe the watchman was right. Maybe you dreamt it, Ronnie."

"Maybe I did," I echoed. If Terry hated me—didn't want to see me—anything was possible.

"The healthiest thing for you to do," Dad advised, "is to go back to the office, and wait. We'll keep our mouths shut about this—till something breaks. I'm going to see Harriet Brown, Bob's wife.

Poor woman—she was sweet to me when your mother died, Ronnie. I'm thinking she might need a man around the house. If anything happens, get in touch with Sandra. She can be trusted."

Sandra could be trusted? I supposed so. I began to feel that I couldn't be trusted. "It was pretty brave of her to go out with Brown," Dad said. "Brave—and damned foolish. She thought she might find something—for your sake, Ronnie."

Suddenly I felt that the thing wasn't over. One girl had died, and a woman was probably dying right now. And the sick men were still at large. "Dad," I said, "you'd better go to Sandra's. I'm—scared for her. Scared for every female in this town."

Dad shook his head. We had come back to the Street, and the sun was a big orange ball over the East River. "I'm leaving you here," he said. "I've got to get to Harriet Brown's."

He borrowed the roadster, and went off. There was a faint dark stain in front of our building, a stain that had evidently been rubbed almost out. Today, hundreds of unconscious passers-by would tread that stain, thinking of it, if they thought of it at all, as part and parcel of the city's untraceable muck.

But to me, it was unholy proof that I hadn't been dreaming the night before—that stain was a young girl's life-blood!

NO ONE had arrived at the office when I came in. Dad had given me the keys to every office and room, and I investigated each one. Even the woman's wash-room, where I had no business at all. And it was there, unmistakable, faint, and lingering, that I caught the scent of perfume. That perfume which had come from the girl who accosted me the night before, and whom I felt I should have known, but didn't.

She'd been here, all right! But she

wasn't here now—she was in the limbo where devils dwell in the daytime. I ran back to my phone, and dialed Sandra's number. I listened to the buzzing signal for what seemed a lifetime. "Sorry, they do not answer," said the operator.

And then I was sure that they were trapped! When I saw them again, they might be broken corpses . . . but, God, what could I do?

The memory of Dad's heavy voice came to me. "Sit tight." And I sat tight. Had to. The phone was ringing, and after I answered it, it kept ringing with scarcely a pause. I had come to work early, on the day of the biggest crash since '29.

It was a hot job to handle alone, that August day when the bottom dropped out of the market. I sat at my phone, collar open, shirt soaked, jacket draped over a hat-tree, and I sold. God, how I sold—when I could find a buyer, which wasn't often.

There was the slimmest of reasons for it. It was pandemonium dropped without warning. Oh, there'd been war scare, and drought in the west—but it hadn't been enough to make the market insane, not in this way!

Somewhere in the back of my brain a thought persisted, and if I'd only had time to examine it, it might have clicked. First, there had been the panic's shadow—Dad shouting that the brokers had gone crazy. Then the panic *within*—with men like Gaines and Brown going horribly sick, with revolting death gripping the Street, and those connected with the Street. And now—the panic in full force. It was as though that hidden underworld which skulked through the Street by night had come into the sun, blasting our lives by day. . . .

"Ronnie. Need help—? I'll—dive right in."

I turned to see who had spoken, and a mad rush of anger made me tremble. Standing there, pale and sick, but with a

good shave and a shine on his shoes, was Harry Gaines!

I dropped the phone I'd been holding, and screamed, "You've got Terry, you dirty murderer! You can't do to her what you did to Marcia! I'll kill you for it!"

The eyelids jerked into a mild surprised "Marcia—poor Marcia! Someone—hurt her last night."

"Hurt her! I'll say someone hurt her! And I saw you outside her window!"

The leer didn't go from that white face, but Harry retreated, as though he were afraid of me. "And I saw *you*," he murmured. "It—wouldn't be funny—to tell police I was in my own apartment. They—expect that. I live there. But you—have fingerprints all over—that don't belong. All over Marcia's body . . . I could tell them something, too."

My arm dropped to my side. I knew, as I had known all morning, how the damnably guilty feel. I mumbled, "But Terry . . . ?"

"I don't know," said the trembling husk of a man. His eyes avoided mine, and he slunk to his desk. The phone was ringing again.

It was later, and hotter, and financially bleaker, before I had time to notice what Harry Gaines had been doing with the phone on his own desk. And when I did notice, I went rabid. He was—*buying*. As fast as I sold, Harry was buying up again. It wasn't gambling, either. It was suicide! I opened my mouth to call him an unprintable name—and my jaw just wobbled there, in mid-air.

BECAUSE, while he'd been sitting there, while the morning had waned to afternoon, Harry's face had turned white as chalk . . . and his eyes were purplish, and his liver-colored lips were a thin gash in a rag face. It was the face I had seen snarling from Marcia's window!

"You've—cancelled my orders all—day, Ronnie," came from the unspeakably

vile visage, words croaked as the unresting dead might croak them. "Maybe—I'll die for it."

"You're damned right, you'll die!" I howled at him. "You're half-dead already!"

"I'll die of thirst," he croaked on. "Thirst that water can't slake, nor wine—unless *you* save me, Ronnie." His thin lips barely breathed forth the words. "You'll *want* to save me—because if I die, Terry is going to die with me!"

His words trickled down my spine like separate drops of frozen air. I wanted to kill him . . . and I tried to. I tore into that icy thin body, and when I'd stopped shaking him, he could hardly stand.

His lip was split, and something trickled over his chin from the gash. It was as weak and thin as water! *And that was what Harry had in his veins!*

Blood. That's what had been the matter with them. With Harry and Bob, and God knows how many others. They had no blood.

"You'd better not hurt me," he whimpered from a corner. "You'd better come with me tonight. They'll kill Terry if you don't come with me."

I clutched at the skinny throat. "Don't make a sound," I warned him, trying not to go berserk. "If you tell me where Terry is, I'll go there with you—today."

His eyes popped, and he shook his throat for air. "There isn't any place to go by day. We'll have to wait—for tonight."

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered.

There was something else he had to tell me. Something that had been bothering me for hours. "Terry said if I'd seen you, I knew almost as much as she did," I told him. "What did she mean by *almost*?"

His lips were drawn back, and he grinned like a corpse. "Maybe—Marcia told her—that I hadn't been home at

night—for weeks. Marcia tried to stop me—tried to keep me from getting to the fresh blood. So I tore at her with my hands . . . I had to make her leave me alone!”

I shuddered at that hideous confession. For there had been a time when Harry loved Marcia. I relaxed my hold on his wrinkled throat.

I believed that something would happen to Terry if I didn't go with Harry tonight. I'd seen what had happened to the others, and I knew that only the most deadly compulsion could have driven Harry to *buy* stocks on a day like this.

He was too weak to talk any more, though he tried. I brought glass after glass of water to him, kept everyone else out of the office. My hot hands froze every time they grazed his face. He grew paler and his tongue began to hang out. His skin turned gray. . . . “You've got to last till tonight!” I pleaded with him. And he took the water, and let it trickle over his gaping mouth and swollen tongue, and there was agony in his eyes. His mouth was too swollen even for a whisper.

It got to be six, and then six-thirty. I brought Harry five cupfuls in three minutes. I'd forgotten what I was supposed to be in the office for . . .

Harry's purplish eyes stared up at me. When I poured the water over him, he didn't even try to swallow it.

Harry was dead.

And his death might mean—Terry's death! I had to get to that place which didn't exist by day, and which Harry had been too far gone to name. I phoned Dad, told him I'd be working late.

Somewhere during the night that had passed, it seemed to me that sheer outraged instinct had caused me to draw back when the gates to hell were open. At one point, I had done the thing which dropped that steel gate between Terry's hiding place and me.

The girl with the faint perfume. She had asked me to accompany her, and I had not gone. Well, I thought frantically, tonight she may walk again. And if she does—I'll walk with her.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Feast of Bloodless Men

Dark came, and the myriad workers were gone from the end of Manhattan Island. Gone uptown, gone to Harlem, to Brooklyn; gone to hot dinners, and comfortable chairs, and laughing children. Nothing that was alive lingered on the deserted street. My footsteps echoed hollowly through the black chasm of stone. . . .

And then there were more footsteps. From behind me came the girl with the painted face. She paused, raised her eyebrows at me. “Back again, Mister?”

Evil? She was evil as the first sin in Edën, and I wanted to run from her with every instinct of my body. But the odor of her perfume persisted, faint and lingering, as it had been in the washroom that morning, and certainties in the back of my head grew stronger.

I said what I'd half-meant to say the night before. “Haven't we met before somewhere?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps. I meet so many people. . . . Walk?” She cocked her arm, and I realized that I was supposed to take it. . . .

We passed the building where I worked, the building she'd disappeared into the night before. That wasn't odd, but I didn't dare call attention to the fact. Perhaps they changed the scene of their operations, for safety's sake.

In front of the Hines Building, with the offices of Hines and Carter occupying the first three floors, my guide stopped. “Like to drop in a while?” she asked. “We could have—fun.”

"Yes," I answered, doubling my hands into fists, to keep from gripping her throat. "Lots of fun."

She smiled and from her handbag she drew a key-chain, and opened the iron gates. This time I was going in, thank God!

"Nobody uses these buildings at night," she explained in the dim elevator she operated herself. "Pity to let all this nice space go to waste, isn't it? When you and I could be so happy—well, it makes a good spot to entertain my men friends."

"Very clever," I admitted. Dammit. I had seen her before! But where, I didn't know.

At the third floor, she led me into the customers' room of Hines and Carter. There were bottles and a bowl of ice, and glasses, on one of the tables. "Drink?" she asked, stroking my arm in a caress that made me go hot and cold with revulsion.

I had to humor her. I drank . . . and then suddenly the girl seemed to be dancing a crazy jig, her head floating off somewhere, yards away from her body. The room was coming apart, too. . . .

Thoughts circled upward, out of my head, in a kind of humming jargon. I'm doped, the words sang in my ears, and then everything was black.

I COULDN'T move my hands. It was bothering me. I could feel them, but I couldn't move them. I said so, aloud, and someone laughed.

I opened my eyes, to find myself sagging in a swivel chair, in a private office. I sat quite still, for the good reason that I was tied hand and foot. A door was open ahead of me, and in the dim lighting of that customers' room beyond, grotesque shapes swirled and danced.

"How do you like it, Ronnie?" asked a clear feminine voice. I turned my head. Standing beside me, her lovely little-girl

face twisted into amusement, was Sandra Howard.

I tried to cry out, and words came in a whisper, "Sandra, you're—"

"At the bottom of all this?" she finished for me. "Why, of course. Didn't you suspect, Ronnie?"

No, I admitted hopelessly to myself, I hadn't suspected. And I should have! God, I should have! That phony-sounding story about Brown taking her to the aquarium, about Terry being at her place. God, what had she done with Terry! I tried to shout that name at her, but it came from my lips in a whisper. That's funny, I thought, I was a good shouter in my truck-driving days.

"There she is," Sandra pointed. My eyes were growing used to the dim light in the room beyond. There were faces and bodies where only shadows had been before. There was Young Carter, who was boss in this office by day, his face pasty and thin and hideous in the dimness, and there was a girl with him . . . twisting her limbs about him, her hands caressing him all over his naked body.

And there were at least a dozen others, bloodless and perverted. A saturnalia among corpses . . . then a scream drooled from my lips.

Nude and unconscious and defenceless, stretched on a table in the midst of that ungodly reveling, was Terry! They weren't touching her now—but had they? Or would they?

I called Sandra the vilest name a man can call a woman, and she patted my cheek with mock-maternalism. "You're weak, Ronnie," she said. "I had to take so much blood from you—to keep my men in there alive. Odd, how much they trust me. They're all doomed—doomed to die of leukemia. There isn't a doctor in the world who knows a cure for it. They aren't capable of manufacturing blood in their bodies any more, so they come to me—for transfusions from

healthy bodies like yours. Poor fools, they think I'm keeping them alive. I hope their delusions make them happy."

I whispered, through teeth that clicked together strangely, "You gave it to them. You took their blood . . . and they're dying."

Sandra nodded, as though pleased with my perspicacity. A girl walked toward her, a girl who had not joined the incredible revels. It was my guide with the garish make-up and the fine perfume. Then I knew her—and cursed myself impotently for not having known her before. She was Maxine Howard, Sandra's daughter. "Nice work," Sandra said to her. "This one's the one I've been after right along."

"My hips," said the girl Maxine, "are irresistible." She giggled, and then sighed. Suddenly tears started to flow down Sandra's cheeks, her face worked oddly.

"Please—" Sandra gasped, "leave us, Maxie. My poor, dearest Maxie. . . ."

Maxine turned, and with a sensuous swaying of her hips, vanished among the shadows. Sandra looked at me again, composure putting her features back into the little-girl mask.

"Maxie is—dying," she said to me, taking a deep breath. "I—killed her, Ronnie. It was selfish, but I was desperate! When your father offered me that blood transfusion last year after the motor accident, I took it, but I was still weak. Needed more transfusions. Your father was still willing to be generous, but doctors warned him that he'd get leukemia from too much blood-letting. *So I took blood from Maxine!*

"No doctor in the world would have let her give me as much as she did—we had to do it at home, privately. You know, I was a nurse once. Oh, I was nearly crazy with fear, Ronnie—fear for myself. I got over it all right, but—Maxie was doomed.

"THAT made me desperate too. I lured men to our place, night after night, gave them drugged drinks. If they had the wrong type of blood, they woke up and went their ways, thinking merely that they'd been drunk. If they had the right type, the type we needed for Maxie, they woke up sick. They went to doctors, who told them they had leukemia, that they were dying. Then I stepped in, offered to keep them alive if they induced others to come to me. Others who would yield their blood. . . .

"It was a desperate game, but it worked. The dying bring me their healthy victims, and soon the victims are dying, too . . . if they have the right type of blood, which you have. You're your father's son, Ronnie. I haven't taken that much from you yet, you'll pull through. But I may . . ."

I struggled against my bonds, and fell back. I felt dizzy and sick, weak as water. An infernal bell was tolling in my brain.

"I—had to give them morphine with the blood, Ronnie," she went on, "so they'd believe what I told them, that I'd discovered a chemical which would check leukemia when it was added to a blood transfusion. They *have* to believe me. If they informed the police, they'd go to jail too, and die there—because now they're as guilty as I am.

"But it gave me an idea, a valuable idea. I'd taken my own daughter's life—like a werewolf. I could become a werewolf—on Wall Street! You know yourself what I made these victims of mine do on the market—and I can be rich now, Ronnie, rich as an empress!"

I tried to tell her to go to hell—but then, she was there already, and so was I. "You're not going to—kill Terry, are you?" I whispered.

"Not if you're a good boy," she answered. The chic little-girl face was composed now, but into her voice had crept a

(Continued on page 107)



SIX years ago we awoke to the sudden realization that there was a definite place for a new type of fiction. So we brought out DIME MYSTERY Magazine; and though we are frank to admit that it was at first an experiment, we have since proven that we made no mistake. As a matter of fact, most publishing ventures are risky at best. But we felt the two principal factors that inspired us were basically sound; and both were founded on human nature.

Has your mind ever flashed back to hair-raising moments of your youth, when you were reading "forbidden" literature up in your room, with your lamp shaded so that pop and mom would think you were fast asleep? Perhaps you were reading Bram Stoker's immortal *Dracula*, or a blood-chilling tale by Ambrose Bierce, Poe, or Wilkie Collins. Whatever it was, the chances are that your pulse was pounding like mad, and every little creaking sound—which might have been caused only by the wind in the shutters—made your heart leap up into your throat to choke you. Well do we remember nights like that, and every one we know can hark back to a similar era—it's human nature. Perhaps, too, you remember that you couldn't find *enough* of that vivid, spine-tingling fare. We never could; and that's one reason we thought there was a definite place for a new magazine.

Later on we spent a few months traveling abroad, and once again we ran across evidence of man's desire to be stimulated by the bizarre, the macabre, the eerie! In Paris there is a theater known as *Le*

Grand Guignol, and each week a new play is presented. In itself, there isn't anything unusual about that—but these plays are like none offered anywhere in the world. They are designed especially for the benefit of those who seek an emotional outlet in pulse-tingling drama; dramas of the walking dead, vampires, and succubuses—creatures who prey upon the innocent in the dark of night. And, we noted each night we attended—every seat in the house was filled! . . . In London we found a form of entertainment equally popular, though running along slightly different lines: *Madame Tussaud's Wax Works*. This attraction, once a part of one of the empire exhibitions, became so celebrated that its owners set it up as a separate museum. The attraction is comprised of all the most terrifying, blood-curdling murders of history, enacted by figures of wax which are perfect images of the originals. *Madame Tussaud's Wax Works* was not designed for those with low blood pressure and weak hearts; yet it has a definite place in the annals of entertainment; and the fact that there is a

place for it, as well as *Le Grand Guignol*, added to our conviction that we should publish a magazine devoted to the cream of mystery-terror ideas.

Don't get the impression that we were planning a magazine to be gruesome—shockingly stark. Our plan was to consider the audience reaction we noted abroad, and combine it with the thrills we remembered as "stolen reading" in our youth. If we (and all our friends) were exhilarated by Poe and Bram Stoker, and if thousands of Europeans can be entertained yearly by the institutions named above, then there must be a market for the type of fiction we planned to offer. We would be catering to a human need as much in demand in certain fields as Western stories or detective yarns are in other fields. We felt certain of that.

However—that was only the beginning. When we set about buying manuscripts we found that there was a marked shortage of authors who could supply what we wanted, for we sought certain combinations of eeriness, terror and scalp-raising material that actually were *not being written!* We received any number of gory yarns that offered nothing but gore; we received stories of the supernatural that were too far-fetched to be convincing; we received plenty of the general run of "ghost" story, the haunted house variety, without any punch, or plot. There was nothing to do but hash over every idea submitted by our best-known writers, and request them to deliver the goods, literally, on order. (This does not mean we don't welcome material from newcomers!)

Here are a few of the "rules" we laid down to authors: the stories must be modern and American. That is to say, the characters must be everyday people who might be you, your neighbors . . . your associates—not people on foreign soil, in ages long gone by. There must be a quality of genuine mystery; there must

be a menace almost unbearable, threatening the people in the story in such a way that the reader really feels the fear that they feel. And this menace must be logically motivated by some character who has a reason for it, and in such a way that it could happen—without too great a stretch of the imagination—in your own home town. . . .

Man will never cease speculating upon the hereafter. So we find our readers request a certain number of stories dealing with creatures that are—or seem to be—from the mysterious limbo beyond the grave. . . . There are other types of mystery-terror yarns, too: tales of human vampires, sirens, and modern witch-doctors; stories of the weird influence one person's mind may exert on another's. Oh, there is ample room for variety in this field—and now, there is always a constant supply. Good mystery-terror yarns are not as scarce as they were when we were young.

Glance back through this issue with us, and note the various styles of mystery fiction you have just read. Donald Dale's lead novel, *Maids for the Dust-Devils*, is the story of a nameless menace that rides under cover of a natural phenomena, striking swiftly and surely. The fear is caused by a combination of nature's wrath—and some evil influence, enhanced perhaps, by the fact that the characters in this novel know in their hearts that the crimes are actually being committed by some horrible, human agency. . . . *In Help Me To Die!* by Leon Byrne, there is no explanation attempted. Rarely do we find a story like this. . . . In *The Town the Dead Things Claimed*, Paul Ernst's novelette, young John Crayton, all unknowing, comes close to mingling with creatures from beyond the grave—and his sweetheart, apparently dead, leads him there! *Terror Has No Face* is Raymond Whetstone's contribution to those readers who can take their terror neat—and still go to sleep without a bright light burning! . . . Henry Treat Sperry gives you a novelette of a modern Circe-like woman who wields a weird, compelling influence over strong men, and at whose beck and call snarls a pack of—well, what WERE those creatures in *Goddess of the Half-World Brood?* . . . You tell us!

And tell us what you like in mystery-terror fiction. Don't hesitate to write us your ideas on how we can offer you the pulse-speeding, spine-tingling type of story that packs the wallop you want! Criticisms are welcome, too!

THE EDITORS

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(Continued from page 104)

strident harshness. "You're going to do me a favor, Ronnie. You're going to call your father, and you'll tell him he's to start buying where Harry Gaines left off."

"Why don't you tell him yourself?" I snarled.

"Because if I told your father that, he'd kill me before I had a chance to finish. I know him when he's in a temper! But he won't kill you. When he sees you helpless, with half the blood gone from your body, he'll come around.

"You phone him, and tell him to come down here. Now, get this straight—Harry was buying in *my* name. So were all the others, whom you see out there. I've got a corner on almost everything in the market. It doesn't mean much yet, because prices are at rock bottom. There's only one man big enough to send prices up now—big enough to buy what I've got to sell. And that's your father. When prices soar again, I'll have his millions—and he'll have you, if he does as he's told.

"Dear old Chet, he's worth more to me healthy and alive than sick or dead. That's why I wanted *you* here, Ronnie. You and your girl, too, in case you were ready to sacrifice your own life for your father. You won't sacrifice Terry's."

"No," I muttered. "Not Terry's."

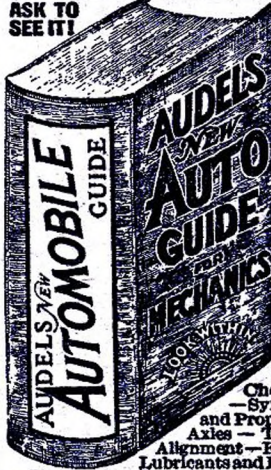
"I knew you were dangerous to my operations," she continued. "I got you just in time. I knew it when Brown came last night to tell me you'd seen Gaines outside Marcia's bedroom window. Gaines was dangerous, too. He'd gone haywire. That's why he didn't get his full quota of blood last night. That's why he died this afternoon.

"And so you'll phone Chet, and he'll come down here. You'll be alone with him—but I'll be listening. With my men, and with Terry. One slip from you, and they'll cut her wide open. If you try to tip your father off, if you make him rush

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

me, he'll be killed. If you send him for help, you and Terry won't be alive when he gets back. Those men haven't had their full quota of blood tonight, not yet—but if you refuse to call your father, they'll get it from your veins. You'll die of that. Much better they die, tomorrow afternoon, the way Harry did—much better all around. You see, we must keep scandal from touching your father's future wife."

"His future *what?*" I gasped.

"Wife. You didn't think I'd be stupid enough not to cover up, did you? No, Chet will have to lend me the protection of his name till this blows over. Just plain Sandra Howard would look too conspicuous going about with a brand new fortune. Mrs. Chet Wallace would be safe. You can tell him I'm willing to leave for Europe right after the ceremony."

I said, "I can't do it."

"No? When we get women here, they aren't always used as blood donors. There are other uses to which doomed men may put a woman if I permit. Sometimes the women don't enjoy it, and they save us the trouble of getting rid of them—there are lots of bodies in Young Carter's safe, Ronnie—there'd be room for Terry there."

I thought of that broken body on the sidewalk—and groaned. Fantastic rustling figures were swirling nearer the unconscious girl. God, it was the damndest choice a man ever had to make! Dad ruined, mouth sealed by an alternative no ordinary blackmailer could have conceived, and tied legally to a woman who called herself, with all justification, a werewolf—or Terry, thrown to those hounds of Sandra's for blood-letting, or worse. . . . It didn't much matter any more what happened to me.

Terry or Dad. Terry . . . or . . . Dad!

"Well?" Sandra said impatiently.

"Look! They're closing in on Terry—if I

don't stop them. . . .

I looked. "I'll do it," I gasped. "I'll do anything."

They unbound me, and left me alone in the office to telephone Dad. Still, I could barely move. And I knew Sandra was listening. When he arrived he was in a towering rage.

"What the hell's the idea of your being here at midnight!" he blazed. "And telling me to come alone. . . ."

"Dad," I began, and then his face went gray.

"Ronnie, you're dying!" he exclaimed.

"I will be," I whispered to him, "unless you—" God, how could I go on? Terry or Dad. I didn't know.

And then a shot pierced the silence, and Dad leapt into the inner office where Sandra was listening. I tried to shout after him, "They'll kill you, too . . ." but he went anyway. They've killed her, I thought in a mad panic, they've killed my Terry. . . .

There was another shot. And another, and another. Then, through a haze, I saw Dad reappear, with Terry in his arms, and Maxine was walking beside him. There wasn't a blemish on Terry's body. "You take the girl," I heard Dad say to Maxie. "Ronnie's pretty heavy, and he's too weak to walk."

Tears were streaking down Maxie's painted face. "Sorry, Ronnie," she said to me. "I couldn't stand it—any more—she was too evil to live. I thought I loved her enough to help her do anything she wanted, but when she tried to ruin *your* life, that was too much. You see, Ronnie, your happiness is really all that matters to me. I've loved you from the day I first saw you, after Mother's accident. This is the only reparation I can make." She raised the pistol in her hand. Before anyone could move, she pulled the trigger. Her young form drooped slowly until she lay at my feet. A long quiver shook her—and then she was still.

(Continued on page 110)

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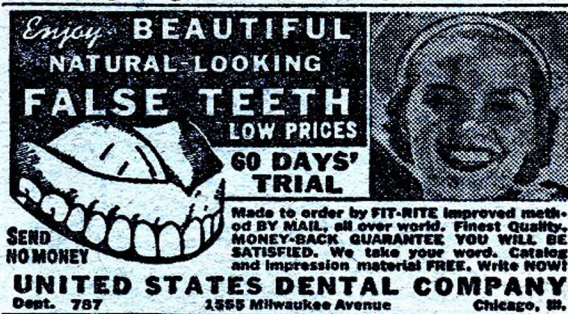
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(Continued from page 109)

I tried to say something, but a wave of dizziness came over me, and everything went black. . . .

A PAIR of grey eyes were looking into mine, and I was lying in my own bed. Sunlight, blessed simple sunlight, poured into the room.

"I've been with you all day," Terry said. "You've been saying the queerest things. . . ."

I tried to lift my arms to her, but I guess I just wasn't strong enough. "How are you?" I managed to murmur.

"Well, look at me," she answered ruefully. I looked. She was adorably smothered in my size A pyjamas. "Your father's had me doctored on the premises. I'm just about getting over the stomach pump. There was a dreadful amount of dope in me, I guess."

Fear shot through me, shaky fear that made me want to weep. "Terry—do you remember—can you tell me what happened after—"

The grey eyes veiled themselves. "I don't know," she said. "I was standing in the corridor, waiting for you, when a man with a white face came up to me. It might have been Harry. I felt something prick me . . . everything was like a dream after that, a dream I can't remember, till I woke up, here."

A dream she couldn't remember. Just how far had those blood purveyors used her drugged body to further their plans? I didn't know, and she didn't know, and there was no way of finding out. . . .

"Maxie," I murmured. "It was Maxie and Sandra. . . ."

Terry began to weep, very softly. "I used to be so fond of Maxie," she said. "And—I'm sorry. Your father told me—Maxie shot Sandra through the heart, you see, without warning. The others thought she'd killed the only person who could save their lives, and she stood

The Werewolf of Wall Street

there, and told them it was a hoax. They were ready to kill her—and she started shooting them, one by one. But I guess they'd have killed her anyway, if your father hadn't rushed them. It is Maxie and your father we owe our lives to. Poor Maxie—she tried to make it up to you in the only way she knew.

"That was two days ago. Two of the others escaped Maxie's bullets, but they're dead now anyway." She wiped her tears away. "They called us this morning from the hospital. Marcia's a little better. She'll live."

Marcia would live. Why, I didn't know. There couldn't be much joy left in her living . . . but was there in ours? Because they had taken blood from me, huge quantities of blood. They had taken it from Harry, too. What if—I blinked at the sunshine, trying to get the courage somehow even to think the thing. What if I were to turn into a feverish pale ghost like Harry and the others? What if I too went mad, tore at the girl I loved as Harry had torn at her sister?

"I can't marry you, Terry," I whispered. "Not till I know . . ."

"About me?" she asked in a small voice. "About what happened—while I was asleep?"

"No," I answered. "Not you. You'll always be the purest thing in the world to me. Till I know—about myself."


Terry was still there, two days later, when a famous doctor came to test me for anemia. I felt calmer, more at ease, but there was a sadness in me that had aged me. I'll never be young again, and I haven't passed the quarter-century mark.

Doctor Holmes took a blood specimen from my finger, and snorted. "You're healthy as a truck-horse," he said. "What makes you think you're anaemic?"

I didn't tell him the whole story, because I couldn't talk about it.

"Well," he said thoughtfully. "You

(Continued on page 112)



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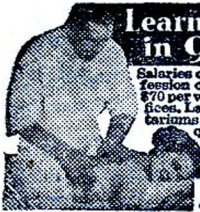


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FOCUS Only 10c

(Continued from page 111)
seem all right now, but you might come back twice a year for a check-up. . . ."

Then it could still happen! That's what haunts me even now. Terry refused to cancel our marriage, but there are nights when I lie by her side, listening to the beat of my own heart as the blood courses through it. Good, rich blood—but will it always be that? I pray to God that He will take my life at once if that blood ever gets thin—before I grow thirsty and turn on the peaceful sleeping woman at my side . . . tearing to ribbons of gory flesh the thing I love most in the world.

THE END

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This space is available for legitimate advertisers who are looking for profits at low cost. Write for rates to: Advertising Dept., Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York.

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Wear fine hose I send without cost with outfit while taking orders for amazing new hosiery. Replacement guaranteed against holes, snags and runs. Rush name and hose size. Wilknit, Desk 15-G, Greenfield, Ohio.

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Songwriters: Interesting Proposition. Write: PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-23, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

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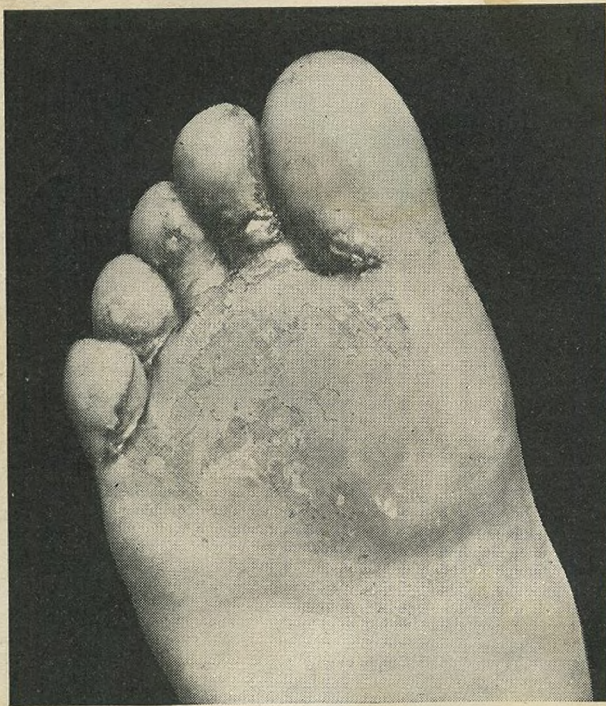
SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC. Free examination. Send poems to McNeil, Bachelor of Music, 4158-A South Van Ness, Los Angeles, Calif.

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BIG CASH DAILY. Cash bonuses regularly. Sell Sensational Year Guaranteed Shirts, Ties, Hose, Underwear. Outfit Free. Dept. P-7, Rosecliff-Quaker, 1239 Broadway, New York.



FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon
Don't Pay Until Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF ITS SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

HERE'S HOW TO TREAT IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS IMMEDIATELY

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



GORE PRODUCTS, INC. P. P.
815 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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of happy smokers who know
that *Chesterfield's* milder and
better taste *really satisfies*



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