

Sister Abigail's Collection

by Lloyd Arthur Esbach

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Rob Moreland had walked past the pawnshop countless times over the years and he knew it was there, of course; but ordinarily for him its dirty windows, screened by a heavy steel latticework, simply did not exist.

Except today.

It was the skull that caught his attention, impinging on the very edge of his perception. He halted, faced the window and peered through the dinginess. He moved closer for a better view. Unusual. A time-browned human skull skillfully encrusted with carefully fit-ting fragments of polished turquoise. Mexican, probably, and centuries old. Or possibly Mayan. Amazing, the skill of the primitive lapidaries; and strange to find this, a museum piece, in a pawn-shop window.

He appreciated good gem work. Gem polishing and silver smithing — jewelry making — was his hobby.

He half turned away — spun back, staring. As he gazed, it seemed as though a hand had clutched his throat, cutting off his breath. His eyes widened in disbelief. It — couldn't be!

There on a strip of black felt amid a disordered spread of all sorts of jewelry was a beautiful oval pendant of pierced silver about three inches long. Set in its center was a large opal, flashing its vari-colored beauty even through the smudged glass, encircled by small, evenly spaced cabochons of alternating bright green and lavender jade. Moreland stared at the pendant with total incredulity. It was beautiful — and he knew every stone, every construction detail — for he had made it himself — but it simply could not be there! Eight months ago he had buried his wife — and that pendant, her favorite jewel, on a Sterling chain and resting on her breast, had been buried with her.

With features set in grim lines Rob Moreland entered the pawnshop, pausing momentarily inside the door. With a single glance he took in the crowded confusion of merchandise covering walls and filling cases, then strode up to the store's single occupant, a short, heavy, dark-haired man standing behind a counter.

“That opal pendant in the window — where did it come from?”

Heavy brows lowered and the professional smile vanished. “That's information we never give out. Are you interested — ?”

“Mister, that happens to be stolen goods.” Moreland's tones were icy. “And

don't tell me I'm wrong. I *made* that piece and there's not another like it in existence."

The pawnbroker forced a smile. "My friend, you must be wrong. The lady who brought it in is known to us — and she wouldn't be the kind —"

"Get it out of the window," Moreland cut in. "Engraved on the back you'll find the words, 'For Ann — with all my love — Rob.'"

The man hesitated on the verge of protesting, then shrugged, opened the little door leading into the window and slid inside. Moreland's thoughts raced. What was his next move? If he called the police what could he say? The implication would be dishonesty on the part of someone at the funeral home, the most respected in the city, and he really had no proof. One thing was certain. No matter what developed, he wouldn't leave the piece here. He'd buy it if he had to — but he'd insist on getting the name and address of the woman who had brought it to the pawnshop. She must be the key. And he *had* to learn the answer to this impossible affair.

The short man reappeared, his gaze fixed on the pendant cradled in one heavy hand. He nodded grudgingly. "That's what it says," then added defensively, "but that doesn't prove it was stolen." He changed the subject. "You do nice work, my friend."

Moreland's eyes narrowed and he spoke slowly, enunciating every word. "Mister, that pendant was buried with my wife in Pleasant View Memorial Park eight months ago!"

The pawnbroker gasped, his eyes widening. Carefully he placed the jewel on a square of black velvet on the countertop. He pursed his heavy lips, obviously weighing the situation, then finally spoke.

"My friend, I don't want any trouble. I don't know what this is all about — and I don't want to know. But first, who are you?"

Moreland produced a business card. "I'm a lawyer. So what's next?"

The pawnbroker grimaced, then nodded. "All I want is to get my investment back. The woman sold it outright — she always does — and I gave her a hundred. I've been asking three but you can have it for the hundred."

Moreland grinned sardonically. "I'll believe fifty. And I want the name and address of the woman. Otherwise I'll call the police. Probably should anyway."

Discussion followed; it ended with Rob Moreland leaving with the silver pendant, a signed receipt, and an address: Amelia Lowry, 818 Waverley — a tree-lined street in the oldest and most respected part of town.

As he continued on his interrupted way to his office, Moreland's mind was in a turmoil. The several blocks' walk did nothing to bring order to his thoughts. He greeted his secretary ab-sently and entered his private office, closing the door behind him.

He placed the opal-and-jade pendant on his desk and stared at it intently, as though to solve its secret by his con-centration. His thoughts moved back to the funeral, eight months ago. Tears blurred his vision as he again felt his loss — the end of almost thirty years of happy companionship. He visualized the last moments in the funeral home —saw again the pendant on Ann's breast, almost flamboyant in its vivid coloring, but her wish.

And then, sudden as a bell sounding he recalled Ann's cousin taking pic-tures — ghoulish, he had thought at the time. She had sent him a set of color prints; he remembered tossing them into a drawer. After a brief search he found the envelope and the picture that clearly showed the jewel. Sternly re-pressing any emotional reaction, he placed the single photograph in an en-velope and slid it into an inside jacket pocket. Over the intercom he spoke to his secretary.

“Miss Connell, get me Lane Stafford of the Stafford Funeral Home.”

“Yes, Mr. Moreland.”

In moments the phone rang. “Mr. Stafford — Attorney Moreland. Will you be free any time this morning? . . . Good. I'll be there within the hour.” He stood up, moved briskly into the outer office.

“Miss Connell,” he said, “I'll be gone for the rest of the day, and I may not be in tomorrow. So far as I know, there's nothing pressing, but if you need to reach me, I expect to be home after four.” He saw the curious look in her eyes but did nothing about it.

Outside, he retraced the twenty min-ute walk to his home. He'd need his car. Passing the pawnshop he could not re-sist another look at the turquoise-cov-ered skull, an involuntary “Damn you!” flashing to his mind.

The part-time maid had already ar-rived and was busy with her chores. Too big a place for one man, he thought, as he had done many times before. Some day he'd sell and move into a bachelor apartment.

He drove across town to the funeral home, a structure of genteel opulence, typical of all of its kind. An attendant opened his car door and ushered him into the hushed interior where he was greeted by the somberly-clad Stafford himself. As the mortician led the way into his office, he said in professionally subdued tones, “Our

paths haven't crossed in quite some time, Mr. Moreland. I trust that you have no need of my services."

Moreland shook his head impatiently. "No — but I do have a problem which I hope you can solve." After they were seated he drew out the photograph. "I suppose you'll recall my wife's funeral eight months ago. This picture was taken by her cousin — atrocious taste, I thought it." He indicated the pendant. "Remember the jewelry?"

Stafford frowned, obviously puzzled. "I do indeed remember."

"You may also remember that I made the piece; I do this as a hobby. This was the reason my wife valued it so highly." Without waiting for a response Moreland brought out the pendant and laid it on Stafford's desk.

"Less than two hours ago I found this in a pawnshop on Cumberland Street. It's the jewel I made which was supposedly buried with my wife. I'd appreciate an explanation."

Stafford gasped, his cloak of quiet dignity vanishing in a breath. "But — that's impossible! There — there's just no way that could have happened." In his agitation he stood up. "Do you realize what this means?"

Moreland nodded grimly. "I know very well what it means to you professionally. But there's the pendant."

The mortician dropped back into his chair, groping for words. "But — it's — it's impossible! You yourself — you drew the coverlet over your wife's face before we closed the casket. The floral blanket was placed on top — and after the pall-bearers, your friends, carried the bier to the hearse they stood by while the flowers were brought out and placed around the coffin. Then they went to their cars."

Again he stood up, suddenly remembering- "At the cemetery, I believe, you did not leave until the casket was lowered into the grave and the steel lid placed on the vault. Mr. Moreland — there just was no opportunity for anyone to open that casket!"

Rob Moreland nodded slowly. "I have to agree — but we still have the pendant."

Silently both men stared at the silver oval, the stillness broken only by the soft, all-pervading music in the background.

"Could it be," Stafford ventured hesitantly, "that someone made a copy of the piece without your knowledge? I mean during the years your wife wore it."

Moreland shook his head impatiently and exposed the engraved inscription. “Obviously it wouldn’t make sense for anyone else to reproduce those words, and besides, the opal is distinctive. No two are exactly alike. And I *know* I cut and polished that particular stone. There can be no question about it.” A sudden thought returned.

“Do you have anyone on your staff named Lowry?”

“Lowry? No — and I haven’t had as long as I can recall. Why?”

“That’s the name of the woman who sold the pendant to the pawnbroker.”

Eagerly Stafford seized the thought. “Then there’s your answer.”

Moreland rose to leave, a wry grimace on his face. “My answer to an im-possibility.”

As he drove away from the funeral home Moreland headed north to Pleasant View Memorial Park. It was absurd, he knew — grave robbers existed only in fiction and among archeologists — but he had to be sure. The park — nonetheless a cemetery — lay in the midst of a sweep of rolling hills, with second-growth forest as background and an expanse of well-kept farmland falling away from it to meet the horizon. The parklike fiction was sustained by an occasional fountain, well-trimmed hedges and randomly spaced trees, and with bronze grave markers flush with the thick turf, as carefully cut as a golf-course fairway.

He found the grave — and felt momentary embarrassment as he noted the smooth lawn covering it, only the marker indicating what lay beneath. He stood there in silent contemplation, aware of the inner emptiness that only time — much more time — could erase. He looked at the plate — Ann Moreland and the dates — and his own name beside hers, awaiting completion. He became aware of a caretaker working nearby and called out a greeting to break the somber spell.

As he drove back to town, no nearer an answer to his problem, he decided on a quick lunch, then a visit to Amelia Lowry.

Rob Moreland approached Number 818 Waverley Street with some uncertainty. He had no idea what to expect, nor had he any plan of approach. There was no phone listing for Amelia Lowry, nor any other Lowry for that matter; probably a visit without warning would be best anyway.

The Lowry house, of white clapboard with gray trim and a gray slate gable roof, was set well back from the street in the middle of a well-kept lawn, not differing greatly from its neighbors. Somewhat austere and somehow aloof, he thought — the latter impression probably suggested by the tightly drawn shades. A

closed-for-the-summer appearance.

He moved up a gray flagstone walk to a gray door flanked by two square white pillars supporting a narrow projecting roof. He grasped the weathered brass knocker, rapped sharply several times, then waited. After an interminable period he rapped again, more sharply. Finally after a third insistent rapping the door opened narrowly and a pair of faded blue eyes peered through the crack. As a precaution Moreland braced one foot firmly against the door, but a moment later it opened wider and a little old woman was framed against the dark interior.

“Oh,” she exclaimed in a high, querulous voice, “I don’t know you. I thought it was Henry who mows the lawn.” Moreland noticed that she was breathing rapidly, almost panting, perhaps indicating excitement or the result of hurrying. “Who are you and what do you want?”

Moreland held out a calling card. “I’m Robert Moreland, an attorney, and I’ve come to see you about some jewelry. Mr. Rothstein of the pawnshop gave me your name. You are Amelia Lowry?”

“Y-yes,” she answered uncertainly. “Mr. Rothstein? I suppose if he sent you it’s all right.” She hesitated, wavering. “Sister Abigail says I should never let strangers come into the house.” She looked at him intently through silver-rimmed glasses, then inspected his card. “A lawyer, you say? But they’re mostly rascals. Are you a rascal?”

Moreland smiled ingratiatingly. “I hope not. I try to be honest. May I come in? It’s really quite important.”

While Amelia Lowry thought things over he got a quick impression of a figure out of the eighteen-nineties. Her dress was gray, of fine-spun cotton he judged, long-sleeved, full cut, with a narrow waist, the skirt reaching to the tops of her black shoes. Gray lace, supported by stays, completely covered her neck. Her face, finely featured, was deeply lined with wrinkles and was topped by thin, gray-white hair gathered in a small coil on the top of her head.

She made up her mind, opening the door and stepping aside. “I suppose it’s all right. We never get company, you know. Not since father went away. We’ll go into the parlor.”

As Moreland followed the slowly moving and faintly wheezing figure through the shadowed hallway, he became aware of the mustiness and chill that permeated the place. Outside, it was a warm summer day. Within, the air was damp and stale, as though too long confined and reused and forever barred from sunshine. The mustiness, he thought, of a cellar with moist walls and an earthen floor.

No wonder the poor creature was short of breath.

The corridor was thickly carpeted, deadening sound. He followed the woman past two doorways, tightly closed, and through a third which she opened. The room was almost as dark as the hallway, the light of two windows kept out by heavy, tightly drawn drapes. His eyes had grown somewhat accustomed to the gloom and he was able to find the chair Amelia Lowry indicated.

“I don’t need much light,” she said half apologetically, “but I guess you’ll appreciate a little more.” She opened a drawer in a small square table beside his chair, drew out a box of matches and lit a kerosene lamp on the table top. Seating herself she said, “We used to have electricity but after Aunt Rebecca’s house burned from the wiring we had it taken out.

“Now what have you in mind?”

Moreland’s fascinated gaze had been circling the room. It was crowded with antiques, including companions to the horsehair seat on which he sat. Now he fixed his eyes on Amelia Lowry.

“Miss Lowry, I’m simply seeking information.” He brought out the silver pendant. “I bought this from Mr. Rothstein, and I *must* find out where it came from.”

The faded blue eyes glanced at the jewel, then a quick smile wreathed the pale lips, emphasizing the parchment-like texture of her face.

“Oh, yes — that is one of the last pieces I sold to Mr. Rothstein. It’s from Sister Abigail’s collection. You see — when we run low in funds I sell a piece or two. We must live, you know. I have her permission.”

“But — where does your sister get the things?” Moreland persisted. “Where did she get this?”

Amelia Lowry shook her head regretfully. “I can’t say — she never tells me — not that I want to know. But she travels a lot. All over the world. And she brings back things for her collection. Father started it many years ago.” She glanced from side to side, then leaned forward with a show of secrecy. “I don’t like some of her things, opals for instance. They are bad luck and she should know it. That’s why I got rid of that piece.” She added with a trace of pride, “I always felt I had better taste than Abigail.”

Moreland frowned. This was no help at all. Returning the pendant to his pocket he asked impatiently, “Is your sister here — may I talk with her?”

She cocked her head to one side as though listening. “No — she’s not here just now. She comes and goes. She travels a lot. She always was one for traveling.

Traveled with father even when she was a little girl. I never wanted to.”

“When can I talk with your sister? Can she get in touch with me? I must find out how she got that pendant!”

Amelia Lowry stood up, spoke as though brushing his question aside. “I’ll tell her what you said. She’ll find you.” A suddenly gleeful, almost impish expression transfixed the old face. As suddenly Moreland sensed the truth, and in spite of himself he felt a chill that was not induced by the musty damp of the room. There was senility here, but there was also a wilder in-sanity.

“Would you want to see Sister Abigail’s collection?”

Better humor her and leave.

“If you wish,” he said, “and then I must go.”

Amelia Lowry drew a deep breath and started for the doorway, then glanced back. “You bring the lamp.”

Holding the flickering, now slightly smoking lamp aloft, Moreland followed to a room at the end of the hall. As the door swung noisily open on dry hinges, his guide reached for the lamp.

“I’ll take it in so you can see. I’m sorry,” she added, “but you won’t be able to go in. I can because I know how. Sister Abigail fixed it like this — doors and windows. Burglars, you know,” she added brightly, bobbing her gray top-knot. She moved slowly into the room.

As the weak light penetrated the darkness, casting grotesquely moving shadows, Rob Moreland caught his breath and his heart raced, his mind refusing to accept the testimony of his eyes. The room was lined with shelves and filled with tables — and all over-flowed with an incredible assortment of jewelry and artifacts, like the plunder of the world’s museums or a pirate’s treasure. The dim glow was cast back by cups and armlets and chains of smoldering yellow gold. There was the flash of innumerable gems, kaleidoscopic in color and brilliance. He saw carved Chinese jade — a gold headdress that could only have come from an Egyptian tomb — ropes of pearls. And all in chaotic disorder. An utterly impossible display in an impossible place.

Moreland took an involuntary step forward — and struck an unseen barrier, an invisible wall as solid as the oak door itself. And suddenly he shivered.

This must be hallucination. This was the twentieth century, in a city where he’d lived all his life. On a street where dogs barked and children played and bacon fried in the morning. But he had to get out of here!

“Thank you, Miss Lowry,” he said in a voice that sounded strange in his ears. “A remarkable collection. But I must be going. I can find my way out.” Turn-ing, carefully controlling every step, denying the urge to run, he moved through the dark hallway, opened the door and stepped out into a world of sanity and warm sunlight. Quietly he closed the door behind him. Only then, he realized, did he start breathing again.

The rest of that incredible day passed without incident. Rob Moreland drove into the country, trying not to think of his visit to Amelia Lowry, not daring to consider the implications of that treasure room, particularly in light of the jewel in his jacket pocket. It was a beautiful day for a drive. The blue sky with an occasional wisp of cloud, the green fields, placid cows browsing in meadows — the sights and sounds and odors of the country — had a soothing effect, freeing his mind of the pressures of all that had happened.

Reaching home about four o’clock, he called his office to learn that nothing had come up which needed his imme-diate attention. Then, feeling he could survey the day with some degree of de-tachment, he got out a writing pad and pen, slumped into a reclining chair in his library-den and with his lawyer’s mind ran through the day, making notes.

When he had finished he read what he had written. Problems? Plenty. An-swers? None. Except that things were happening which had no natural expla-nation. Especially that utterly unbe-lievable collection, and that doorway through which he couldn’t pass. He glanced at his watch. Krebs might still be in. He dialled a number — Marvin Krebs, Private Investigator.

“Marv? Moreland. I have a little job for you. Should be no trouble — I’d do it myself but I’d rather pay for the leg-work. I want everything I can get on a Lowry family. L-o-w-r-y. Start with Amelia Lowry, 818 Waverley. . . . Yes, they’re local. Father, mother, siblings. Relatives — history. You know what I’m looking for. I’m particularly inter-ested in Abigail Lowry. Got it? Get back to me as soon as you can — here at home or at the office.”

He left his den and descended to his basement workshop, taking the pen-dant with him. Selecting a masculine-looking stainless steel chain from among a dozen reels, he cut off a length and prepared it to receive the opal-and-jade pendant. He’d wear it himself, until this mystery was resolved — under his shirt, of course. He wasn’t risking pos-sible loss.

For the rest of the day he followed his usual routine — a shower, reading, an early dinner at a favorite restaurant — not greatly enjoyed — more reading, on which he couldn’t concentrate; a bit of television which he found boring, then bed. A restless and seemingly end-less night followed.

About eleven the next morning Mar-vin Krebs appeared at Moreland's office. A little man, quiet, self-effacing, expert in his line.

"No difficulty whatever, Mr. Moreland." He handed him a typewritten report, several pages in length. "Amelia Lowry is the last of her direct line. There's one surviving relative, a distant cousin living in Sellersville. Amelia's father was a rather prominent archeologist who died in the nineteen fifties, probably old age. Amelia had a twin sister named Abigail who died of a heart attack ten years ago. You said you were especially interested in Abigail, but that's the only one I could find. But it's all there in the report. Anything else, Mr. Moreland?"

Mechanically the attorney answered, "No, Marv — that's all. Give your bill to Miss Connell."

Alone, Moreland stared blankly into vacancy. The words kept echoing in his ears: "Amelia had a twin sister named Abigail. . . died of a heart attack ten years ago."

He read the report. Krebs as always had been thorough. Every detail was there. Ancestors. Dates of births and deaths. Interment of the last three deceased in Pleasant View. Only one new item of information that Krebs hadn't told him — Abigail had also been an archeologist, had been Dr. Lowry's assistant and had continued in the field until her death.

But what did this contribute to the solution of his problem? Nothing — only more unanswered questions. He felt the unfamiliar weight of the pendant on his chest and thought savagely, "Why — *why* did I stop to look at that double-damned skull!" He'd be wise to forget the whole matter — but he couldn't. He'd have no peace of mind until he had the answer.

A few legal matters — some letters to dictate — these filled Moreland's morning. When the secretary left for lunch he told her he'd be out for the afternoon. He had made a decision. Distasteful though it was, he'd have to make a second visit to Amelia Lowry.

After lunch he drove to the old house on Waverley Street. He had to bang repeatedly before an answer came. This time he did not receive even the semi-welcome of his first call. The door opened about six inches; and there was obvious hostility in the little gray woman's thin voice.

"So it's you again! Abigail told me you'd be back — and I wasn't to let you in under any conditions. I shouldn't have let you in yesterday. Go away!"

Moreland forced a smile. "I'll go in a few moments, Miss Lowry. I just want to know why you insist on saying that your collection belongs to your sister Abigail — and that she continues to speak to you. You know, as I know, that she died ten

years ago.”

The woman’s reaction was startling. She fell back as sharply as though he had struck her. Her pallid face became even more parchment-like, and she gri-maced with utter fury.

“Don’t you *dare* say that! She’s more alive than you are! And it *is* her col-lection — she adds to it constantly. Why must you come here to make trouble?” Her voice grew shrill and her breath came in great gasps. “She doesn’t harm anyone. These things are buried in the ground and she finds them. That’s what archeologists do. Why did you come? Go -go-”

The worlds trailed off and an expres-sion of sharp pain contorted Amelia Lowry’s face. Her hands fluttered to her breast — and abruptly she collapsed in a gray heap.

In consternation Moreland froze. A heart attack! He should have known with her troubled breathing. He had triggered this. He looked about wildly — saw a neighbor a half block away brooming her walk.

Cupping his hands he shouted, “Call an ambulance! Miss Lowry has had an attack!” He saw the woman hurry into her house, then he bent over the pa-thetic figure, pressing his ear to her breast. He detected a heart-beat, faint and irregular. Mouth-to-mouth resus-citation — it was all he could do. His fault — his fault! When the ambulance arrived there still was life in the frail body.

As the medics drove away with Amelia Lowry, Moreland made sure that the door was locked and followed in his own car. At the hospital he signed the woman in, since there was no one else to do so. To his relief he learned that she had been there before with a car-diac problem, so her physician was known. Assured that everything pos-sible was being done, he drove to Police Headquarters and reported what had happened, minimizing his own part in the incident.

Deeply troubled, Rob Moreland re-turned to the Good Samaritan Hospital and inquired about her condition. He was able to speak with her physician. She was in the intensive care section, of course, and she was conscious. She was in stable condition, but her ad-vanced years and congenital heart trou-ble made recovery very unlikely. When he asked to see her he was told only immediate family was permitted in in-tensive care. He told them there was no family and he was her attorney, and reluctantly permission for a brief visit was granted, with the admonition that he avoid any excitement.

He found the little gray woman awake, but very weak, equipped with all the wiring and tubing associated with emergency cardiac care. He spoke quiet words of regret, and apparently her earlier wrath had dissipated for she smiled faintly and weakly shook her head. He gained the impression that she wanted to speak, so he

leaned over with an ear close to her mouth.

Her words came in a faint whisper.

“Sister Abigail tells me — I’ll soon join her. We’ll be — closer than ever. And we’ve decided — what to do — with — the collection.”

“Why not leave it to the Cumberland Museum in memory of your father?” Moreland suggested. “And you still have one living relative, you know — Greta Lowry.”

Her reply came haltingly. “The mu-seum — for some larger things — the things that were father’s. But other things — we wouldn’t want to — give up. The house — to Greta. You’re a law-yer. Would you write — a will?”

“Of course.” Moreland drew a note pad from an inner pocket. “Now you relax. It won’t take long.”

The language was as familiar as the back of his hand. He wrote rapidly, keeping it simple. The house and fur-nishings with the land to the distant cousin. The contents of the artifact room at the rear of the first floor, “con-sisting of archeological specimens and gems, as designated by my attorney, Robert Moreland, to the Cumberland Museum as a memorial to my father, Jonathan Lowry.” There was more, to make everything clear, but it was con-fined to the bare essentials.

Slowly he read it to Amelia Lowry, asking if she understood and approved. She nodded. Moreland then rang for a nurse and when she responded ex-plained what was wanted. She left and returned immediately with an associ-ate. Very shakily and faintly, assisted by a nurse, Amelia Lowry signed the impromptu will and the nurses wit-nessed the signature. Moments later, with the document in an inner pocket, after words of encouragement, and after leaving his home address and phone number, Moreland headed for the park-ing lot.

He had barely reached his den, drop-ping into the desk chair, when Amelia Lowry’s physician phoned to tell him she had died. Mechanically he gave in-structions that her body be sent to the Stafford Funeral Home; as mechani-cally called his secretary with the di-rective that she notify Greta Lowry in Sellersville about her relative’s death, and that she notify Lane Stafford. He’d see him the next day to make the fu-neral arrangements.

As he cradled the phone Moreland wearily leaned back in his desk chair, scowling in self disgust. He certainly had made a complete mess of things today. He had brought on Amelia Lowry’s heart attack and death — no amount of rationalizing would change the fact. He had displayed the finesse of a gorilla. As he thought of the tirade which led up to the tragedy, one state-ment rang in his memory.

“These things were buried in the ground and she finds them. That’s what archeologists do.”

He fingered the pendant through his shirt. “Buried in the ground.” Found by a twin sister dead ten years! A ghostly grave robber. An archeologist plying her trade after her death! His frown deepened. The occult was one area about which he knew almost nothing, had no interest. There was little in his library that would shed light on the subject — probably the *Encyclopedia Britannica* was his best bet. Starting with “apparition” he began his re-search. He found little of interest until he reached “poltergeist.”

There were almost three pages of comment, the writer citing instances of various objects moving without appar-ent cause, of things from a second sto-rey room crashing to the floor in a room directly below. The reported occurrences were world wide. This brought to mind something he had read some-where. A well-known Methodist — or was it Episcopalian — bishop receiving communications from his dead son. The son supposedly had transmitted objects halfway around the world, had trans-ferred things from one closed drawer to another. Would this be called a pol-tergeist? But what matter a name!

One thing was evident. Now he’d never know the answer to mystery of the jewel that refused to remain buried. He was conscious of its weight against his chest. He could conjecture, but that was not knowledge. He thought of the invisible barrier that had blocked his entry into that incredible treasure room. Had it been real, and if so, had it van-ished with Amelia Lowry’s death? In any event, the local museum would get an amazing windfall bequest.

A sound overhead interrupted his thoughts, brought him stiffly erect. It was a dull, metallic thud, as though a heavy object had been dropped. It ap-peared to come from the rear of the sec-ond floor, a little used storage area. Instantly it was followed by a distinctly metallic clang.

He started to his feet, half crouching, the hair on his body bristling with in-stinctive dread. He stood erect — halted, waiting, scarcely breathing, listening for a repetition of the sound. It came with other noises of moving things. Stealthily he slid from behind his desk.

Then stopped.

He felt a sudden rush of frigid air, miasmatic, lingering, passing within inches of his face, As though something invisible had brushed against him. A hint of motion in the corner of his eye drew his unwinking gaze to a hazy something forming above his desk. He held his breath, his body rigid.

It solidified — became the familiar age-browned human skull encrusted with turquoise. It dropped with a dull thud to the desk top.

The cold touched him, drawing a suppressed cry to his lips, sending an icicle of fear up his spine. And suddenly beside the skull materialized the opal-and-jade pendant on its chain, its pressure gone from his chest. Overhead the clanging and thudding sounds continued unabated. Rob Moreland's thoughts whirled insanely, bits and pieces tumbling over each other. Amelia Lowry saying, "We've decided what to do with the collection." That will — in his handwriting, witnessed— giving him disposal of the jewelry and artifacts. And dominating everything, pounding in his brain, the single thought, the certainty that at that very moment, piece by piece, his storage room was being filled with Sister Abigail's collection.