

THE CORRODING DEATH

By Wyatt Blassingame

In the lobby of that luxury mountain hotel, an epileptic child screamed his ghastly warning of ancient Bahil, that all who tried to leave must die. Alan Brooke knew the folly of trying to escape, for in the chill of the night an Evil trinity—Misery, Cruelty and the Burning Death!—had signed the register!



CHAPTER ONE

The Man Who Died

THE girl spoke slowly, and as she did a slight tremor shook her body. "This country," she said, "there's something unreal and awful about it."

Alan Brooke looked down at her and said nothing. He sensed the girl's high-strung tension, and though the scene did not effect him in this way he listened to anything that Talma Norris said.

She gestured with both hands at the country around them. They were standing at the edge of a canyon that dropped sheer for more than three hundred feet to a soft green carpet of treetops. Directly across from them, the opposite wall of the canyon blazed in the late sunlight like a gigantic opal, blue and emerald and blood red.

An eagle came over the canyon wall, hung suspended in the light, then turned, dropped like a dead weight, and was gone. To their right, a huge spring of water boiled crazily from the earth, ran swiftly along the slope, like a runner gaining speed for his jump, then hurtled out into space in vapor-hidden falls. From far below came the dull, whispered moaning of the water as it crashed.

"It's all so wild, so savage," the girl said. She turned. "And then this building here where it has no right to be."

Behind them, the country plunged upward to a crest sharp against the sky, and on this was the building: a huge thing of many colored stone, rounded turrets pointing at the sky, and long narrow windows smeared with blood by the late sunlight. "Where did it come from?" the girl asked. "How could it have been built here? Who built it?"

A look that was almost of fear came into her face. Her lips parted and her eyes seemed to start from their sockets.

It was the look on her face that made Brooke ask quickly, "What are you thinking about?"

She laughed nervously. "I'm being silly—but all at once it seemed that I could feel it, almost see it: something horrible that is going to happen!"

She put her hand on his arm, and her grin came more naturally. "But I've never been psychic before, so I don't imagine we have much to fear from my foreseeing the future."

"But we do," he said. "If we don't hurry back to the hotel something horrible is going to happen. I'm not going to have time before dinner for my customary number of martinis."

Halfway up the slope, he paused. He was breathing hard, and the pain was beginning in his chest. "We've got to rest a moment," he said. His face was white more with anger at himself than with exhaustion. But there was no need to lose his temper, he thought. He had to get used to this sort of thing, for he was almost as well as he ever would be.

The girl had stopped and was pressing her left hand to her right side. "I'm glad you rested," she said. "I've got a pain, a sharp one, all of a sudden." She saw the concern in his face. "It's nothing. A touch of indigestion probably."

He wondered if she were pretending, so that he wouldn't feel badly about his own weakness. The thought angered him. After a moment, when his breathing was more normal, he said, "Let's go on."

"The sun's gone," the girl said. "It's getting cold." She still had her hand pressed against her side, but when they started walking again, she removed it.

AFTER dinner, most of the resort's guests grouped in the lobby around the great open fire.

There were no lights near the fireplace, and the glow of the blaze struck with golden, wavering blades through the gloom. Faces seemed to appear and disappear in the light. Chairs seemed to waver, to bend with the alternate waves of light and darkness. The persons there had eaten well. Some of them still sipped from liqueur glasses. There was an atmosphere of comfort and luxury.

Outside, the night wind hunted at the turrets and at the corners of the building. It whispered in the darkness....

Clyde Mallory, manager and part owner of the Mountain India resort, was standing before the fire, legs spraddled apart, hands clasped behind his back. His shadow lay grotesque across the floor.

"The Government owned the property," he said. "No one had ever tried to claim it. There were sheer walls on every side, and no one had ever climbed up here. I was flying over, far off my route, when I spotted this building. That's how I got interested, and one thing led to another. But it

took me three months to get back and find a way up these cliffs. And here was this building, pretty much as it is now, though of course we've completely remodeled it, plumbing and such things. It must have been built about a hundred years ago. But who built it, or how, there's no telling. Indian labor must have been used, but the design is East Indian rather than American."

A woman said, "It is a great deal like the Taj Mahal. I thought of the Taj Mahal the first time I saw it."

In the gloom beyond the fire, Brooke was sitting with Talma Norris. He was paying no attention to the general conversation. When he was close to Talma, he paid little attention to anything but her. And then she said, "What's wrong with that Wingate brat?"

"They didn't pinch his head off when he was born," Brooke said. "Where is he?"

"There."

The child was standing at the edge of firelight and shadow. He was thin and sulky-faced, spoiled by an arrogant mother who had more money than was good for her. Generally he went around voicing his opinion of his own importance in a high, shrill voice that made one want to kick him. But now he was standing strangely silent, his body as rigid as though an electric current flowed through it.

He began to sway stiffly back and forth. A wave of firelight passed over his face and Brooke saw that his features were transformed almost beyond recognition. The eyes had rolled upward until only the whites showed. The lips were peeled back from the teeth, and muscles worked in the child's throat. Then sound came out, a kind of deep, moaning whisper.

Mrs. Wingate cried, "Archie! Archie, what...?"

"Hush!" the child said.

But it was not his voice at all. It was a deep, guttural sound torn from him with physical effort. And strangely no one in the room moved, not even Mrs. Wingate. It was as though the hand of terror was laid on each person, stilling him. They listened.

"I can tell," the child said in that voice that seemed ripped from his chest. "I can tell how this house was built—and of the curse upon it." The fire washed over his face again. It gleamed golden on the drops of saliva gathering around his mouth.

"I can tell of Nahid Namal, banished from his own country, who came here to hide, and erected this building, using the American Indian for labor. And I can tell of the guests he brought here to entertain him, beautiful women and young men and much wine. But the curse of Brahil was upon him, and though the curse could not touch inside his home, it could hold him there and all those who visited him. For no one could come to this place and leave again—alive."

LONG shudders ran through the boy. His mouth worked and saliva spilled down across his chin. Then the scream came, shocking because it was in the boy's voice again, high and terrible.

"And we too must stay, all of us—or die!" He was whirling, spinning, as though in the grip of an epileptic fit. Saliva spurted from his mouth. Then he fell face down. His teeth closed on his lower lip until the blood came with a rush.

The child screamed in sharp pain. He leaped wildly to his feet.

Mrs. Wingate and the resort doctor took him upstairs. The doctor said later it was undoubtedly an epileptic stroke of some kind. "Not at all uncommon," he said, though Mrs. Wingate swore the boy had never had a fit before. The doctor was a little drunk; he always was. He overrode her objections with a wave of his hand.

Downstairs in the lobby, H.P. Duncan, of Duncan and Company, Wholesalers, and numerous other Duncan enterprises in Denver and surrounding towns, was saying, "Well, it was a good story, and I hate to make a liar out of the little beast so soon, but I'm leaving early tomorrow. Business, you know. Never really get any vacation. A man has to keep his nose to the grindstone if he's going to get ahead these times...."

The first shock of what they had seen passed, and the general opinion of the persons gathered in the lobby was that they had always known the Wingate brat was crazy. Yet they were sorry this had happened, because now they would have to feel sorry for him, rather than want to kick him in the pants.

Outside, the night wind hunted at the turrets and about the dark cliffs and caverns. A warped moon crawled into a sky striped with moving clouds. An animal howled in the darkness.

Talma Norris said to Brooke, "I'm afraid, Alan. I know it's silly, and yet I'm afraid. Something is going to happen."

It happened the next morning when H.P. Duncan, of the various Duncan enterprises, was leaving. There was an electrically operated elevator which took men and animals from the point where the trail became impassable to the top of the plateau. Preceded by servants carrying his baggage, Duncan stepped aboard this elevator.

Far below them, there was a stirring among the trees that carpeted the canyon bottom. An oddly shaped cloud of smoke arose and floated upward. The wind, that always blew down the canyon, caught it. The smoke hurtled straight toward the elevator, then thinned suddenly, and was gone into the sunlight.

Those of the guests and servants who were close by and happened to be watching Duncan saw a curious thing.

He took a single backward step as though an invisible hand had struck him in the chest. He raised one hand. Suddenly, while he was still on his feet, there was a great black hole in his chest, and a rush of black smoke whirled outward from this hole.

Duncan screamed in furious, unbearable agony. He reeled, missed going over the side of the elevator by inches, staggered backward, and fell. Thick smoke was still coiling upward from him. He pawed at the hole in his chest, and the fringes of this hole bubbled like a boiling kettle of fat. Cloth and flesh disappeared. With unbelievable rapidity, as though consumed by some titanic inner fire, his body charred into ashes.

Within three minutes, his whole torso and hands, part of his face, part of his legs, were gone. The smoke, which had oozed from him, ceased.

His corpse was little more than a pile of ashes.

Toast of the Dead

DR. BEDLOW, the resort doctor, was drunk. "I don't believe it," he said. "Not only that, but it didn't happen. It couldn't happen the way you tell it. Somebody poured a bucket of acid on him. That's the way it was. They folded him up and put him in a vat of acid."

"I saw it," Alan Brooke said. "All within three minutes, there on the elevator. And not a thing touched him but the smoke that drifted up from below—though I believe that had all vanished before it reached the elevator. Anyway, there were two porters on the elevator with him. If the smoke touched him, it touched them also, and they weren't hurt."

Dr. Bedlow had another drink. "You're lying," he said. "It couldn't have been that way." He took another drink, a very large one. "At least," he said, "I hope it couldn't."

Brooke found the resort detective talking with Clyde Mallory and the assistant manager. "Something killed him," the detective was saying. "You can't argue out of that. And I don't know what it was."

The assistant manager said, "We've got to have the state law, Clyde. There's no way around it."

They looked at one another, the same thought in every man's eyes. They knew what Mallory was going to say, for they had been over this before. But Alan Brooke had not heard.

Clyde Mallory said, "Who's going for the law?"

The house detective and the two managers looked at one another. None of them spoke.

"Why don't you phone?" Brooke asked. "You've got a private line that hooks up with a regular wire a few miles from here, haven't you?"

Mallory wet his lips. "We had. But something happened. It's out of commission."

"Somebody's got to go," the detective said.

The assistant manager took a long breath. "All right," he said. "Something happened to Mr. Duncan. But there is no sense in tying that up with an epileptic brat's squalling. I'll go." The muscles had pulled hard in his face. He was keeping his mouth tight shut so that his lips would not tremble. He swallowed, said, "But just in case there is somebody who's trying to keep us all up here, somebody who's watching that elevator, I'm

CHAPTER TWO

going to leave after dark, without telling anybody just when."

"That's okay," Clyde Mallory said.

The detective said, "How could it be a person? Nobody touched Mr. Duncan—just smoke. How could. . .?"

"Shut up!" the assistant manager said.

No one saw him that night when he went down the elevator. But just before midnight, Alan Brooke heard the queer rumbling sound he had heard in the morning as the smoke rose from the valley. He was talking with Talma when he heard it, and together they ran out to the front porch of the resort.

Far below them they could see a luminous cloud of yellow smoke rising out of the darkness. It drifted upward in its queer, elongated shape. The wind caught it and it rushed toward the spot where the elevator stood. But it thinned as it came and the color went out of it. It vanished into the night.

A man began to scream, one horrible, high-pitched, unearthly cry after another. Then the cries choked off and were gone.

Alan Brooke pushed Talma back toward the hotel door. "Get inside! Stay there!" Then he ran.

He went down the long steps with one leap. There was a fifteen foot fish pool in his way, and he jumped it, never breaking his stride. His movement had the perfect poise and grace of a trained acrobat. But before he had gone thirty yards he was staggering. The muscles in his chest caught fire. He slowed to a walk, stumbling, scarcely able to breathe, cursing himself for his weakness. Mallory and one or two of the guests passed him before he could reach the elevator.

Under the white spot of a flashlight lay the remnants of what had been the assistant manager. Most of his body was burned away, as though some raging fire had blazed inside him and eaten its way out.

THEY gathered in the lobby. Lights blazed now so that the fire seemed to have dimmed and died low. In the merciless glare of the overhead lights, the character of each man and woman was cut upon his face.

The guests were grouped around the fire. The resort employees—porters and chambermaids and cooks—stood back near the walls of

the big room, as though even for death they must wait until after the wealthy had been served.

"It seems absurd," Henry Frank was saying. "The child simply had an epileptic fit. We know that. In this day and age, nobody can possibly believe in superstitious curses." He was a little, meek-faced man, and he spoke very pompously, as though he found it necessary to convince them, and himself, that he was not afraid.

John Darber said, "You've heard of folks who dreamed things, and they came true. Even doctors admit some persons are psychic. Maybe the kid wasn't having an epileptic fit; his mother said he never had one before. Maybe it was...."

"Nonsense!" Henry Frank said.

A sour voice said, "Yeah? The trouble with the brat was that he was filled with the spirit of Brahil—whoever that may be. And if you want to go back in the doctor's office, you'll see evidence that there's a curse on us. Anybody who doesn't believe that, can just walk down to the elevator."

A woman cried out sharply, and was silent. Harrison Snyder yelled. "Shut up, you fool!" He was a big, hawk-faced man. But now his mouth was trembling, and there was fear in his eyes.

The sour-voiced man said, "Ha! Look at you—all of you! Afraid just because you're going to be killed." He moved until he was the center of the group. From where Alan Brooke and Talma stood they could see him clearly.

Sam Lester had been handsome once—six feet tall and had weighed a hundred and eighty—but long years in a tubercular sanatorium, operation after operation, had taken its toll. Now, after a thoracoplastic operation had removed his ribs on one side, he was little more than a skeleton. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes deep in his head, his teeth gone. He stood always tilted to one side because of the missing ribs. He weighed ninety-five pounds.

He leered at the group around him. "I've been dying for years," he said. "Dying for nine years, and I'm not but twenty-nine now. What the hell? I can take it. But look at all of you."

"Shut up!" Harrison Snyder yelled again. He took a step forward, his big fist clinched, his face white with fear and anger. But Alan Brooke stepped forward before he could reach Lester, and caught his arm.

A woman in the group began to sob. Henry Frank said, "You're right, Mr. Lester. We have all

grown childishly frightened. We can't let this thing get the best of us."

"But I've got to leave soon," John Darber was saying. "I've got to leave soon! And suppose...." He stopped, and there was no sound except the woman's sobbing.

From the door of his office Clyde Mallory, manager and part owner of the resort, was watching them. "My first guests," he was thinking. "My first guests—and my last. I don't think I'll have to worry about any more coming here after these leave—if they leave."

In his office Dr. Thomas Grew sat and grinned at the sheet-covered table. He was very drunk, and there was a bottle of liquor on the floor beside him. He reached down and lifted the bottle and held it forehead high. "To my best patients, the dead ones," he said aloud. "They never cause any trouble—and I never collect fees anyway." He took a long drink, shuddered slightly, and put the bottle on the floor again.

ALAN BROOKE and Talma had gone outside. They stood close together, looking down the slope of the plateau into darkness. A cold wind plucked at them. There was a bent yellow moon in the sky, but it was like a picture of a moon hung against a dark curtain and gave no light.

"I keep thinking of the Wingate child's face," Talma said. "When he spoke, it was twisted, contorted, as though something . . . And the voice wasn't his voice at all."

"I can't believe that sort of stuff," Brooke said. "Coincidence, luck perhaps. I've seen a lot of strange things happen that way. But ancient curses—I can't go for them."

"Then what. . .?"

"I don't know. Somebody evidently wants to keep all of us here."

"But why? And how did they kill. . .?"

"I don't know."

He turned and took both her hands in his. "There's no reason for us to be afraid," he said. "As long as you are here, I don't want to leave. And you're in no hurry."

"No, Alan. With you here...."

It was later, when they started back toward the hotel, that the girl pressed her hand suddenly

to her right side. "What is it?" Brooke asked. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. That pain again. It's sharp." She tried to laugh. "They say fear can cause indigestion, don't they."

At her door, he kissed her, and went on down the hall to his own room. For a long while he stood in front of his window. He could hear the prowling wind overhead, and see the painted, lifeless face of the moon. Minutes passed as he stared up at it.

Life had taken some strange twists for Alan Brooke these last six months. Half a year before, he had been a Hollywood stunt man, crashing airplanes, diving from high bridges, dropping from airplanes to moving automobiles, doing tricks that the stars themselves were afraid to do. And then there was the stunt which went wrong, because a glamour girl had dropped her lipstick on the floor of an automobile, and Brooke had stepped on it and slipped as he was leaping to safety after running the car off a cliff. He had fractured six ribs, and one of them had punctured a lung.

The doctors had said he couldn't live. Only his perfect physical condition had saved him. But that punctured lung would never be of much use again. His muscles were as tough as ever; he could move with the oiled precision of a machine—but he could endure only a few seconds of vigorous exertion. Then his lungs would give out.

Life had doomed him to a slow, careful pace; and for a man with Alan Brooke's thirst for adventure and danger it was almost maddening. It was as though he were already dead, he sometimes thought; already rotting.

Then he had come to this resort, and met Talma Norris.

And two men had died mysteriously.

He undressed and turned out his light, but he could not sleep. His steel-tempered muscles would not lie quiet. He had trained them for violent, deadly action, and for months now they had had nothing but childish exercise.

He got out of bed and dressed quietly in the dark. He put a flashlight in one pocket of his leather jacket, a .38 revolver in the other. There was a back stairway, and he went down it silently, out into the night. He turned down the slope of the plateau toward the elevator....

THE bent yellow moon hung in the sky, but the earth was dark. Only a few lighted windows splotched the hotel. There was no sound except the whisper of the wind. The cold of high altitude struck through his clothing.

He moved quietly, keeping in the densest of the shadows. When he was within thirty feet of the elevator, he crouched against a rock and waited. The cold gnawed at him. The water moaned faintly where it crashed far below. The wind whispered. That was all. He moved away from the rock and toward the elevator.

It was a huge contrivance, only partially closed in. It loomed up, a dark, shapeless blot against the blue-black sky. He took another step toward it, and stopped.

There was something cold around his heart. His whole body was cold, and he found that his muscles, which had always been steel-sure, were trembling. All at once, he realized that he was afraid.

All his life, Alan Brooke had been attracted by danger. He had followed dangerous professions by preference. He had come close to death many times, and it had given him kind of a hot, drunken pleasure. But that had been when he dealt with dangers that he understood. Now he was close to something that struck invisibly and without warning. His heart pounded hard, yet his body was cold. He had an almost irresistible impulse to whirl and run back toward the hotel.

He cursed under his breath. He hunched his shoulders and made his muscles steady. Then he stepped forward and onto the elevator. His eyes were tight in their sockets, straining to see down into the darkness from which that yellow cloud of smoke had appeared earlier.

Nothing happened.

He took the flashlight from his pocket, cupping the head of it with one hand so that the beam was shaded, and began to search the elevator. There was nothing unusual about it, scarred in places, rough and strong. Then he noticed the two rusty brown spots on the steel side. It was close to this side, he remembered, that H.P. Duncan had suddenly staggered and cried out, and died.

He touched the spots with his finger, but they seemed only rusty splotches. He leaned close to them and smelled.

On the slope of the plateau there was a clicking sound, as a small rock began to roll

downhill. The noise was magnified by the stillness, hurled against Brooke's taut eardrums. He whirled, snapping off his light, diving from the elevator. A startled cat could not have moved faster.

Behind him, something made a light, popping sound.

He struck the ground with his body arched, hands breaking his fall, sending him spinning sideways. The whole movement was without jolt or sound. Then he lay motionless, the .38 ready in his right hand. The quiet of the night came down like a blanket over him.

For five minutes he waited, and there was nothing. He stood up then, and began to go carefully up the hillside toward the hotel. Once he stopped to let his breathing grow normal again.

Beyond the crest of the plateau, the land was rugged, filled with huge rocks, but comparatively level. It stretched for a half mile or so in each direction before the sheer cliffs hemmed it in. The hotel sprawled over only a small portion of this. Nearly all the lights were out in the building now.

The yellow moon was turning grey. There was a grey murk in the east where the sun soon would rise.

Alan Brooke circled the hotel toward the rear doorway from which he had come. He was within ten yards of that door when it opened. Light spilled out.

In the light, Brooke saw the twisted, scrawny body, the hideous face of Sam Lester. The consumptive passed through, into the hotel, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Mail Came

BEFORE opening the Mountain India resort, Clyde Mallory had arranged to have mail flown in once a week. A plane could not land on the rugged plateau, but it could fly over and drop the mail on small parachutes. The morning after the assistant manager's death, the plane circled, dropped its small flower-like chutes, and vanished into the west again.

A porter gathered the mail and brought it to the desk clerk who began to sort it out. "They'll find plenty beside good news today," the clerk said, "when they look in their boxes."

"What do you mean?" the porter asked.

"Some little slips like these," the clerk said. "Mr. Mallory has raised the rates on every room. Fifty bucks a day is the minimum now. Mrs. Wingate'll owe one-fifty a day for her rooms. Will she raise a stink!"

The porter said, "Well, I'll be damned! You mean just 'cause they can't get away...?"

"Mr. Mallory said the business was ruined. He said he might as well get what he can while he's about it."

"Yeah," the porter said. He wet his lips. "A fat lot of good it'll do him, if he has to spend the rest of his life up here."

The porter and the clerk looked at one another, each with the same question in his eyes. The clerk said, "You think really—you believe that kid. . .?"

"I don't think nothing," the porter said. "Except I damn sure ain't going to be the next person who tries to leave."

The clerk bent suddenly and put both hands over his face. He was thinking of the body of the assistant manager as he had seen it last night, a boiling gray mass of flesh and bones burned into smoking ashes within three minutes.

A half hour later, Harrison Snyder was pacing back and forth across his room. He held a letter crumpled tight in his right fist. His face was drawn and sweat stood in beads across his forehead. Henry Frank sat watching him, a worried frown on his meek face.

"What are we going to do?" Frank asked.

The big man whirled on him. "What are we going to do?" he shouted. "Why, my God! Even you should know what we've got to do! We've got to get back there and put those mergers through within the next two days. If we don't, we're ruined! Wiped out!"

"Then you are going?" Henry Frank asked. "You're going to take the chance?"

Snyder's face went bloodless. Abject terror and misery came into his eyes. He stumbled so that he half fell against the wall. He leaned there, trembling.

"I can't believe in anything like a curse," Henry Frank said, rubbing his hands together nervously. "Maybe what happened was an accident of some kind. Maybe if you went now...."

Snyder straightened. "Listen, you go back, Henry. You've got as much money in this business as I have. You put more in it to start with. You can put the deal through. After all, I need to stay here. My health is shot. You know what the doctor told me."

The little man waited a long time before he answered. His voice was flat and toneless. "I can't do it," he said. "I—I don't believe in any curse, but I'm afraid. I admit it. I'm afraid. You've always been the strong man in the firm, Harrison. You go back and save it."

Harrison Snyder dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Little whimpering sounds came between his fingers. "No. No. No," he whispered. "I won't do it." And then in almost a scream, "A million dollar business! Gone!"

Contempt showed in Henry Frank's face. "And you always pretending to be the strong man!" he sneered. "I'm afraid—but at least I don't howl about it."

THE man who had signed the hotel register as John Darber tried to concentrate on the whiskey bottle upon the table.

Not more than three good drinks were gone from the bottle, yet John Darber appeared to have trouble seeing it. He was not customarily a drinking man; in fact, he had been drunk only once before in his life, thirty-four years ago, when he was nineteen.

He reached out, but his hand missed the bottle. The damn thing was going round and round and he had to wait and catch it as it came by. Finally he grabbed it, and poured liquor into a glass, spilling part of it. It spread out in an amber pool upon the table. In the pool he saw Peaches O'Neil's face.

Peaches had danced third from the left in the *Follies*. She had often had her picture taken, wearing a muff, or a veil, or a string of beads, for magazines like *Broadway Fun*. It seemed a miracle that John Darber had ever met her. It happened at the Rotary Convention.

John Darber had been a clerk in the First National Bank, fifty-three years old, married, with two children. But Peaches had seemed to like him. She had sat in his lap, though she had

moved away when he grew too amorous. She was really a good girl, she said, and anyway, he had to show first that he truly liked her. It took a lot of money to show that. He couldn't remember when and how he had taken that first five thousand dollars. He just realized suddenly that the bank examiner was coming, and he would be caught.

And then he had the chance to steal the ninety thousand. Of course the bank would know who had taken it, but he would have about twenty-four hours start. And Peaches said she would go with him, live with him in Europe or Mexico or the South Seas, wherever he chose, because she loved him so much. So he had taken the money.

He had given her ten thousand dollars, and she was to arrange his escape from the country while he hid at the Mountain India resort under the assumed name of John Darber. She had wanted to keep all the money, but somehow he didn't trust her very much, even though she did swear she loved him. He had hidden most of the money, hidden it well, so that it would take a long time to find, even if a person had some idea about where to look. And now—

He stared at the letter. One end of it was soaking up the spilled whiskey. He tried to read it again, but the print was blurred. Anyway, he knew what it said. Peaches had arranged for the get-away. He was to meet her in El Paso, three days from now. Exact timing, she said, was necessary.

To get there, he had to leave here within the next twenty-four hours. He thought of H.P. Duncan and the assistant manager, of the way their flesh had boiled and gone up in gray smoke. He thought of Peaches waiting in El Paso.

And he thought also of the hidden money, seventy thousand dollars of it. There was always the slight chance that it might be found.

He began to cry. He lowered his head and started bumping his forehead against the table like an angry child.

MRS. J.D. WINGATE stared at the letter she had received in the mail, and her bosom swelled and her face grew white with fury. She was a big, hard-faced woman, accustomed to having everything her own way, whether it concerned the running of the charity bazaar or the kind of tobacco her husband smoked. It seemed incredible to her that J.D. would have the nerve to

try anything like this. Once or twice he'd had ideas of his own, but she had soon put an end to them. And to think that he would have gotten away with this, if a friend hadn't written and told her!

J. D., at his age, thinking he was in love with his secretary! Some little fool after his money! And J.D. trying to divorce her while she was away with Archie, not saying anything to her about it, trying to cut her off with some skimpy alimony and just the few hundred thousands that were in her own name. And J.D., if you added his life insurance to his business, worth a good million dollars!

Well, she'd show him, just as she always had! And she'd show that little fool also. She'd hurry back before the divorce was granted and—turning toward her bags, she happened to look through the window and down to the elevator where two men had died. Her throat worked dryly.

Alan Brooke looked down the slope of the plateau toward the elevator. Beyond it rose the opal-colored cliff on the other side of the canyon. To right and left, the plateau stretched, wild and rugged, sparsely wooded, sprinkled with huge many-colored rocks. The stream boiled hissing from underground, raced through the bright sunlight, and plunged downward into the mist.

For the first time, Alan Brooke became aware of the wild, almost eerie beauty of this place. There was something unreal, fantastic about the whole countryside. And then this great building that seemed to have sprung out of the ground, no one knew how . . . built on a plateau that was inaccessible to anyone except the most skilled of mountain climbers, before that elevator was put here.

He went down the slope through the sunlight, stopping just short of the elevator. He could see inside. On the floor and far wall there was a huge brown corroded spot more than a quarter of an inch deep in the steel plating. It had not been there when he looked last night.

He turned and started back up the slope, working first to right and then to left as he went so that he covered a V shaped area which had its point at the mouth of the elevator. He was about fifty feet up the slope when he met Talma Norris. She said, "Alan, what . . .?"

"I was just prowling around," he said. "I've got some ideas about those murders."

"Murders?"

"You can't put faith in this curse business. Those killings were done by somebody around here—and not somebody who's been dead any eighty years either."

"But how could they?" she asked. "We—we saw Mr. Duncan. How could anybody have done that?"

"That's what I was trying to find out."

"Why would anybody want to kill us all, want to keep us all here? Most of the persons here never saw one another before, never heard of one another."

"Suppose somebody wanted to keep just one of us here—and didn't want any word to get back to the rest of the world. They might find it necessary, or maybe just easier, to keep the whole lot of us." He shrugged. "That's what I'm trying to find out. Come on, I want to see Clyde Mallory."

THE hotel manager was in his office. "Yes," he admitted slowly. "There is a trail down the south cliff. But it would take a group of skilled climbers to make it."

"And a man going down that trail," Brooke asked, "would be visible?"

"Most of the way."

"So that if a person wanted to keep us here, and was armed, it would be dangerous to try slipping away by that path."

"It would be impossible."

Brooke thanked him and was at the door when he turned back. "I'd like to get a piece of candle," he said. "I like to chew on the tallow."

Mallory looked as though he thought Brooke had gone crazy, but he got the candle.

In the lobby again, Brooke told Talma Norris, "Wait in the bar. I'm going to try to get Sam Lester down here, and if I do, I want you to talk to him, keep him busy for a half hour or so."

"Lester? You mean that awful looking man who's had T.B.?"

"That's him." And before she could ask any more questions, Brooke was gone.

He went to his own room first, cut a piece about one inch in length from the candle, and heated it until the tallow was flexible. Holding this in his hand he went swiftly down the hall to Lester's room. He knocked, and the man's sour voice said, "Come in."

Brooke opened the door and stood there, leaning against the sill. "How about coming down and having a drink with me?" he asked, and at the same time he pressed the hardening tallow into the slot where the spring lock fitted when the door was closed.

Sam Lester stood up, his thin body tilted to one side, his gaunt face sour. "Sure," he said. "I'm always ready for a drink."

They sat at the table with Talma, Brooke seeming surprised to find her there. After a couple of minutes, he excused himself, saying he had left his handkerchief in his room and had to go up for it.

The door of Lester's room opened easily because the spring lock had not been able to fit into its plugged slot. He went in, closing the door behind him.

Swiftly, methodically, he began to search the room. There was a check book on a Chicago bank showing an account of over thirty thousand—evidently Lester had plenty of money, but persons who came to resorts of this kind usually had plenty. There was a .32 calibre pistol, the barrel clean and the cylinder full of cartridges. The usual clothes and luggage. Nothing else—until he went into the bathroom.

It was an unusually large room and contained a big, rough wooden table. Over the table was spread an assortment of bottles, test tubes, powders, all the paraphernalia of an elaborate amateur chemical set.

Brooke was examining it when he heard the sound behind him. He turned.

Sam Lester stood there, leering at him. "I took that up when I was at the San," he said. "Occupational therapy, you know. They encourage that sort of thing."

In Lester's hand was the .32 calibre pistol, the muzzle pointed at Brooke's stomach.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Doctor's Drunk

"A NEAT trick, the way you plugged the lock," Lester went on. "But I happened to notice you doing it. I'm quite good at noticing things."

"So it seems," Brooke said. He could feel the increase in his heartbeat as he watched Lester's finger, tight against the trigger. "I imagine you learned that at the San also."

"Yes. I've been flat on my back for more than six months at a stretch on several occasions, and I made a game of watching every move that was in sight. You learn to see a lot that way—like persons plugging locks. So I came back up to find why you did it."

Brooke's eyes were on Lester's trigger finger. His strained muscles were corded.

Brooke said slowly, "I came in here because I'm interested in murder."

"Murder? You mean Duncan and that hotel man?"

"Yes."

"What's your interest?"

"The killer doesn't seem to be picking his victims because of any personal grudge," Brooke said. "It looks as though everybody at this hotel is a prospective corpse, if he tries to leave."

Lester's toothless mouth opened in a grin. "So you're in a hurry to leave?"

"Maybe."

"But why your interest in me?"

"I wondered why you were prowling outside just before dawn."

He saw the man recoil, as though he had been struck, saw his muscles tighten. His finger grew white on the trigger. But what he would have done, Brooke never knew.

The hall door of Lester's room made a squeaking sound as it opened.

Sam Lester tried to spin, swinging his gun. Alan Brooke went into action.

He took one short step, jumped. His left hand slapped on Lester's gun wrist, his right hand gripped the revolver barrel, thumb and forefinger tightening on the cylinder so that it could not turn, stopping the raised hammer before it fell. He wrenched, and the gun came free.

From the bedroom, Talma Norris watched. The back of one hand was pressed against bloodless lips.

"Hello," Brooke said.

"I—I thought you were here. Then when he came back up—I followed."

"Thanks." He looked at Lester. The gaunt man was leaning against the wall, panting. There was anger, but no fear in his eyes.

"I imagine all this is to find out what I was doing last night?"

"Yes," Brooke said.

"What I was doing," Lester said, "was trying to find out what you were doing. I saw you go out, and I followed."

"And what happened?"

"There was a third person outside. I heard him, but in the dark I couldn't see who. I tried to get close to whoever it was, but he ran."

Talma looked at Lester's thin, twisted body. "You weren't afraid?"

Sam Lester laughed. "What the hell have I got to be afraid of? I'm dying anyway. Six months, a year or so, is all I've got."

BROOKE felt a sudden surge of sympathy and affection for this man.

"I have a rather academic interest in murder," Lester said abruptly. "I've read a lot about it. It seems to be rather easy to get away with." His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright as he spoke.

Then another thought struck Alan Brooke. Suppose suffering had driven this man mad? An insane man killing for the excitement of the thing! A mad killer who had nothing to lose, because even if he were caught he would probably die before the law would run its slow course.

He was thinking of this, watching Sam Lester, and did not see the change in Talma's face. Her lips tightened across her teeth, her mouth opened on a cry that she half stifled. She pressed both hands hard against her side. She swayed.

Her face was grey with pain. Her body doubled up in the middle. Both arms pressed against her side. Small whimpering cries came through her clenched teeth. "Alan! Alan! It hurts!"

He got her to Lester's bed and stretched her out. Then he was in the hall running.

Halfway down the stair, the old wound in his lung caught fire. He stumbled and almost fell. The air had turned to acid in his throat and lungs. But he kept going. The stair, the corridor, stretched out to eternity. Then, finally, he was flinging himself against the door of Dr. Thomas Drew's office.

The doctor was tilted back in his chair, his feet on the table, a whiskey bottle beside him. His eyes were open, but glazed and unseeing.

Brooke shook him, slapped his face viciously. But it did not help. He went across the room, drew a glass of water and poured it over the doctor's head. The man stirred then and some of the glaze went out of his eyes, but it took Brooke another three minutes to have him on his feet.

"Upstairs!" Brooke tried to say. He could scarcely speak because of the pain in his chest. "Room 280!"

When finally the doctor went reeling away, Brooke collapsed. For four minutes he half lay in the doctor's big leather chair, drawing breaths that were pure agony. Then the pain slackened and he went back.

Talma lay on the bed, only half conscious now. The doctor stood over her. Sam Lester was gone.

"What is it?" Brooke said.

"Appendicitis. Have to come out right away."

"Well, why don't you hurry? Get her down stairs! Get started operating!"

The doctor turned his dull, bloodshot eyes toward Brooke. "I can't," he said. "No anesthesia."

BROOKE didn't believe him. He got the man by the shoulders, shook him.

"A resort with a doctor wouldn't be without ether, chloroform, something!"

"Don't have any." His gaze came up to Brooke's again, the miserable, abject eyes of a man whom life had completely defeated. "Mallory gave me money—but I—put a lot of it in liquor."

It was like a death sentence!

Then Sam Lester was in the room again, bell boys and Mallory with him, carrying bowls of ice. "Keep packs on it," Dr. Drew said dully. "Plenty of ice packs. Maybe that way you can keep her alive until you get her somewhere they can operate. But you'll have to hurry."

It was one of the bell boys who said, "Great God, Doc! You know nobody can't leave here alive!"

The doctor made a helpless gesture with his hands. "She has maybe twelve hours before that appendix ruptures."

And it took ten hours at the best to reach the nearest town!

A cold, precise tension came over Alan Brooke. It was the feeling he had experienced sometimes before a dangerous stunt: careful, yet sure of himself, of his trained body and brain. There was a way to do almost anything if a man were smart and brave enough.

He said, "Get everybody in this hotel, every guest, every employee, out front. "

"What—?"

"The murderer is here at the resort. If everybody is together, so that no one of them can make a move without a half dozen others seeing it, the killer won't have a chance. While you are all together, watching one another, I'll take Talma down on the elevator."

It was the last chance. But it would work. He was sure of it. *It had to work!*

Ten minutes later they were grouped on the broad, sunswept lawn of the resort.

"Everybody here?" Brooke asked.

"Everybody but one," Mallory said. "We can't locate Mr. John Darber."

"That meek looking fellow of about fifty, fifty-five, that looks like a bank clerk?"

"That's the one. We can't find him."

And then the queer rumbling sound drifted up from the floor of the valley far below. And every person in the crowd whirled, staring out beyond the cliff's edge to where an odd, elongated cloud of smoke was rising, being caught by the wind.

For the first time, Alan Brooke noticed that the elevator also was gone!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Blurred Memory

BROOKE had to fight his muscles to keep them moving at an easy trot, to keep from taxing his lungs. Even so, he was staggering when he reached the cliff's edge.

The elevator was at the foot of the cliff. It was an open-topped affair, and he could see the body, dwarfed by distance, lying on the floor—though it was not a body now. It was little more

than a mass of boiling flesh and bone, and grey ashes.

Every person at the resort had been grouped together, watching one another—every person except John Darber.

And now John Darber was dead!

It could mean but one thing: the murderer had an assistant on the valley floor—and even if a person escaped from the killer on the plateau, the one below would get him. And minutes were rushing past, toward the time when Talma Norris must die in agony!

Some of the crowd had straggled down to the cliff's edge. Brooke called one of the porters. "That elevator works automatically from both ends, doesn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"Get it back up here."

Then he was going up the slope again, his hot eyes watching the Wingate brat.

He took the child by the arm. "Come on," he said. "Inside. I want to talk to you."

"Take your hands off Archie!" Mrs. Wingate commanded.

"Shut up!" Brooke said.

"Why, you . . .!" For a moment, it looked as though she would explode with indignation. Then she saw the blaze in his eyes, the set of his jaw. Her mouth worked, but no words came out of it.

"Come on!" Brooke said.

Archibald Wingate kicked viciously at Brooke's shirts. He tilted back his head and began to bellow. "I won't go!"

Brooke slapped him. It was the first time Archibald Wingate had met with violence other than his own. The fight went out of him immediately.

Ten minutes later Brooke again joined the crowd outside. He called Mallory and the hotel detective forward. "You two are in authority here," he said. "You can back me in what I am going to do, or you can let me take the responsibility for it. But there is a girl dying here, and she has to get away. I'm going to see that she does it, if I have to murder two men rather than leave them for the state to execute."

"What do you mean?" Mallory asked.

"The man who killed Mr. Duncan and your assistant is going down on that elevator—and I'm going to be just behind him with a gun in his

spine. He must have arranged some kind of signal with his assistant below."

Mallory's voice was husky. "You know who it is?"

"I know," Brooke said. "I don't have evidence enough, perhaps, for a jury. But I know. Last night I went out to look around and this man tried to murder me. I had learned that he used acid for his murders, and he was afraid I might learn something else. I found corroded spots where drops of the acid had splattered the elevator. Sam Lester saw the killer, recognized him, but Lester didn't see him try to kill me. All he knew was that he was out there at the time. Maybe he was innocent. We had no proof."

"So he was really the murderer?" Lester said.

Mallory said, "Who? Who is it?"

"I talked to that Wingate brat," Brooke went on. "This killer hypnotized the child without the child knowing what was happening. That's easy enough for a good hypnotist handling a kid. He taught him what to say, convinced him he should put on a good act. The kid is a showoff, anyway. His act was staged under the power of post-hypnotic suggestion."

"But who?" Mallory whispered.

"The kid was commanded to forget. He can't remember anything about the trance. But he can remember the man he was talking to—the same man Lester recognized last night. And that's enough."

It was then that little, mild-faced Henry Frank made his play. His hand whipped under his coat, flashed out with a gun. "All right!" he yelled. "You've found—!" The gun swung toward Brooke.

The house detective was a big, dumb-ox of a man. He had been helpless in the face of a mystery he could not understand. But a gun was something he did understand. He was to one side of Henry Frank, and he took a quick step forward and swung.

Frank's gun banged, the bullet going straight up. Then he was rolling on the ground and the gun had skidded from his hand.

FIVE days later, Alan Brooke sat at Talma's bedside. "The kid could remember scarcely anything," he told her. "He had a blurred memory of seeing somebody's eyes get bigger and bigger, somebody he had been talking to. He couldn't remember who it was. Sam Lester hadn't

recognized the man he heard that night. But I knew the killer couldn't be sure of it, and I was certain by then of what had happened. So I bluffed, kept stalling, hoping for the real murderer to break. He did, completely. Once we had him, he gave up, signaled his assistant in the valley, and we brought you down."

"He was such a peaceful looking little man," Talma said, "sort of browbeaten. Why did he do it?"

"He had been browbeaten. Years ago he put up most of the cash with which he and Harrison Snyder went into business, a chemical manufacturing concern. They made a fortune. But Snyder had grabbed most of it. He just rode over Frank. And the little man sulked until maybe he was partially insane.

"Lately, their chemical concern had got in some tough spots, and Frank saw his chance. He quietly pulled nearly all his money out and put it into a rival concern. Snyder still could have saved the business, if he had been there to push some mergers. That's why Frank had to keep him away, and had kept him from getting any word back to the concern, or any word reaching them that he was unable to come."

"But why didn't he simply kill Snyder?"

"The moment Snyder died, his part of the concern went into the hands of his bankers. The bankers that been suggesting these mergers for some time, and would have put them through, saved the business—if they learned he was being kept away. Frank didn't want that, because he was selling his own concern short. He stood to make a fortune, for the rival concern would be able to buy up his old business for almost nothing if it failed."

"But the way they died?" she asked.

"He was a brilliant chemist. He had learned somehow to combine nitric acid with almost pure hydrogen under terrific pressure—I don't know enough about chemistry to explain clearly. Anyway, he could pack this product in a glass shell that could be shot from a rifle—and silencers work well on rifles, though they are never very effective on pistols. When this struck his victim, the glass shell shattered, the acid came out inside the man he shot. And it was an acid about a thousand times more vicious than any commonly known. The hydrogen combined with the oxygen in the air and simply burned the man up. The

smoke from the valley was nothing but the result of a smoke bomb that he tossed over the cliff."

He grinned at her. "There was something else I found out, when I put the pressure on Clyde Mallory."

"What?"

"About the hotel. He discovered the location, but there was no building here. The place was so beautiful, and with the water in the stream medicinal, it had all the makings of an exclusive resort. So he and some financial backers built it as secretly as possible, then came out with this wild tale about discovering it there. It was swell publicity. As you know, they got a million dollars worth of free advertising from the papers and magazines about it. And then little Henry Frank came along and made the scene backfire."

"The way you worked all that out," the girl said, "you ought to be a detective."

"I'm open for a job," he said.

THE END

