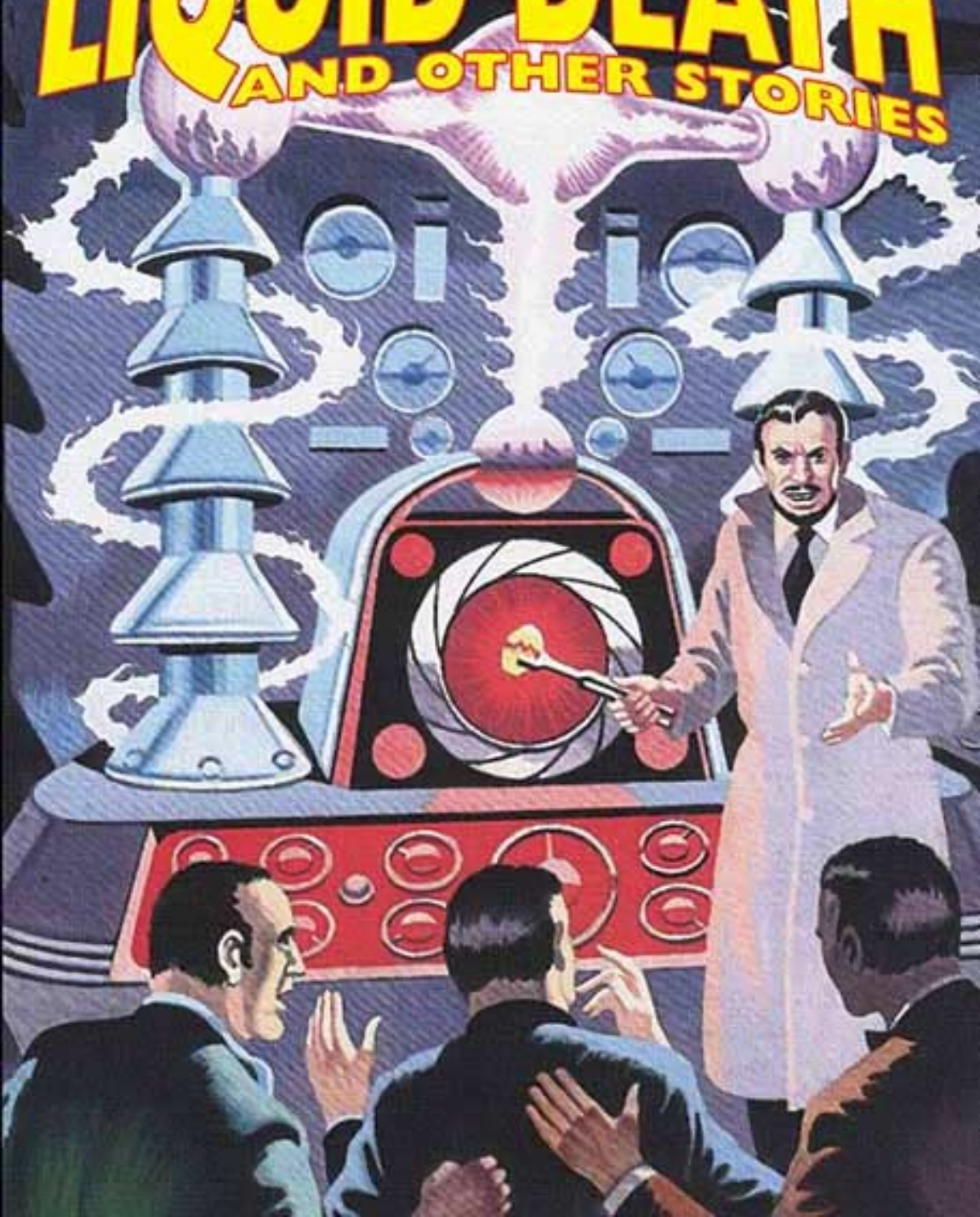


# JOHN RUSSELL FEARN LIQUID DEATH AND OTHER STORIES



Liquid Death And Other Stories  
*by John Russell Fearn*

**Wildside Press**

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## INTRODUCING JOHN RUSSELL FEARN'S **CRIME & DETECTIVE STORIES**

JOHN RUSSELL FEARN began his writing career as a pioneer exponent of science fiction, appearing in all of the specialist American pulp sf magazines in the early 1930s. Many of the best of these stories have already been republished by Wildside Press, and others are in preparation.

However, Fearn was also a prolific and successful writer in other genres, especially in the field of crime and detective fiction.

As early as 1938, he successfully introduced a new kind of science fiction under the pseudonym of "Thornton Ayre". The new technique (which Fearn called 'webwork') involved connecting seemingly unrelated elements together to unravel a mystery. The method was already well known in detective fiction, the leading exponent at that time being Harry Stephen Keeler.

At the same time, Fearn also began writing crime and mystery stories for the pulp magazines, and his first stories appeared in *Thrilling Mystery Stories*. This magazine is now a rare and valuable collector's item, and few modern readers will have seen copies. This present collection contains several of his short stories and novelettes from *Thrilling Mystery Stories*, here reprinted for the very first time. They will surprise and delight fans of the author and crime buffs alike.

By 1939, Fearn was expressing to friends his liking for crime mysteries, in preference to sf writing, but commercial exigencies dictated that, as a full time writer, he had to

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continue to concentrate more on science fiction during the early years of the war.

By the mid 1940s, however, Fearn was beginning to raise his sights from the pulp magazines, and he began to move into new book-length markets. Over the next few years, Fearn wrote numerous novels for English hardcover and paperback book publishers—science fiction, westerns, and detective fiction. His most successful detective creations (writing as “John Slate” and “Hugo Blayn” respectively) were “Maria Black” and “Dr. Carruthers” who appeared in several novels. The Slate and Blayn novels are classics of the ‘locked room’ and ‘impossible crime’ genres. But there were many equally brilliant one-off crime novels written under other names, including “Thornton Ayre” and “Frank Russell”, many of which appeared in the Canadian magazine, the *Toronto Star Weekly*. The magazine printed a complete novel every Saturday in a tabloid newspaper format, as its “Novel of the Week.” The *Star Weekly* was a prestige market, and regularly attracted stories by the likes of Erle Stanley Gardner, Ellery Queen, Wilson Tucker, Roy Vickers, and one of the greatest writers of detective fiction, John Dickson Carr.

Fearn was a great fan of Carr's work, and his own crime stories contain similar ingredients: a horrifying and baffling murder, locked rooms, and cerebral detection employing both scientific methods and psychological insights into the criminal mind, with a liberal sprinkling of dry humour. Because most of Fearn's detective fiction appeared under pseudonyms, which at the time were not known to be his, it has not

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achieved the same attention as his science fiction, but the situation is beginning to change.

Since Fearn's death in 1960, I have been working ceaselessly to uncover all of his pseudonyms, and to arrange for the republication of his best stories. The first substantial academic recognition for his detective fiction came with the publication of Robert Adey's *Locked Room Murders and Other Impossible Crimes* (1979; revised, 1991.)

Adey wrote that, during and after the war, "the one writer who continued to concentrate his powers almost exclusively on impossible crime novels was John Dickson Carr. The only other author who produced them in any quantity was John Russell Fearn and he used half a dozen different names and as many publishers." However, Adey's pioneering work listed only a few of Fearn's many crime stories, some of which I have only identified and discovered in recent years.

During the last dozen years of her life, I had acted for Fearn's widow, Carrie. As her literary agent, I arranged for the reprinting of many of Fearn's "known" stories, but it was only after she died that I made an amazing discovery.

My contact with her had arisen in 1970 when, as editor of the British sf magazine *Vision of Tomorrow*, I was in regular contact with Walter Gillings, who had earlier edited the pioneering British magazines *Tales of Wonder* and *Fantasy*. Gillings had discovered a number of Fearn sf mss still in his possession; they had been accepted years before but had remained unpublished when wartime conditions forced the magazines to fold. He passed them on to me, and I arranged for their use in *Vision of Tomorrow*, after first purchasing the

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rights from Mrs. Fearn, whom I had discovered was still living at the Blackpool home she had shared with her husband. She invited my wife and I to visit her, in order to complete the transaction personally.

Anxious to help her further, I implored her to search amongst Fearn's papers to see if he had left any other unpublished mss, which I would arrange to purchase on my next visit in a few weeks' time.

When I called again, it was to find Mrs. Fearn visibly distressed. She handed me a small cache of mss, insisting "that was all there was." She confided in me her dread of entering Fearn's writing study because of the poignant memories it evoked. I learned, in fact, that she had not been able to bring herself to enter the room since his death ten years before. Not wanting to disappoint me, she had steeled herself to make a special effort. Naturally, I respected her feelings; thereafter the subject of the study and any mss it may have contained was never mentioned between us. And I had no reason to believe that it actually contained any further mss, other than those she had given me. Mrs. Fearn became a good friend of my wife and myself, and when our daughter Claire was born in 1972, we made frequent holiday visits. Childless herself, she was delighted to become Claire's honorary "Auntie."

It was only after her death in 1982, that I learned from her solicitor that following Claire's birth in 1972, Mrs. Fearn had added a codicil to her will, bequeathing all Fearn's copyrights to me. I contacted her executor, who allowed me access to



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Fearn's study, in order to salvage any books and papers it might contain.

I found the room to be a veritable Aladdin's Cave of mss, books, and cans of cinema films, written and produced by Fearn himself, using amateur and semi-professional actors and actress friends. Many exciting literary discoveries were made, including many unpublished western, science fiction and detective novels and short stories.

My elation at these discoveries was tempered with a great sadness. Her devotion to her husband's memory had deprived Mrs. Fearn of the considerable sums I would have paid her back in 1970 for all of the additional sf mss, whilst as her literary agent I could have also tried to place the additional western and detective material with other publishers. It was money she sorely needed, but money did not signify in her thoughts and memories. And, in fact, I believe she may well have acted deliberately, in order to benefit my daughter and myself after her death.

*Liquid Death and Other Stories* is the first of a projected series of new books—exclusive to Wildside Press—that will present the best of Fearn's detective fiction for a new generation of readers, both classic reprints (appearing for the first time under his own name) together with entirely new “lost” stories appearing for the very first time. It is a series no discerning reader of detective fiction will want to miss, and will be welcomed by all fans of the author.

—Philip Harbottle

Wallsend, June 2001

## LIQUID DEATH

### I

THE MAN IN the cloth cap, coarse flannel shirt, and corduroy trousers tied just below the knee with string was obviously a laborer. For this very reason he looked distinctly incongruous as he waited outside the polished green door of a typical London house of the Georgian period. After his ringing at the bell there was a long interval, then the door opened and a manservant gazed out into the late summer afternoon in obvious horror.

"Tradesmen's entrance is at the rear," he stated briefly. "On your way, my man."

"I would if I was a tradesman—but I'm not." The man gave a broad grin. "Nick Gregson's the name, pal. I want to see the guv'nor."

"You cannot possibly mean..."

"I mean Henry Garside, the bloke as owns them 'ouses down Stepney way. The ones that's bein' demolished now."

The manservant frowned and then seemed to recollect something. "Am I to understand you are connected with the demolition firm, Mr.—er—Gregson?"

"Right, pal. And I must see the guv. It's important."

The manservant's nostrils distended. "I will enquire if the master is at home. Wait there."

The laborer shrugged and took a firmer hold of the stiff brown paper parcel he was hugging. Or rather, it was dirty

yellow, splashed with whitewash, and advertised a famous cement. Plainly it had been picked up on the demolition site.

"This way," the manservant directed coldly re-appearing.  
"And wipe those boots, if you don't mind."

Nick Gregson humbly did as ordered and then took off his cap from lank hair as he followed the majestic being across a somber, spotless hall to a nearby door. Once beyond it, Nick found himself facing a tubby, middle-aged man in a velvet smoking jacket, reclining in a deep armchair beside the fire. Having evidently been prewarned as to the appearance of his visitor, he expressed no surprise as he viewed him.

"Well, my man? And what can I do for you? Excuse my not asking you to sit down. Those working clothes are hardly..."

"Aw, that's all right, guv'nor. This won't take long."

Gregson brought the dirty paper bag more clearly into view and was about to dump it on the Shereton occasional table when a howl of protest stopped him.

"Not on your life, man! Don't you dare dump anything on that table! Come to the point, can't you?"

"All right. See this bag? In it there's five hundred sovereigns! Queen Victoria, from the look of 'em."

"Why come to me?" Henry Garside's pink face was impatient.

"Because I thought as 'ow you might like to buy 'em. Nice price for sovereigns these days, guv'nor. Around forty-five quid a sov. isn't it?"

"I'm not certain of the exact market value. And I repeat—why come to me? Why don't you take them to a pawnbroker, or somebody?"

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"Because a bloke like me might get looked at, with five 'undred sovereigns! 'Sides, there's a reason why I've come to you. I found these this afternoon in an old tin box in number six, Fordney Crescent, one of them rows of 'ouses of yours which we're wreckin'. I s'pose I should've let the foreman know about it, but instead, I got to thinkin'. I found 'em, and there's some sort of law about buried treasure that lets a man keep what he finds—or a part of it, or summat."

Garside's impatience had gone. He was looking astonished instead. After thinking for a moment he took up a newspaper from the stand beside him and spread it over his immaculate trousers.

"Come over here, my man. Let me see some of those coins."

Nick Gregson moved swiftly and, from the cement bag, poured about a score of the old, stained coins on to the newspaper. Garside picked several of them up in turn, examined them intently, and finally began to nod his bald head slowly back and forth.

"Mmm, seems little doubt about it, my man. So you found them in number six, Fordney Crescent, did you? Whereabouts?"

"Under the ground floor—but I kept it to meself."

"Very illegal of you—but I'm damned if I blame you for that! Let me see, now; my tenant at number six was—" Garside mused with his mouth open. "Oh, yes, Mrs. Brice. The little widow with hardly a penny to her name. Dead now, though. No guarantee the sovereigns were hers, anyway. So you came to hand them over to me? That was very honest of

you, Mr. Gregson. To be strictly accurate, the police should be told."

The laborer's expression changed. "Now, wait a minute, guv. I didn't come to give 'em to you. I want to sell 'em. More chance of doing it to you than to a pop-shop. Somebody might try an' say I pinched 'em. Five hundred sovs. take a lot of explaining."

"On my property, Mr. Gregson—therefore I call them mine."

"Findings keepings, I say."

"No doubt..." Garside's face melted slowly into a grin. "However, I'm not a hard man and you are obviously far more in need of money than I am. I'll buy them from you—at twenty-two pounds fifty a sovereign."

Gregson glared. "What in hell sort uv a bargain is that? These is worth forty-five pounds each—or near it."

"Exactly. Hence the fifty-fifty. You hardly expect me to pay market value, do you? What would I get out of it?"

"Same's you've paid me! Fair's fair, I say."

The smile on Garside's cherubic faded again. "Better take my offer, Mr. Gregson. If I withdraw it, I can claim all these, and you'll get nothing. You seem good at sayings; you would do well to remember one about looking a gift horse in the mouth."

Gregson scowled in thought and rubbed the back of his weather-beaten neck. Then, at last, he sighed.

"Okay—I'll take it. I'll probably get nothing the other way. Let's see—that's twenty-two pounds fifty, five hundred times, and..." he broke off, floundering.

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"Eleven thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds, my man, and consider yourself well paid. Let me see them all. Here—put them on the rug."

Garside spread the newspaper at his feet and emptied the dirty bag over it. For the next twenty minutes Garside was busy counting and re-counting, then at last he struggled from his knees to his feet and lumbered across to a wall safe.

"Naturally, you'll prefer cash?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I ain't got no blasted bank account, if that's what you mean."

"Quite so." From the safe Garside took the required amount in high denomination notes and handed them over. Gregson went through them steadily with a dirty thumb and forefinger, and finally he nodded.

"Thanks, guv. Not what I expected, but it'll have to do."

"And should you find any more sovereigns on my property in the course of its demolishing, we can perhaps do further business, my friend. Good day to you."

Gregson nodded and took his departure at the side of the scandalized manservant—and it was about this time that a similar scene to the Gregson-Garside performance was being enacted in the Soho district; and this time, the setting was Reuben Goldstein's, the pawnbroker.

Reuben Goldstein was no longer a young man. His eyes had no longer their intense keenness. He did not hear so well any more, either—but there was not much he missed. And he watched with interest as two customers arrived together almost at closing time. One was a man of apparent age—early eighties at least—and with him was a powerful young man

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who proudly carried a wooden box on one broad shoulder. Plainly it was heavy, for he dropped it with considerable force on the counter and then mopped his sharp-featured face.

"Good evening, gentlemen." Goldstein looked from one to the other and rubbed his gnarled hands together.

"And vot is your pleasure?"

The elderly man, impeccably dressed, raised his malacea cane briefly. "Open it up, Harry. Let him see."

"Okay, grandpa." The young man pulled a small screwdriver from his pocket, removed three screws from the box's wooden lid, then heaved it up on hinges. The pawnbroker gazed fixedly, much as Edmond Dantes must have done when he first beheld the treasure of Monte Cristo.

"Sovereigns!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "I never saw so many sovereigns all at vun time!"

"Mr. Goldstein, there are five thousand sovereigns there!" The elderly man spoke with firm, cultured quietness. "The collection of a lifetime. I am eighty-six years of age, and have spent my life collecting sovereigns as a hobby. Now I know I have not much longer to go, I am selling my possessions, and that naturally includes these. I assume you are interested? My grandson here remarked that you are one of the fairest dealers in this region."

"I always give a square deal!" Goldstein looked very resolute about it, his hooked nose nearly touching his chin. "But five t'ousand! That is a lot of gold."

"Course it is! I wouldn't be wasting my time on trifles, believe me. It isn't money I need; just commonsense value

for my offspring. Take them—take them. Look at them. Test them.”

Goldstein scooped up a handful of the coins and disappeared to mysterious regions at the shop's rear. The young man and the elderly man exchanged glances and waited. Then, at length, Goldstein came back.

“Obviously, I cannot take time to count five t'ousand coins, so I...”

“There are five thousand, Mr. Goldstein. You have my word on that. And, let me tell you, it has never been broken.”

“I would not doubt it for a moment—not for a moment. And I would like to do business. These sovereigns I have tested are perfect—real gold.”

The elderly man looked indignant. “Did you think they were brass?”

“I am a business man,” Goldstein said solemnly. “I have to weigh gold and test it with acid. If those two tests are right, then I am glad. But to count and test five t'ousand of them is a long job. Ve can do business,” he finished firmly, “if you trust me with these sovereigns until this time tomorrow night.”

The elderly man reflected, then the young man gave a shrug.

“Might as well, grandpa. Whoever you take these coins to, they'd have to examine them as Mr. Goldstein wishes to do. Only to be expected.”

“Ah, well—I suppose so. I so dislike delays. Very well, Mr. Goldstein; give me your receipt and I will return this time



tomorrow. My name is Vincent P. Caxton—if you wish to know.”

Goldstein nodded and laboriously wrote out a receipt, upon which his two customers left with the promise to return at five-forty-five the following afternoon.

And, at the home of a certain famous financier and industrialist in Mayfair, there took place that same evening a most confidential meeting between the financier himself—Elliot K. Marsden—and globe-trotter Jeremiah (Jerry) Bax, just back from a jaunt which had kept him out of England for twelve years. Long enough for society to forget about him, even to think of him as a complete stranger when he landed back. Jerry Bax was a clever man. He had the charm necessary to convince the devil himself that black can be white—sometimes.

“Thirty thousand sovereigns, eh?” Elliot K. Marsden drew gently on his cigar and surveyed the three boxes which three strong servants had carried into this library a little while earlier. “It's mighty good going, Jerry.”

“So I think.” Jerry was a tall, easy-going man in the early fifties, military in features, bronzed in complexion, and nearly always smiling. “I never expected to find the damned treasure mind you. I knew of it from an old sailor friend of mine. He knew the stuff had been buried on one of the remote Pacific islands when the ship carrying it had been wrecked, but I was the only man to find it. Naturally, I want to make something out of it. It occurred to me you might want to make something out of it, too—not as actual sovereigns, but as gold in bulk. So it's up to you.”

The financier picked up one or two of the coins and examined them intently.

"They look genuine enough."

"Look! They damned well are. Put them through any test you like."

"I intend to, before we talk business. I've asked Walters to come over. He's my chief analyst."

"Analyst?" Jerry frowned. "What on earth has a financier in common with an analyst?"

Elliot K. grinned. "You've evidently forgotten that I own a number of combines—steel, rubber, plastics, and heaven knows what. I could be swindled with materials if it were not for my analysts—and Walters is the best of them all."

Jerry shrugged. "Okay. But I'm surprised you can't take my word. I'm well known enough."

"With all due respect, Jerry, I've only your word for that, too. Nobody seems to remember you in select circles, in spite of your saying you were once closely connected with them."

"Twelve years is a long time, E.K. People forget, and..."

"Mr. Walters, sir," the manservant announced gravely as he appeared like a phantom.

"Oh, yes, Peters; show him in here, please."

Walters was a thin-nosed, unsmiling man of uncertain age, carrying with him a square box of portable equipment. He said "good evening" to his employer, nodded briefly to Jerry Bax and then—having been given his instructions beforehand—went to work on six selected sovereigns. In silence the industrialist and the explorer watched him, even though they could not follow the entire sequence of the test.

The acid and the weight tests were obvious enough, but other experiments between magnets, and using instruments like flashlamps except that they had no beams—were beyond them. Nor did Walters' expression give anything away.

Finally, however, he folded up his equipment and tossed the coins back in the nearest box.

"Genuine gold in each case, Mr. Marsden," he announced. "Atomic weight is correct, and so is the response to ultrasonic vibration. Acid-proof and correct normal weight—as opposed to atomic."

"Then, if those six are pure gold, so must the others be?"

Walters flashed a brief glance at Jerry. "I suppose so. One could hardly select six at random, sir, and have all the others spurious."

"I should damned well think not!" Jerry objected. "Look here, E.K., what do you take me for?"

"All right—no offence!" the financier grinned. "Can't blame me for taking precautions. Right, Walters, that's all. Many thanks."

The analyst nodded and took his departure. Marsden poured out drinks and brought them back to the table, handing one to Jerry.

"All right—we talk business," he said. "What's your price?"

"Top market value, of course. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand pounds. I can get that anywhere, and you know it. You, using them for their actual gold value, can probably make a handsome profit, even at that figure."

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"Could be," the tycoon grinned. "But my figure is one hundred and ninety thousand, top limit. I'm going to be under considerable expense operating with so much gold."

"One hundred and ninety-five thousand, or I go elsewhere."

Marsden reflected and then held out his hand. "One hundred and ninety-five thousand it is. You shall have my check before you leave this evening. Now let's have another drink."

\* \* \* \*

A week after the various negotiations in sovereigns had been completed, a group of men sat in a secluded country house some thirty miles from London. The house was unique in that it stood in its own somewhat neglected grounds and that the nearest neighbor was a good three miles away. Even the main road that ran from London to the south coast was a good half-mile distant so, in every way, the house was admirably suited for men working against the law.

The men arrived at the house by different routes and at varying intervals, and always by night. Unless they were specially watched, which they were quite certain they were not, nobody could report upon their comings and goings. So, finally, every man was present. Two of them were the elderly gentleman of culture and his powerful 'grandson'; another was Nick Gregson from the demolition squad; and there was also the smiling, military looking Jerry Bax. In addition to these, there also lounged in the big, comfortably furnished library a square-headed, unimaginative strong-arm man by

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the name of 'Mopes' McCall, two years a fugitive from Dartmoor, and of whom the police had lost trace.

They waited without speaking to each other, some of them smoking and meditating, others playing cards. But each was alert for the least sound from the night outside. It was nearly midnight, and one more had still to come.

He came just after Jerry Bax had glanced at his watch—and immediately every man was on his feet, revolver or automatic ready for action, only to replace them as the immaculate man known only as the 'Chief' came into the library. All knew his real identity and his position in the social scale, but none had ever dared to betray him. He was much too powerful for that.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said briefly, removing his overcoat, homberg and scarf. "All of you here, I see. Good! I only hope the presence of each one of you is indicative of good news."

"Far as I'm concerned, Chief, no doubt about it," Jerry Bax remarked, lighting a cigarette.

"Splendid!" The Chief crossed to the deep armchair beside the electric fire and settled himself. "Now, my friends, how is the little business with the sovereigns progressing? Your reports, please, one at a time. You first, Jerry."

Jerry grinned and, from his wallet, handed across Elliot K. Marsden's open check for 195,000 pounds sterling. The Chief took it and raised his eyebrows.

"I said two hundred and twenty-five thousand, Jerry. What's this?"

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"Best I could do. Marsden's no easy nut to crack. You know as well as I do that that many sovereigns couldn't be handled—er—conveniently in the ordinary course of business, except over a very long period. I took the best bargain I could."

"Mmm. Very well. And you, Larry?"

The elderly culturist smiled complacently and produced another check.

"Twenty two thousand five hundred, Chief. Full market price, and not much trouble, either. Goldstein was extremely thorough before he'd part with his money. though."

"My congratulations, Larry—and to your mythical grandson. And what about you, Nick?"

Nick Gregson looked uncomfortable as he handed over a large envelope containing his 11,250 pounds sterling. The Chief counted the notes swiftly and then narrowed his eyes.

"Where's the rest of it, Nick?"

"That's all there is, Chief—so help me! That old devil Garside beat me down to half price—an' even less—an' there wus nothin' I could do about it. I said at first that idea of plantin' me an' them sovereigns in a demolition area wus crazy; now I'm sure of it."

"I placed you, Nick, where your lack of education and finesse fitted you best. You've done very badly, but I'm prepared to believe you are speaking the truth, because you know where you'll finish up if you are not..."

The Chief made a mental calculation. "Two hundred and twenty eight thousand, seven hundred and fifty pounds. Very fair, considering our actual outlay has not been very great.

Fifty per cent of this total is mine, and the remainder is yours to divide between you as you see fit. I'll have no part in your squabbles as you endeavor to apportion it. Understand?"

The others nodded silently and looked menacingly at each other—or, more correctly, Nick Gregson looked menacingly at everybody else.

"What about mc, Chief?" 'Mopes' McCall objected, his chair on its hind legs against the wall. "Don't I get anythin' for stayin' here like a dumb cluck in case anything happens?"

"You get your normal pay, 'Mopes', and nothing else. You can't be expected to cash in on proceeds which you haven't attempted to earn."

"I was willin'!" 'Mopes' shouted, pulling an immensely thick notebook from his shirt pocket. "Look here, I've a list of mugs who'd fall for the sovereign racket any time we..."

"I'll decide how to run our—er—financial concern," the Chief interrupted. "Don't start getting big ideas, 'Mopes', in case the police suddenly discover where you are.'

Muttering to himself, 'Mopes' relaxed again, inspecting his thick notebook pensively; then Jerry Bax asked a question somewhat uncertainly:

"When these sovereigns reach the markets, Chief, isn't there likely to be trouble?"

"Why should there be? Sovereigns are being found every day by all manner of people. A sudden influx of them should not occasion any surprise. Even if it does, it doesn't matter. These sovereigns are real gold, even though they have never been actually in the Royal Mint at any time."

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Jerry shook his head worriedly. "That's the bit I can't get over—how you produce real gold without there being any. It's nothin' short of damned uncanny!"

The Chief shrugged. "One might as well say that it is uncanny for somebody's moving picture to be projected for thousands of miles through empty space—but it isn't. We call it television. It is simply an accomplishment of science—just as is the art of turning base metals and unwanted alloys into gold. We live in a scientific age, my friend, and the old days of the counterfeiter, with his clumsy press, have gone into the discard, along with the horse-drawn trams. I must admit, though," the Chief added pensively, "that I hit on the secret by accident. When I knew I could manufacture gold whenever I wanted, the thing to do was to distribute it. Hence my selection of each one of you. Just the right type! All of you wanted by the law. One word from me, and..."

There was silence for a moment Then another blunt question—this time from the 'grandson'.

"If you can make gold as easily as you say you can, why all this messing about with sovereigns and making the right contacts to receive them? Why don't you cut everybody else out, make gold bricks, and dump them in your bank?"

"You reveal profound lack of experience, my young friend," the Chief commented. "One cannot haphazardly dump gold bricks in a bank, as you seem to think. A strict watch is kept on all gold reserves, and one or several gold bricks out of thin air would be a matter for investigation. Sovereigns, though, can appear in their thousands without raising suspicion, being deemed the secret hordes of misers, financiers, and such. It



is by far the best method. Slow, yes—but sure. For instance, having just completed a clean-up, we must now lie low for a time.”

“For myself, sir,” observed Larry, the elderly man, “I bow before your scientific knowledge. We have a brilliant man leading us—brilliant in crime and in his normal profession.”

“We'll keep my normal profession out of this,” the Chief said brusquely. “And to satisfy all of you, now I know you are to be trusted—otherwise you would have tried to give me the slip with much of the money you've recently made—I'll show you just what is done to make these coins. ‘Mopes’ knows already, since he guards this place but, fortunately, he hasn't the intelligence to understand anything.”

The gunman's thick lips opened at the start of a protest, and then closed again. Scowling, he resumed his study of the thick notebook he still held in his beefy hands.

The Chief rose. “Come with me, my friends. I think you will be intrigued—with the possible exception of Nick here, whose mentality is about on a par with that of ‘Mopes’.”

“At least I can pull a deal, which is more'n he can do!” Nick objected.

“Pull a deal? At half the possible value? My dear Nick!”

Smiling cynically, the Chief opened the library door and led the way across the broad hall. Presently he reached the paneled side of the massive staircase, one of which panels flew open under the actuation of a tiny switch. Beyond the panel loomed a staircase, clearly illuminated since lights from below had automatically come into action.

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"You know, my friends," the Chief commented, as he led the way downstairs, "I count myself lucky to have been able to buy this old mansion. Absolutely ideal in every way—even to these great wine cellars that I have turned into one big laboratory. Ah, here we are. Look around for yourselves."

The assembled men were already doing so, mostly in amazement. Nick Gregson indeed was pretty near to gaping and perhaps with good reason. There was electrical apparatus in all directions, and practically all of it of highly modern electronic design. There were also anode and cathode globes on pillars, electro-magnets, cathode ray tubes, and all manner of complicated equipment of like character.

"You must use plenty of juice to run this laboratory, Chief," Jerry Bax commented. "Aren't you afraid the power and light authorities might ask questions some time?"

"There's your answer to that." The Chief indicated three massive generators. "I use enough power to start them up and, after that, they run themselves in non-stop stages and, of course, they supply me with adequate power. Yes, my friends, there is a wealth of secrets down here; the accumulation of years of specialized knowledge—to say nothing of the expenditure of a considerable amount of money. And if you have scientific knowledge, you might as well use it to the best advantage. Government scientists, one of which I could have become—are poorly paid. I prefer big money, and in time I shall have it. All of us will."

There was a pause as the men surveyed the other part of the laboratory, which appeared to be devoted to chemistry, judging from the test-tubes, retorts and scores of

mysteriously labeled bottles. Then the Chief began moving briskly, talking again as he did so.

"I promised to show you how this gold business is done. Right—see here."

He motioned to the cathode ray tube equipment and indicated the small matrix at the base of it. Into it he placed a chunk of iron, then closed the matrix door and pulled a lever that completely surrounded the matrix with lead.

"This isn't magic, you know," he said dryly, switching on two of the generators. "The secret of metal transmutation came in when atomic power was found. Indeed, metal transmutation is atomic power. It simply consists of forcing into a piece of matter the requisite number of electrons to make it change its material state. The cathode ray tube, linked up to that electro-magnetic equipment there, does just that."

"You mean," Jerry Bax said, always the brightest of the gang, "that you've found the way to alter any material structure, so it becomes something else?"

"That's it—but in the higher orders I have much more work yet to do. Iron, for those of you who can understand me, is called iron because it is a chunk of matter having twenty-six electrons flying round the proton, or nucleus. But add fifty-three more electrons to each atomic group within the material, and you have seventy-nine altogether in each group. That piece of matter is then called gold, because of the seventy-nine electrons. In some cases, electrons are withdrawn to go from a heavier element to a lighter one. Understand me?"

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The 'grandson' and Nick Gregson plainly did not, but Jerry and the elderly Larry nodded slowly. Though they were not by any means nuclear physicists, they gathered the drift and each had, at some time, heard of the Periodic table of elements.

"Yes," the Chief mused, watching the instruments, "we have come a long way since the days of the housebreaker, with the bull's-eye lantern and a jemmy in his hand. Crime these days is a scientific art, my friends, in every sense of the word, and nothing less than a skilled opponent can hope to beat the police, for they are not fools, either, believe me."

"Well, you're in a position to know!" Jerry grinned.

The Chief said nothing. He calmly studied the instruments while those around him backed away slightly before the somewhat terrifying display of electrical power sizzling and flashing around them. Man-made lightning was climbing up and down magnetic pillars; the cathode ray tube was alive with lavender coruscations.

Then, at the stroke of a switch, everything ceased and the Chief opened up the matrix. From it he withdrew in a pair of tongs a chunk of gold, somewhat larger than the chunk of iron that had originally been placed there.

"If that isn't magic, I don't know what is, Chief!" the 'grandson' exclaimed, staring.

The Chief only smiled and carried the chunk across to a bench whereon stood a variety of moulds and electric furnaces.

"Here is where the job is finished," he explained. The gold is correctly adulterated and..."

"Adulterated!" Jerry exclaimed. "But a sovereign is pure gold, isn't it?"

"It is twenty-two parts pure gold and two parts alloy," the Chief corrected. "Its weight is fixed at 123.27447 grains troy. Any sovereign responding to that weight is okay—as all ours are. Loosely, one considers it pure gold, but I haven't fallen into the trap. I have made careful research. Now here, you see the various moulds, made by a master-craftsman of my acquaintance, covering various periods from 1489, when the sovereign first appeared, onwards. The heads of the various kings or queens are here in the moulds, with the appropriate die-casts of the sovereign's other side."

"You then melt the gold, and run it into these moulds?" Larry enquired.

"That's it. And the cutting and milling machines you see over there. Quite a private mint, in fact. Naturally," the Chief added, with a dry smile, "I haven't explained the full process of transmutation. I'm not quite such a fool as that. However, you see here the basis of what promises to become a prosperous business. And we can never be caught out. We can literally make money for nothing."

Silence. The eyes of the men were on the gold—mostly in envy. Envy that one man should know so much, and be able to give every order because of it. To kill him would be easy, but of what avail? Without his profound knowledge, nothing could be done. He was the planner of everything; he made everything, knew everything and, as yet, the law had not the remotest idea he even existed.

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"Suppose," the 'grandson' said, "for the sake of argument, that somebody did get wise to this racket? What then?"

"That somebody would die." The Chief gave his characteristic shrug. "Die, my friends—painfully and completely. And none could fathom how it happened, or at least, the real cause behind it. There is nothing I have overlooked—nothing!"

II

FOR THE TIME being, the work of the super counterfeiters was done. They were decided—or at least the Chief was—not to do anything further for perhaps three months. In the interval all of them returned to different walks of life to carry on a pseudo-existence as best suited the Chief. Jerry Bax was still a supposed world-traveler and lived on the fat of the land with all expenses paid, making what contacts he could find for a touch at a later date.

Larry and the 'grandson' both departed separately to France to smell out the prospect in that country, whilst Nick Gregson found himself in the dock region, doing an ordinary job of work until he should be wanted. In the case of every man there was, of course, a reason for the police wishing to find them; but they were all safe enough from actual arrest and cunning enough to keep out of harm's way.

The only one who was always in danger if he were to show his unlovely face was 'Mopes' McCall; and to him there still fell the grinding monotony of keeping a constant watch over the great mansion, fending for himself as best he could, hidden from the eyes of the law, always waiting to grab him. He was kept provided with food and drink and cigarettes by a nocturnal friend of the Chief's; but otherwise he never stirred out of the rambling old pile. His only friends were the radio and television. Altogether, there were times when he wondered if a return to Dartmoor might not be preferable—then, recalling that he would have some fifteen years to

spend there, he changed his mind. So he remained the caretaker and nursed in his subhuman brain a growing hatred for the brilliant man who was his absolute boss and jailer.

It was sheer inquisitiveness that led him to go down into the laboratory one November night. Sick to the back teeth his own company, he was anxious for some kind of novelty—and he still smoldered at the contempt with which he had been treated by the Chief. Not the intelligence to understand, huh? Well, maybe there was an answer to that, too!

Cigarette dangling at the corner of his thick lips, his hands in his trousers pockets, he wandered down into the brightly lighted subterranean area and surveyed, smoke drifting into his left eye.

“Wonder why the mug doesn't think up a way to make a woman, same as they do on the films?” he muttered. “That'd make this damned set-up worth while.”

He prowled around slowly, peering at this and that, feeling there were a lot of things he'd like to smash up, yet afraid to do a thing for fear of explosions and sudden death. He just couldn't find anything whereby he could hit back at the Chief and take that superior smile from his face.

“Even if I set fire to the joint, I'd only land back in the doghouse,” ‘Mopes’ told himself morosely. “So maybe I shouldn't. Can't think why I can't have a maid or somethin', to help out with keepin' the place tidy.”

He knew perfectly well why, but it didn't console him much, just the same. So he just went on prowling, surveying the electric monsters and finally ending up beside the bench where lay the coin moulds for the stamping machine.



Absently, he stubbed out his cigarette on the nearest mould, and then gave a gasp. He had not noticed that the mould, pipe-shaped where it fitted into the machine, with the engraving at the base, had been half over the bench edge. The sudden pressure he put on it toppled it to the floor. He stared down at it, sweat suddenly down his face. Even from here, he could see the pipe had a crack right down it and that the King Edward VII engraving had split!

"Hell!" 'Mopes' whispered, then he picked the die up and examined it. The angle at which it had fallen on the stone floor had fractured it three-quarters of the way round. When it was in use it would crumple up under the impact of striking the shiny blank sovereigns.

"Weld it," 'Mopes' muttered, glancing urgently about him. "That's it! Weld the crack. I'm not such a mug I can't do that. Did it back in the doghouse, in fact.'

In this he was correct. Long ago, he'd been a welder in a garage, and had pursued a similar tack in jail. Now it might even save his life, for he had little doubt that the Chief would take it out of his hide if he discovered what had happened. Down here, there was all the necessary welding equipment. Right!

'Mopes' went to work, the most careful job he had ever done. At the end of half an hour the thin crack was certainly well sealed, and well nigh undetectable, so carefully had he smoothed the rough edges of the seam away. But he had overlooked the fact that a coin mould must be absolute precision to produce the required image, therefore he looked

with some misgivings upon the defaced profile of his late Majesty, King Edward VII.

"Only spot it if he looks close, and I'll not admit anything," 'Mopes' murmured. "Who the hell cares about a crooked nose and a bit off the beard, anyway."

The defaced mould meant no more to him than this. He had not the wit to see what repercussions might follow. He put the mould carefully on the bench, restored the welding equipment to its rightful position, then went back upstairs before he did any more damage. An hour later he was asleep, dreaming of absolute pardon by the law, and hundreds of beautiful girls crowding round to congratulate him.

A week later the Chief returned abruptly. He merely stated he was calling a meeting; that there was a job they could pull which would need only Nick Gregson and the elderly Larry. They would be coming the next night; the Chief would be staying over to get some laboratory work done. That could only mean making coins. 'Mopes' took everything in sour silence and inwardly wondered if any King Edward VII sovereigns would be cast.

They were. The Chief worked on them all the following day, but so great was his hurry, and so sure was he of his equipment, he made no special examinations. By evening he had minted ten thousand sovereigns of King Edward VII period and suitably stained and polished them to give an impression of age. Hardly had he finished before Nick Gregson and Larry, urgently contacted, presented themselves and 'Mopes' found himself shut out of the library and detailed to prepare a supper for all three.

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In consequence of this visit, an elderly 'lady' took up residence in a house in South Kensington that had long been empty. Before having her furniture brought, she sent for a gasman to check all pipes because she had a morbid fear of death through this agency. Knowing exactly what to do, Nick Gregson made a suitable hole in the floor of the empty drawing room and placed within it the aged box that contained the ten thousand gold sovereigns. This done, he went down the road to the pawnbroker's in the nearby shopping center. That Samuel Grindberg was in the market for sovereigns was obvious; the poster across his window blazoned the fact for all to see.

"I see you're interested in sovereigns, Mister," Nick Gregson commented, as Grindberg himself came to attend to his customer.

"Right." Grindberg surveyed Nick's uniform and was perfectly satisfied that everything was in order.

"In that case, take my tip and go and see the old lady who's moving in to seventeen, Caterham Gate. I've just bin fixin' the gas pipes, and dug up a box of sovereigns—'undreds of 'em! King Edward Seventh, from the look of 'em. The old lady told me to ask you to go and see her. Okay?"

"Thanks—I will."

And Samuel Grindberg wasted no time about it. He called his lady assistant to take care of the shop and then set off. Larry, superbly disguised, was smoking his pipe when the doorbell rang. Promptly he put the pipe away, assumed the shaky old woman's role, and admitted the energetic, middle-aged Grindberg into the empty ball.

"Good morning, madam. Grindberg's the name. A gas man told me about..."

"Some sovereigns he had found? Yes, yes, indeed ... most remarkable." Larry had cultivated an excellent quavering treble. "As it was a matter of some urgency, he offered to help me out. I understand you deal in sovereigns?"

"I buy them, madam, certainly—providing they are yours to sell."

"Well, they're on my property, so I'll take the responsibility. Come and see them for yourself."

Grindberg nodded and followed the 'old lady' as 'she' shambled into the drawing room. In another moment he was on his knees, regardless of the dust, turning over the pile of coins in the box below floorboard level.

"No doubt of it," he said. "Sovereigns of Edward Seventh period."

"Then," Larry said, innocently, "I would like to sell them to you."

"Yes, and I'll be glad to buy them, providing they're genuine, and that you'll indemnify me against any police enquiry."

"Genuine? Well, of course they're genuine!"

Grindberg picked up one of the coins and examined it carefully with a jeweler's lens. When he had finished his examination, there was a puzzled look on his face.

"I'm not altogether satisfied that these sovereigns are genuine, madam; unless, of course, their age has something to do with the defacement on the King's profile. However, we still wish to do a deal, don't we?"

"Naturally." Larry was getting worried. This was the first time the sovereigns had ever been questioned.

"My reputation around here is impeccable" Grindberg said, rising and dusting his knees. "I'm prepared to give you a receipt for these sovereigns whilst I have them examined by experts. If they're perfectly genuine, I'll pay full market price for however many there may be. How's that?"

Larry reflected swiftly, only to realize almost immediately that he dared not refuse. To do so would look very suspicious. But what the devil did the man mean by questioning their genuineness? The Chief surely hadn't slipped up for once?

"Well?" Grindberg raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, that will be all right. How—how soon will you know whether you can buy them or not?"

"Oh, by this time tomorrow, I should think. And if they are spurious, the police must be told, naturally."

"The police?" Larry's make-up saved his look of consternation.

"Certainly—for your good, madam, and mine. You can't afford to have spurious coins on your property, any more than I can afford to be mixed up in a possible deal concerning them. Leave everything to me, Mrs.—er ... ?"

"Mrs. Henshaw."

"Right! Leave everything to me, Mrs. Henshaw, and I'll see we're safe enough, whatever the analysis shows." Grindberg scribbled hastily. "Here is your receipt, madam. I'll get back to the shop and ... No, better still, I'll ask my son to come and remove this lot for me. He's only next door but one—a

building contractor—and he has a handcart, amongst other things.”

Larry nodded rather dazedly, still painfully aware of the fact that there wasn't anything he could do. There was not even the opportunity of disappearing and taking the coins with him before things became too involved. For one thing, they were too heavy for him at his age and, for another, Grindberg had said he was only going next door but one, which was as good as him hardly being off the doorstep. But what the devil had he meant by the coins not being genuine?

Puzzled, he picked one of them up out of the box and examined it carefully. The King's head was a little out of shape, certainly, but that surely didn't mean anything? Since he was not an expert on coins, Larry was incapable of arriving at any conclusion before Grindberg returned with a powerful young man in the early twenties—obviously his son.

“I'll contact you tomorrow then, Mrs. Henshaw,” the pawnbroker smiled, as the box was dragged from the room. “Will you be at this address?”

“I expect to be,” Larry responded. “If I should miss you, I'll call in at your shop.”

“Fair enough. Only a few yards down the road.”

With that, Grindberg took his departure. Larry let a reasonable time elapse, then he, too, left the house, keeping up his old lady act until he reached the nearest telephone kiosk. Here he dialed swiftly.

“Chief?” he asked as, at length, there came a reply.

“What's the idea? I told you not to use this extension without vital reason.”

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"There is vital reason, Chief! It's about..."

"Whatever it is, it can wait. Ring me in twenty minutes at my private number, then we can speak freely. That's all."

The line clicked and became dead. Larry compressed his lips, shrugged to himself, then glanced briefly at his woman's wristwatch. For the next twenty minutes he killed time as best he could, wandering further away from the region of his 'house' all the time. The moment the twenty minutes was up, he hurried quickly to the nearest kiosk and dialed the Chief's private number.

"Well, what is it?" the Chief's voice asked impatiently. "I've had to take time out to take this call at my home, and you'd better have a good reason. Larry speaking, isn't it?"

"That's right. I thought you ought to know that there are signs of danger. Grindberg—the likely prospect—has his suspicions about the sovereigns. He's going to have them analyzed and, if he doesn't like them, he intends to inform the police."

"If he doesn't like them? What the hell do you mean by that? There is nothing wrong with those sovereigns."

"He seems to think there is. Something to do with the King's face being wrong. Anyway, Chief, I don't like it. If he starts getting the police on the job, we're going to be in a fix. Or, at any rate, I am—and Nick Gregson as well. So—what's the answer?"

Silence for a while, then: "When is Grindberg going to tell you what he thinks about the coins?"

"Tomorrow. He's taken the coins for examination and given me a receipt." And Larry added all the details.

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"I cannot imagine why he should have a reason for suspicion," the Chief observed at length, thoughtfully. "If there is a reason, and he goes to the police, we'll certainly be in an awkward position. They have unpleasantly efficient methods of finding things out. Let me think, now—Grindberg will undoubtedly phone the police if he has a reason, therefore he will not leave his premises and make himself available for us to get at him."

"Get at him?" Larry repeated.

"That's what I said. There is suspicion in that man's mind, Larry, and he'll magnify every little defect in the coins for that reason. He's got to be stopped, and we've got to have those sovereigns back for examination. You can leave this to me. Best thing you can do is to drop out of sight, resume your normal identity and go to the hideout in Ireland. I'll let you know when I want you. I've got to move fast."

"Right," Larry responded promptly, thankful to be able to drop out of the proceedings, and he rang off.

At the other end of the line the Chief sat musing for a moment or two, then he picked up the phone again and dialed swiftly. It was the thick argumentative voice of 'Mopes' that answered him—very cautiously to commence with.

"A job for you, 'Mopes'," the Chief said briefly. "Get the closed saloon from the house garage and use your usual moustache and glasses disguise. You'll be safe enough at the wheel of the car. You'll drive it to Caterham Gate, South Kensington, and stop at the corner of Alderson Street. There you will pick up Nick Gregson. I'll make arrangements for him to be there. Got that so far?"



"Yep," 'Mopes' agreed heavily. "Be a relief to get out of this damned joint."

"I haven't finished yet. Listen further. This is an elimination job..."

"The snake stuff!" 'Mopes' cried eagerly.

"That's it You'll find everything in the laboratory, second shelf up. Take it with you. The man you will eliminate is named Grindberg. He runs a jewelry and pawnbrokers shop just beyond the Alderson Street corner. I'll arrange that he leaves that shop around noon. He's middle-aged, active in his walk, becoming bald, with a fresh complexion. Make sure it *is* him before you do anything. Let Nick do the driving. Transfer Grindberg's body to anywhere you like, so long as it's off the beaten track. Has that much registered?"

"Yep."

"Lastly, you will return to Grindberg's shop. I don't think there'll be anybody there, except a young woman. Silence her somehow, so she can't identify you later, but you are not, under any circumstances, to harm her. In that shop, somewhere, you'll find there are ten thousand sovereigns. Get them—and get back to the house by night—not day. That will be around seven at this time of year. Everything clear?"

"Yep."

The Chief pressed down the receiver rest, waited, then let it rise again. From the directory he dialed Grindberg's number.

"Hello, yes? Grindberg, jeweler, speaking."

"Would you be interested in viewing a selection of diamond rings, Mr. Grindberg?" the Chief asked in a polite voice.

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"Are they valuable?"

"As a collector, I would place their total worth at about two hundred thousand pounds. I have a few other gem dealers who will be coming to my home later. I've included you on the list."

"Kind of you," Grindberg said, "but why? Do I know you? Do you know me?"

"I know you quite well, and have been impressed by your fair prices for precious stones. Of course, if you're not interested..."

"Hold on a minute. Who says I'm not interested? A gem dealer is always interested in diamonds. What is your name, sir?"

"Andrew Carmichael."

Grindberg gave a little gasp and then blinked. Andrew Carmichael was one of the greatest buyer of gems in the city. Then the ever-suspicious Grindberg remembered something.

"I read the other day that Andrew Carmichael had gone to the continent."

"Publicity stuff," the Chief responded calmly. "I prefer to drop out of sight now and again whilst I finish special deals. Let me tell you, Mr. Grindberg, that this is a very special offer. Do you wish to view these diamonds, along with your competitors, or don't you?"

"Of course I do. When would be convenient?"

"Be at my home at two o'clock this afternoon. Elm Terrace, West One. The Larches."

"Two o'clock is a bit difficult..."

"That is the only time when you can see the stuff without your competitors also being present. I have all the times arranged. If, of course, you buy on the spot, I'll cancel the others."

Grindberg was a businessman. "I'll be there!"

He rang off and glanced at his watch. He had only time to get lunch and then be on his way. His intention to make a thorough examination of 'Mrs. Henshaw's' sovereigns would have to wait until later. Turning, he raised his voice in a shout:

"Betty!"

A slim, good-looking girl in the early twenties—exactly the right type to tell the tale to the customers—came hurrying into his back office.

"Yes, Mr. Grindberg?"

"Better close for lunch. You'll have to take over for most of this afternoon. I've some important business in the city."

"Yes, Mr. Grindberg," and the attractive blonde took her departure and returned on time to open the shop up again. As he had intimated, Grindberg was missing.

Until three o'clock, nothing happened in Mr. Grindberg's establishment. The implicitly trusted Betty manicured her faultless nails, ate six chocolate nougats, read part of her romantic novel and imagined herself swept into the arms of a laughing Caribbean brigand—then came two customers. Muttering to herself, she switched on her dazzling smile and drifted to a position behind the nearest glass showcase.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," she greeted brightly, but as there was no response, something of the smile faded from

her face. The two men had come in and turned their backs to her to examine another showcase. Now they turned to face her, she realized they were masked with handkerchiefs. One of them was small and the other huge. Both wore overcoats with upturned collars and soft hats low down over their eyes. To recognize any features was impossible.

Betty was plainly and simply scared to death, but she still had the presence of mind to remember the button to the burglar alarm. Her delicate white hand began to stray to it, until the massive paw of 'Mopes' crashed down on her wrist.

"Better not," he muttered, as the girl flushed with pain. "Get back out of sight—behind them cabinets."

"Look here—who do you think you're ordering about—eh?"

Betty wondered how she had the nerve to say that much. The next moment she was seized and bundled behind the cabinets. 'Mopes' powerful hands held her tightly against the wall.

"Hurry it up, Nick," 'Mopes' snapped, forgetting he ought not to use names. "Find them sovs. and let's get out."

"Why not yell it out in the street that we're here, an' be done with it?" Nick blazed. "You've shouted my name, and what we've come for. Anything else?"

"Search—and shut up! Sugar here won't say nothin', will you?" And 'Mopes' shook the girl fiercely.

"No—no, of course I won't!" Her blue eyes were wide in fright as 'Mopes' still pinned her against the wall. She did her best to try and discern his features, but it was impossible. All she could clearly detect were his cold, blue, inexorable eyes. They were studying her intently, almost inhumanly.

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Then he suddenly looked away and watched Nick's urgent searching in the back office.

"There's sovereigns in this joint some place," 'Mopes said abruptly. "You look the bright sort uv girl who'd know just where. How's about telling me, huh?"

"I don't know..." Betty gasped, her eyes watering as 'Mopes' smashed a hand viciously across her face.

"Don't hand me that, sugar. You're a trusty in this joint, or you wouldn't be left with all this caboodle. Where is it? The sovereigns, I mean! Cough it up before I bash your pretty top through that showcase!"

At that, Betty found herself swung around helplessly, lifted off her feet, so the showcase was perilously near her face.

"The—the safe!" she gasped hoarsely. "They're in the safe. In—in a box."

'Mopes' set her down. "What's the combination?"

"I—I..."

"Quick, damn you—! We haven't no time to waste!"

"Left four, right six, left two—and let go of me!" she panted, struggling. "Get your filthy hands off me!"

"Not just yet, sugar. Got that combination, Nick? Hurry it up!" 'Mopes' turned back to the girl and whirled her back again against the wall. "Y'know something. sugar? You're just the kind of kid I could go for. I'll show you what I mean. I hold you tighter up against me, like this, see, and with my right hand I—hell!" 'Mopes' broke off as, in shifting his hand, the girl's right arm was also released and she made good use of it.

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Her right hand gouged down his face, tearing away the handkerchief mask and ripping the flesh down his cheek. For the moment 'Mopes' forgot his lustful intentions and realized two other things instead. His features were revealed, and he was bleeding like hell. Then the girl had twisted and torn free of his remaining hand.

She blundered towards the shop doorway, screaming at the top of her voice. She grabbed the door to open it—but 'Mopes' was upon her.

"You hell-fired she-cat!" he yelled. "Stick your claws in me, will you?"

His terrific right fist slammed straight into her jaw as she swung round, and that did it. 'Mopes' was an immensely powerful man, with all the brute force that often goes with a turgid intelligence. Betty was literally lifted from her feet under the impact of the blow, her brain crashing into darkness. She hit the showcase behind her, recoiled from its wooden edge without breaking the glass, then crashed on her face on the floor and lay motionless. The whole thing took only a few seconds, and 'Mopes' watched it all in fascination.

Then he glanced at the closed door. Two people were looking at the articles in the window, but were barred from seeing into the shop by the array of goods. They might come in at any moment, though. 'Mopes' moved, with some intelligence for once. He took one leap at the door, jammed the bolt, then retreated without being noticed.

Striding over the girl's motionless body, he looked in at the office doorway.

"Hurry it up, Nick! How in hell much longer?"

Nick turned from levering a heavy box out of the safe. Then he gave a start.

"Your mask! Where is it?"

"The bitch scratched it. Got that stuff yet?"

"Yes, but it'll take both of us ... What was that you said about the kid?"

"I had to quieten her. She got tough..."

A startled look came into Nick's eyes. Suddenly abandoning his effort with the case of sovereigns, he brushed past the ponderous 'Mopes' and hurried into the shop. In a matter of seconds he spotted the girl and dropped beside her.

"You damned silly fool!" he whispered, getting up again slowly. "This kid's dead. Dead! You know what the Chief said 'bout not hurting her."

"Dead?" A vague look of alarm came to Mopes' unlovely face. "She can't be! I only tapped her on the chin for ploughin' my face up."

"Her neck's broken, anyway." Sweating, Nick gave a quick glance about him, towards the people passing up and down in the street outside. Then he swung back to 'Mopes'.

"We've only one chance, since you've balled up the whole thing, 'Mopes'. Make it look like a robbery. Take some of the stuff in here as well as the sovereigns. Shove the kid behind the counter outa sight."

'Mopes' moved like a Juggernaut. He dragged the dead girl behind the counter and then stuffed his pockets with small valuables, while Nick did likewise.

"Right!" Nick panted. "That's all we can do. Get the door open. We'll walk out, carry the case between us. No masks,

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though, any more than when we came in. That'd get folks wonderin'. As it is, we oughta make it."

"Mopes' ripped off his kerchief from around his neck and jammed it in his pocket, then he headed into the office. Nick followed him, to find he was not needed. With a red face and a good deal of hard breathing, 'Mopes' hauled the case on to his shoulder.

"Take two uv us!" he sneered. "Why in hell don't you get some muscle in that rat's body of yours? Get the door open."

Nick nodded briefly and hurried forward to pull back the bolt. The door swung open. As casually as possible, keeping their faces averted, they left the shop and moved to their car at the kerb, a few yards away.

'Mopes' heaved the case of sovereigns into the front seat with such force it ripped the hide. Five seconds later he and Nick were on their way, and men and women still passed back and forth outside Grindberg's shop, unaware that anything unusual had happened.



III

THE SENSATION-MONGERS had plenty to feast on in the evening papers. The choice of two intriguing items. The *Record* chose 'KENSINGTON MURDER ROBBERY' for its headline, whilst the *Echo* preferred 'PAWNBROKER DIES OF SNAKE-BITE'.

The *Echo*, in fact, considered it so unusual for a man in a disused warehouse to be found dead from snake-bite that they ran a feature about it. Death from a snake had not happened in England since—oh, heaven knew when! Reporters went gray trying to find the last occasion. But what connection had a pawnbroker dead from snake-bite to do with his own shop being robbed and his girl assistant being killed? Was it coincidence or deliberate plotting? Had the gold sovereign found on the dead pawnbroker anything to do with the mystery? This was what the police wanted to know. In fact, what everybody wanted to know.

\* \* \* \*

And, in a certain mansion, thirty miles from London, the Chief was on the rampage. Cloistered with 'Mopes' McCall and Nick Gregson in the library, he had about exhausted all the epithets he could think of in expressing his fury.

"I should think you've done every damned thing I told you not to do!" was his final explosion.

"Just the way things 'appened, Chief," Nick muttered sullenly.

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"I'm not blaming you, Nick, so much as this thick-eared clod who worked with you. Blast you, 'Mopes', what did you have to kill that girl for?"

'Mopes' moved uneasily. "I didn't do it on purpose, Chief. I only tapped her on the chin."

"Why?"

"She wus goin' to give things away by shoutin' inter the street. It wus the only thing I could do."

"She broke her neck, anyway," the Chief snapped. "And I expect you left your damned fingerprints all over the place—and on her, or I don't know you! You are already fingerprinted as a convicted criminal. I can see there may be a row over this lot, 'Mopes', and if there is, I'll see that you're in it up to your neck. It was to avoid anything like this that I gave orders for the girl assistant not to be hurt. That's murder, you dim-witted ape—or didn't you know?"

"So wus bumpin' off Grindberg!" 'Mopes' retorted.

"I agree—but nobody will be able to trace that, providing you did the job properly."

"We did everything you said, Chief," Nick said nervously. "Picked him up when he left the shop and took him to an empty warehouse. Then we 'snake-bited' him, just like you said."

The Chief looked at the box of sovereigns on the floor of the library. Picking one of them up, he examined it under the bright desk light. Quickly he turned back again and picked up a handful. By the time he had finished studying each coin in turn, his face was grim.

"This is wonderful!" he declared sourly, flinging them back in the box. "If the sovereign found on Grindberg was identical with these, the prospect of trouble is about trebled. For some reason, each one of these sovereigns is wrongly cast."

"Can't blame us for that, Chief," 'Mopes' commented.

The Chief did not answer. He thought for a moment or two; then, suddenly making up his mind, he hurried from the library, slamming the door behind him. He went straight down into the laboratory and across to the bench where lay the moulds. In a few minutes he was back, bringing with him the faulty mould for King Edward VII.

"What's the answer to this, 'Mopes'?" he asked curtly.

'Mopes' looked at the mould, then at the Chief's steely eyes. He rubbed the end of his bulbous nose rather uncertainly.

"I—I dunno, boss. What is it?"

"A mould, welded up the center," the Chief sneered. "I didn't do it, and you're the only person around here in the normal way. This welded crack has spoiled the profile impression, and the flaw has repeated in every sovereign that has been cast. I never noticed it at the time, because I was too busy. Thanks to Grindberg having one of the sovereigns on his person, the police are going to think things."

'Mopes' breathed hard. "I—I didn't know I'd done anything wrong, Chief. I heard a noise below and went to look. Me hand caught the mould and knocked it on to the floor. So—so I repaired it."

"Without telling me!"

"I—I wus scared uv what you'd say, or do."

"There's nothing I can do—it's done." The Chief put the mould on the table and sighed. "No use my taking it out of your hide, 'Mopes', you're too thick-skinned. But on day, I may pay you back when you don't expect it. For the moment, the unpleasant truth is that our whole organization has been thrown into chaos, and the police are probably sniffing out our trail at this very moment. I'll do what I can to deflect them, but it won't be easy. You'll stay on here, 'Mopes', and keep guard. You, Nick, had better be on your way whilst it's dark. Go back to your usual job and I'll tell you when you're needed. If there's trouble about your being away from your job, let me know. I'll square it for you." Nick gave a quick nod and beat a retreat, glad to get away from the Chief's smoldering rage. 'Mopes' remained unmoved, far too obtuse to realize that, one day, the Chief would strike him down without mercy.

It was also about this time that Chief-Inspector Norden, of the Yard's murder squad, was pondering the sovereign lying on his blotter. Save for the faint clicking of Detective-Sergeant Withers' keyboard in the far corner as he tabulated the details of the Grindberg shop murder, there was not a sound in the office. The dusty electric light was glowing and, outside, was the gloom of the late autumn night hovering over the Embankment across the way.

"The point is," Norden said at last, lighting his pipe, "is there a connection between the death of Grindberg himself from snake-bite, and the murder of his girl assistant? Viewed impartially, the two things don't seem to be connected. Yet, looking at this sovereign, I begin to wonder."

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"Yes, sir," Withers said dutifully, and went on with his typing. He was accustomed to his superior's habit of thinking out loud.

After a while, Norden drew to him the police surgeon's report and read it through for the third time:

"Post Mortem Report on Betty Lathom, Dec'd.

Cause of death I ascribe to fracture of the vertebrae, possibly caused in the first instance by a severe blow to the jaw, which caused the head to jerk back sharply. The blow was probably administered by a fist, since there are no marks to suggest an instrument. It is also possible that the deceased was hit in the face, there being distinct evidence of contusion on the left cheek (suggesting a right-handed attacker)."

"Mmmmm," Norden commented to himself, and unearthed a second report.

"Post Mortem Report on Samuel Grindberg Dec'd. Cause of death I ascribe to severe snake-bite, though from what kind of snake cannot be stated until further analysis of the venom within the victim has been made. No other traces of injury."

"Fatal snake-bite in Britain. It's unheard of." Norden was talking aloud again. "If I could only be sure that the snake-bite business is phony, cleverly arranged murder, I could also be sure that the raid on the Grindberg shop was part of the same set-up."

He reached to the interphone and switched through to the Fingerprint Records department

"Dabs? That you, Harry? Anything checking yet on those prints you got at Grindberg's?"

"I'm just coming round, sir. I think we've something that will interest you."

"Good! About time somebody had!"

In a moment or two the fingerprint expert had arrived, carrying with him an indexed folder. Laying it on the desk, he opened it at a photograph—a complete record indeed, including fingerprints—of one 'Mopes' McCall.

"No doubt of one thing, sir," the expert said. "The few prints we found in Grindberg's are all identical with those of this chap. Other prints are obviously made by gloves. Seems unlikely McCall here would wear gloves part of the time only. Which suggests he had an accomplice, or accomplices."

"Uh-huh." Norden studied the photograph. "Ugly looking cuss, isn't he? Escaped Dartmoor two years ago, did he? Not recaptured. Mmmm. No record of him being mixed up in counterfeit coins, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Before he was convicted for robbery and attempted murder—and those other charges you see on his record there—he was a panel-beater and welder in an obscure garage somewhere."

"Right. That's all I need at the moment, Harry. But thanks very much—and leave the file here."

The expert nodded and went out. Norden relighted his pipe. In the corner, at his own desk, Withers went on typing steadily, wondering just how soon it would be possible to knock off work. It was already ten past eight.

"It seems to me," Norden said presently, as though he had read the sergeant's thoughts, "that there's not much more we can do tonight, Jim. I want the full report on Grindberg, for

one thing, and a statement from the Royal Mint concerning this sovereign for another. Nothing much more we can do for the moment."

With which Withers promptly agreed and, ten minutes later, both he and Norden had returned to their homes, to forget all about murder, snake-bites and robbery; but, the following morning, they were back on the job again—or, at least, Withers was. His superior did not arrive until nearly eleven o'clock, and then it was with a puzzled look on his square face.

"Morning. Jim," he greeted briefly. "Anything more yet?" he added, pulling off his hat and overcoat.

"No, sir. I've got the reports complete on the Grindberg business, and Doc. Andrews has sent in a further report on Grindberg. Seems it was rattlesnake venom that killed him."

"Rattlesnake? Wonder how the hell an American serpent got over here..."

Norden crossed to the desk and studied the report thoughtfully.

"Rider on Post Mortem of Samuel Grindberg Dec'd. It is my opinion, after chemical analysis of the deceased's bloodstream, that death was caused by rattlesnake venom, within approximately ninety minutes of the bite. Closer investigation of the corpse reveals two small punctures at the base of the throat, which tally with the width of a rattlesnake's poison fangs."

"Think of that!" Norden commented and, sitting down, he lifted the telephone. "Get me the chief caretaker at the Zoological Gardens, please, and make it quick."

Returning the phone to its rest, he took from his pocket the solitary golden sovereign he had been inspecting the previous evening. Detective-Sergeant Withers raised a questioning eyebrow.

"The Royal Mint never manufactured this coin, Jim," Norden said, holding it up. "I checked on it this morning, which is where I've been till now. On the other hand the metallurgy department tells me it contains all the necessary ingredients of a sovereign."

"Right amount of gold, you mean?"

"Right amount of gold and alloy."

"Well, then—doesn't that make it legal tender?"

Norden looked severe. "My dear man, where have you lived? Any coin which has not been produced by the Royal Mint is spurious. Dammit, if we had people turning out gold sovereigns just as they liked—correct proportion of gold and alloy notwithstanding—where would we be? This is a fake. Why Grindberg had it in his pocket, and whether it is connected with the murder of that poor girl Betty Lathom we don't know—but we may soon. I have Grindberg's son, Nathaniel, coming in this morning. He was out of town yesterday, so we couldn't get a statement from him..."

Norden broke off and lifted the telephone. "Yes? Oh, yes—put him on. Zoo Supervisor? This is Chief Inspector Norden, C.I.D., Metropolitan Division. I'm busy on the Grindberg case. Maybe you read the facts? Uh-huh. Yes, well, that helps a lot. Grindberg was killed by a rattlesnake, apparently. Is there one missing from the zoo—or any of the zoos—that you know of? There isn't? No information about it? Yes, I see. Tell me,



how long does a rattlesnake's bite take to prove fatal? Right. Yes—I see how you mean. Many thanks.”

Norden rang off and lighted his pipe slowly.

“No escapes from the zoos, sir?” Withers asked.

“Nothing at all and, if there had been, it would have been reported, naturally. Further, I'm not sure but that the captive snakes have their fangs drawn, anyway. But I was given the possible solution that the snake may have come over from America in some cargo somehow and escaped unnoticed—but that it happened to pick on Grindberg is the most amazing thing ever. Time of death from the bite varies from an hour to three hours, and as a rule it is fatal.”

“Whale of a queer business this, sir.”

Norden was about to answer when the door opened. “A Mr. Nathaniel Grindberg to see you, Inspector.”

“Ah, yes. Show him in, please.” Norden got to his feet and held out his hand in welcome as the powerfully built son of the dead pawnbroker came in swiftly.

“My condolences, Mr. Grindberg,” Norden said, with a sympathetic smile. “Have a seat...”

Nathaniel sat, fidgeting nervously with his hat. Norden summed him up briefly as he smoked, then:

“Primarily, of course, we are investigating the murder and robbery in your late father's shop, Mr. Grindberg, but we are also trying to tie up the problem of your father's peculiar demise by snake-bite. It was reported to the police in the first place by boys playing in an old warehouse, who found the body. Up to now, there has been no suspicion of foul play; just, shall we say, death from misadventure. But the way

things are shaping, the inquests on both your father and Miss Lathom will be adjourned, pending further enquiry. There may be a connection."

"Possibly." the young man muttered. "But I can't think what. I know I'd like to get my hands on the swine who killed Betty. We were going to become engaged next year."

"I see..." Norden picked up the sovereign from the desk. "Have you any idea where this came from? As you will know, it was found in your father's pocket."

"I know." Nathaniel gave a gloomy nod. "It'd be one of the ten thousand he took from Mrs. Henshaw for examination before buying them."

Withers looked up sharply from making notes of the conversation. On Norden's face there was no change of expression.

"Ten thousand of them? That's a tremendous number of sovereigns. How do you know about them?"

Nathaniel gave the facts. Then: "I'm surprised you don't know about them. They'll be in my father's safe in his office, I expect. I wanted to check on it myself, but the policeman on duty wouldn't allow me."

"Only doing his duty, Mr. Grindberg. This Mrs. Henshaw, from whom you took the sovereigns on your handcart; what did she look like?"

"Oh, around eighty, I'd say. Very bent, high-pitched voice, old-fashioned clothes. Seems the gas man found the sovereigns in the first place and he went and told dad, at Mrs. Hensliaw's request, of course."

"Why your father, specifically?"

"No idea. Because he was the nearest pawnbroker, I suppose."

"I see." Norden knocked the ashes from his pipe. "And this elderly lady had bought number seventeen Caterham Gate, had she? And your father was to report on the sovereigns to her today?"

"That's it. Maybe she doesn't know what's happened, and is still waiting for him."

"She will very soon be acquainted with the facts," Norden said. "Man from the gas company to check the pipes, lay on the gas, or what?"

"No idea of the reason for his visit, Inspector."

Norden smiled. "Well, thank you, Mr. Grindberg. I shan't need to detain you any further. I'll keep in touch with you. You've no particular information you can give about Betty Lathom, I expect?"

"Afraid not. You'll have got practically everything from her parents, haven't you?"

"Yes; we did that yesterday. Her address was on her insurance card. Well, good day, Mr. Grindberg."

Nathaniel shook hands and departed, leaving Norden biting on his extinguished briar. He wandered back to the desk and met Withers' excited glance.

"Ten thousand sovereigns, sir! And all duds, if they are like that spare one we found on Grindberg. But they were not in the safe, even though young Nat evidently thought they were. Unless he's up to something."

"I don't think so, Jim—though, in our job, we can't trust anybody by appearances. The point is," Norden continued,

pointing his briar significantly, "this business begins to make sense. We have our tie-up. Those sovereigns were taken from Grindberg's safe, obviously, and that means that the other odd articles were probably only taken for effect. But for Grindberg's son, we'd never have known there were any more sovereigns. It definitely begins to look as though the sovereigns and Grindberg's death from snake-bite were all part of the same thing. The girl was perhaps wiped out to stop her talking."

"And this Mrs. Henshaw? She's a new one."

"Yes. Hop over to seventeen Caterham Gate, Jim, and see what you can dig up. I'll check on the gas authority and see if we can trace that gas man."

"Right, sir."

Withers whipped up his coat and hurried out as Norden crossed to the phone. Before long he was in touch with the right quarter in the gas company, and he was not particularly surprised, either, when he learned that no official from the gas company had ever been sent to seventeen Caterham Gate.

Norden sat musing for a while when he had this response; then he looked through the reports, the photographs, the fingerprint records: Finally he picked up the sovereign.

"Doesn't make sense," he muttered. "No man would make ten thousand sovereigns of the right gold and alloy amounts, and then go through all this palaver..." He switched on the interphone. "That you, Mort? Can you spare a moment for a vital conversation?"

"No—but I'll come, just the same. I know you would hardly be asking for me unless you were out of your depth—and I love seeing you murder boys eating humble pie."

Norden switched off, smiling sourly to himself. After a while, Chief-Inspector Mortimer Dawson presented himself. He was tall, thin and keen-featured and, from his generally jovial manner it would have been difficult to realize that he was one of the Yard's 'boffins'. In other words, he was one of three Inspectors specially versed in scientific problems and, as such, was attached to the C.I.D.'s Scientific Division.

"All right, I'm listening." he said, throwing himself in the nearest chair and lighting an extinguished stub of a cigarette. "What's on your mind, Arthur?"

"The Grinberg business, to be exact. You said I was getting out of my depth, and you're dead right! The possibility is that the prime mover in the business is minting sovereigns—ten thousand of them that I know of. And the rub is that they're exactly right in weight, gold content, and all the rest of it. What kind of a lunatic would risk that? What would he get out of it? Cost him more to fake the damned things than to sell them."

"Depending." Dawson replied, "on how he did it. His method of manufacture, I mean. You're sure all ten thousand are what you might call 'genuine duds'?"

"Here's one of the ten thousand. I can't guarantee all the others are like this, but it's an even chance that they are."

Dawson took the coin handed to him and studied it with the eye of a specialist. Then he tossed it up and down in his palm.

"I take your word for it that the contents are right?"

"Not my word, Mort—the Mint's. I had it checked there. Now, what can I do? How can a man manufacture this sort of thing?"

"Poor nose and beard on the profile," Dawson mused, still scrutinizing the coin. "Eh? How could they be manufactured? Very easily, if the secret happens to be known. I could do it myself if I knew the secret, and retire from this hell-fired business of working out other Inspectors' sums for them."

"Would you mind coming to the point?" Norden demanded with sulphuric calm.

"All right. The answer's transmutation—I think."

Norden wrinkled his brow. "Isn't that something to do with souls?"

"That, my learned friend, is transmigration—a very different matter. Transmutation is the atomic theory, the Philosopher's Stone of old-fashioned alchemy—the power to change other metals into gold."

"It's damned impossible!"

"Nothing is that, if you have a scientific mind. The scientists have striven for years to discover a way of changing one metal into another, even more so since the atomic theory came in. It is a controlled principle of adding or subtracting electrons from atoms of matter, thereby altering their constitution. A man who could do that—a brilliant nuclear physicist, for instance—could make a sovereign like this. Thousands or tens of thousands, like stamping out confetti from paper."

"But—but you don't seriously mean that some criminal scientist is doing that?"

"In this space and atomic age I can't think why not. The cost to him would be heavy—yes; but negligible, compared to the profit he'd make with those things in circulation. From what I can see, he's slipped up in the die-cast somewhere, and that's exposed the whole thing."

Norden sighed and then irritably refilled his pipe. "Now I'm getting really sunk! I'm a straightforward murder man, with my murder box, lens, and band of helpers. I've never had a case I couldn't solve, but if I'm getting entangled with nuclear physicists who can turn things into gold—I'm quitting!"

Dawson grinned and tossed the coin back on the table. "You can't quit. The Assistant Commissioner takes a dim view of that kind of thing."

"I can transfer the case to a specialist. Yourself, for instance ... Yes," Norden went on, musing through the smoke of his pipe, "the more I think of it, the more scientific this business becomes. The death of Grindberg, for instance, from the bite of a rattlesnake. Everything pathological says a rattlesnake did it, but somehow, I can't believe it. Whoever heard of a rattlesnake in the heart of London? Nobody else has been bitten, or else it hasn't been reported, and no snakes are missing from the zoo. Do you think a snake-bite could be faked in some way?"

"Surely." Dawson apparently had no doubt about it. He jabbed his cigarette in the ashtray and spread his hands. "You only want the venom and something that looks like snake-bite—and there you are; at least, I think so. I'm a scientist,

not a specialized pathologist. Let's have Ensdale's view. He's the smartest pathologist and physicist we've got on the staff."

Norden turned to the intercom and gave the necessary instructions; then they had to bide their time until Boyd Ensdale saw fit to grace the drab office with his presence. He was head of the pathology division and acting consultant to the scientists, quite one of the cleverest men at the Yard. His degrees ran into two columns of small type in 'Who's Who'.

His appearance, when he arrived, bore no relation to his position or knowledge. He was of small build, untidy and with graying hair that looked as though nothing on earth would keep it under control. His features were nondescript but there was intelligence in the rapier-sharp gray eyes.

"Yes, gentlemen?" he asked briefly, wandering in and perching absent-mindedly on the edge of the desk. "Is there something you want?"

"Quite a deal, Mr. Ensdale, if you can spare the time for it." There was unction in Norden's voice. "It's the Grindberg case. It's taken a turn into the scientific regions."

"Grindberg? Oh, yes—the snake-bite business."

"Exactly—the snake-bite business," Norden agreed. "I can't credit that the snake-biting is genuine, and I'd like your opinion on whether such a thing could be faked."

"Simple enough, I should think. You only need two needle-like prongs duplicating the width of the snake's double tongue, coat the prongs in venom, and there you are."

"If you were to examine the body of Grindberg could you tell from the fatal wound he received whether it is genuine or a fake?"



"It might be possible by micro-analysis of the wound tissue. If it is genuine, some traces of saliva from the snake will probably be obvious. If it is not genuine, no such sign will be present. Do you wish me to look?"

"I'd be glad if you would," Norden assented. "Andrews is working on the corpse at the moment at the mortuary. I'll have a word with him and tell him you'll be coming over."

"Right," Ensdale said, slipping off the table. "I'll let you know all about it as soon as I can."

He left the office in the same thoughtful way as he had entered it. The door had hardly closed behind him before the telephone rang. It was Detective-Sergeant Withers at the other end of the wire.

"Nothing doing at seventeen Caterham Gate, sir," he announced. "Place is empty and locked up. According to neighbors, nobody has been seen near the place so far today."

"Not very surprising," Norden replied. "Since the man from the gas company was also a fake. I assume Mrs. Henshaw was, as well. You'd better trace the agents who sold the house to Mrs. Henshaw and see if you..."

"I already have, sir. A 'For Sale' notice had been stripped down from a top window and was lying on the floor. They're in the same road—Caterham Gate—and they..."

"To the point, Jim. What did they say?"

"Apparently, Mrs. Henshaw hadn't bought the place. She had only been given the key and a permit to view, said permit having a time expiry of two days. Evidently just long enough

for her to complete her business with Grindberg. Needless to say, the key has not been returned to the agents' office."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. From what I have been able to find out, Grindberg senior wasn't exactly the soul of honor."

"So I imagine—otherwise, he wouldn't have agreed to a deal in sovereigns about the origin of which he was by no means sure. All right, Jim, thanks. You might as well come back to the office."

Norden switched off and glanced across at Dawson.

"Plainly," Dawson said, "the whole thing is quite nicely organized from beginning to end. Still feel that you'd prefer me to take the job over?"

"Definitely! Give me a straightforward killing, not a modern Midas. I want you to come with me to the A.C., and I'll try and get him to let me transfer the case to you."

The Assistant Commissioner raised no objections, and Norden's relief was obvious as he handed over all records, notes and photographs to date. It had got to evening before Dawson, by now acquainted with the main facts, received the awaited report of Boyd Ensdale. It said:

"Concerning Samuel Grindberg Dec'd—it is my opinion that the snake-bite wound is genuine. Micro-analysis of tissue from around the wound reveals traces of snake saliva, along with the venom."

Dawson put the report on one side and lighted a cigarette. Detective-Sergeant Harriday, his right-hand man and also specially trained in the scientific group, picked up the report and studied it for himself.

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"Genuine, after all, sir. Damned amazing coincidence—don't you think?"

"Too amazing. I don't believe it. I'm not doubting Ensdale's word, but I do think we're up against a criminal scientist with an uncanny gift for faking his effects to cover his traces. Tomorrow, in the daylight, we're going round to examine the warehouse where Grindberg was found."

## IV

TO THE SURPRISE of 'Mopes', the Chief paid an unexpected visit to the mansion two days after the snake-bite death of Samuel Grindberg. As usual, he came by night and walked in on the strong-arm man to find him listening to the radio, his feet propped on the arm of one of the best chairs.

"Shut that thing off!" the Chief ordered.

"Sure thing." 'Mopes' obeyed and then looked surprised. "I thought you didn't mind me 'aving the radio and telly, boss?"

"I don't—but not that loud. How would you expect to hear anybody prowling about? You didn't even hear me."

"I never thought of that," 'Mopes' admitted, scratching his head.

The Chief settled himself in the nearest chair and lighted a cigarette. Discreetly, 'Mopes' put his feet on the floor.

"Something wrong, Chief?" he asked presently. "I didn't expect you comin'."

"So I noticed, with your number twelves defiling the furniture. As for there being something wrong—yes, there is. All traceable to you. First, the damaged mould which gave away the sovereign racket; then the killing of that youngster, Betty Lathom. I've a mind to rub you out, 'Mopes'."

The other man's eyes hardened. He was prepared to fight for his life if he had to, but he much preferred the easier way of just taking orders.

"Right now, you can be useful," the Chief continued, musing. "I don't know whether you've heard about it on that

radio or not, but the Grindberg business has been transferred to Chief-Inspector Dawson, of the Yard's scientific division. And I don't like it. He's dangerous. Got more knowledge in his little finger than an ordinary copper has in his whole brain-box. We've got to make ourselves reasonably safe, 'Mopes'."

"Anything you say, Chief."

"Dawson has put it out to the press that, although all pathological reports show that Grindberg died of the venom of a rattlesnake, he doesn't believe it, and he's going to leave nothing unturned to prove that the 'bite' was deliberately created by artificial means. That can get you—and, in time, all of us—in a sticky mess, my friend."

"Uh-huh. What do I do, then? Watch out for this mug Dawson and rub him out?"

"No! And stop being so damned crude. You'd only make things worse by killing a Yard man—and a special scientific fellow, at that. I've thought it out, and I think we can save ourselves by having three more killings at widely separated places. Not too widely, though. By that, I mean not all of them in one spot."

'Mopes' sat listening, the set of his thick lips showing he had not in the least gathered the drift as yet.

"Dawson thinks the snake-bite was phony, apparently because Grindberg happened to be the victim. He might incline to thinking it was coincidence if three other people, quite unconnected with Grindberg, also die of snake-bite. The death of all four would then be lumped together as being caused by a solitary rattlesnake loose somewhere in the city. It would probably swing things away from us."

"Could be," 'Mopes' admitted, after a spell of profound concentration. "Make it look natural-like."

"Exactly. And that's where you come into it. I want you to select four people at random, all within a quarter mile area of each other, and 'snake-bite' 'em. Tonight, for preference. You shouldn't have any difficulty."

"Okay," 'Mopes' growled. "Anything else?"

"No. Get on with the job and return here..." The Chief got to his feet. "I'll be round again in due course, when I have need. At the moment we've all got to lie low until the heat's off. For some things, I wish I hadn't to trust so much to you, but it can't be helped. Oh, fresh provisions will be sent in for you tomorrow by the usual firm."

With a nod the Chief went on his way and a moment or two afterwards, the front door of the mansion was slammed. 'Mopes' lighted a cigarette and hummed a tune to himself as he hurried down into the laboratory. He was pleased at the prospect of a night out.

From the shelf of the bottles he took down the simple instrument for making the 'snake-bite', examining it carefully. It consisted of a stainless steel blowpipe, with a double end, exactly spaced so it was the width of a snake's twin-tongued fangs. Or rather, it was slightly under the required width since it was, in basis, a blowpipe, and the darts therefrom would arrive in a victim more widely spaced than at the source of their journey.

Slipping his weapon in his jacket pocket, 'Mopes' crossed to the refrigerator and from it took one of many self-freezing capsules, coated inside with dry ice and in themselves

miniature refrigerators. These were the creation of the Chief. Within the capsules were about twenty glass-like tiny darts, actually nothing more than icicles, with rattlesnake venom frozen within them. The idea was deadly and brilliant. The ice slivers made the necessary punctures in the victim, and then promptly melted and released the venom into the bloodstream. 'Mopes' had never worked with so foolproof a weapon, and it suited his childish, brutal mind to blow darts with unerring accuracy.

Still humming to himself, capsule in his pocket alongside the blowpipe, he hurried upstairs again, wrapped himself up in his overcoat, drew his soft hat low down, and then left the mansion. In a matter of minutes he was driving swiftly down the main road that led eventually into the city. By early morning he was back again, and such was his nature he slept easily on the thought that one man and two women had died at his hands that night, horribly, in the destructive anguish of poison, before help could reach them.

The news of it reached Scotland Yard next day, from different sources. First, one of the women was found, then the man and, finally, the other woman. Because Grindberg had also died of snake-bite, it seemed proper that these latest deaths from a similar cause should be laid at the door of Chief-Inspector Dawson.

"So we get deeper into the mire," he commented bitterly, when he had looked through all three reports.

"I'd say exactly the opposite, sir," Detective-Sergeant Harriday commented. "We're relieved of one worry, surely? We know now that Grindberg's death from snake-bite was

coincidental and not deliberate. Otherwise, why were these other folk wiped out? They're totally unconnected with the Grindberg business, or indeed with anything at all out of the ordinary, if these reports are to be believed."

"Coroner informed of each case," Dawson mused. "Let me see, now..." He switched on the interphone and contacted Boyd Ensdale in the pathological division. "Dawson here, sir. How about the three snake-bite victims which have come in? Are you making out the reports on them for the coroner?"

"No," came Ensdale's voice. "Andrews is doing that, but he asked for my opinion. It's the same as in the case of Grindberg. Genuine snake-bite. Time that blasted serpent was found and killed, if you ask me."

"Yes, indeed," Dawson agreed. "And thank you, sir."

He switched off, lighted a cigarette and plumed smoke from his nostrils.

"Somebody," he said slowly, "is being very clever. Tell me something, Bob: if you were deliberately faking snake-bite wound, and had got rid of a possibly dangerous person by that method, what would you do to throw the police off the scent?"

Harriday reflected for a moment and then snapped his fingers.

"Polish off some independent victims to make it look as though the first snake attack was genuine."

"Right! And that's what's happened here, I think. Which is all to the good. It shows we have our man worried—otherwise, he wouldn't go to such lengths."



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"And where are we?" Harriday sighed. "Not a lead, not a clue. That warehouse certainly didn't tell us anything, and we can't pick up any information concerning the attack in the shop since nobody seems to have noticed what went on. The only concrete thing we have got is that 'Mopes' McCall is mixed up in it somewhere—but we've no way of finding out where he is."

"Not at the moment," Dawson agreed, pondering. "Plainly, though, he isn't the brains behind all this. I think we need to look for a skilled scientist, and since there aren't so many in the country, we can do a bit of elimination and check on the movements of each one. Yes—that's it! I'll have lists of likely ones made out, and then I'll study them. In the meantime, since we haven't got anything else, you can go to work on another angle."

"And what's that, sir?"

"Make a tour of every scrap metal foundry and yard you can dig up. He certainly won't pay top price for it, unless he's crazy, so that leads us to the junk and scrap yards. Find out what you can."

"That I will, sir. And there's also another angle. He can't make transmutations without some pretty costly up-to-date scientific apparatus. Maybe if we contacted the suppliers of generators, cathode ray tubes and general electronic equipment, we might get a lead."

"Very good idea," Dawson conceded. "I'll tackle that over the phone, Bob. You get busy on the junk yards—now!"

Harriday wasted no more time. Neither, for that matter, did Dawson. But, as they realized, they had both started on a

task which might take several days to complete, and in the interval there was nothing could be done. Amongst other things, reports were gathered from the banks of modern coins suspected to be spurious—in various denominations—and they were submitted to Dawson for examination. So cleverly were they molded, it was well nigh impossible to distinguish them from the real thing. Even the banks had been fooled. But the electron-microscope in the Yard's laboratory of physical research was not deceived. Side by side with genuine coins, the false ones revealed themselves by flaws in the lettering round the sides—flaws so minute that even an ordinary microscope could not spot them.

"Which," Dawson declared, when Harriday enquired into progress, "reveals that we're at work on a man, or number of men, who have considerable skill, and who probably relied on the fact that nobody would go to the length of using scientific instruments like the electron-microscope."

"I don't suppose we would have done, sir, but for the fact that we found that phony sovereign on Grindberg. Everything has sprung from that."

"Everything except a definite lead to take us to the heart of this business," Dawson muttered. "There's got to be a way, somehow..."

Meanwhile, at the mansion, 'Mopes' McCall was by no means in a good temper. The provisions which the Chief had promised him had been duly delivered the night before—the night after he'd dealt with his three 'snake-bite' victims—but he had only just discovered, in unpacking them, that the usual supply of cigarettes had been omitted. The obscenities

which 'Mopes' then invoked upon the head of the provision merchant ought to have killed him stone dead—none of which altered the fact that 'Mopes' was without cigarettes, and boiling mad.

Finally, he looked at the clock. It was seven-thirty in the evening, dark outside, and too late for gaspers in this isolated spot—or was it? Suddenly, 'Mopes remembered something and tugged his thick notebook from his shirt pocket, running a red sausage of a finger down a series of entries. When he came to 'Maudie Vincent, The Tobacco Shop', he grinned to himself.

"Why not?" he muttered, putting the notebook on the table and thinking. "I ain't seen Maudie in three years. Be nice to see her, even though I mustn't let her recognize me. An' she's open till ten, or useta be."

'Mopes' nodded promptly to himself. Cigarettes he had got to have, and he was prepared to take any risk to get them. It was unlikely the Chief would drop in; if he did, to hell with him! The provision merchant ought to do his job better. Then, as he got into his hat and overcoat and added dark glasses for good measure, he remembered something. He had no change—in fact no money at all. His last lot of wages he had 'blued' on the night of the murders, chiefly in public houses who defied the law by keeping open beyond the normal hours and he was not due for more wages until two more days had gone.

"Hell ruddy fire!" he muttered to himself, jamming his notebook into his overcoat pocket "Wonder if Maudie would

let me have 'em on tick? Nope, that wouldn't work, 'cos she wouldn't know it was me."

For the moment, his slow-moving brain was stuck. He felt again in his pockets, then, in some wonder, drew forth from his overcoat—the opposite pocket to where he had put his notebook—the double blowpipe and the capsule of icicle darts. He had quite forgotten to return them to the laboratory after his activity of two nights before. For a second or two, he wondered about having another snake orgy, since there were quite a number of darts still 'cold stored' in the capsule.

"Hell—no!" he muttered, thrusting the stuff back in his pocket. "Chief said only three. If more turned up, I might get me head punched..."

Abruptly, he stopped muttering. There, in the corner of the big room, lay the answer to his problem. The case of sovereigns, just as he and Nick had left it. He grinned. Maudie was pretty dumb, anyway, and she'd certainly never suspect a phony sovereign. Probably feel quite proud to have it. What was more, she could sell it at a considerable profit. It was a thought that made 'Mopes' feel good.

He crossed to the case, picked up one of the sovereigns, then set off in his car on his journey. It was a seven miles trip, but he made short work of it, and he knew there was not the least chance of his being apprehended. The night, and his trifling disguise, were sufficient guardians.

To his relief, Maudie Vincent's Tobacco Shop was open, just as it had been in the days when the blonde Maudie had been one of his many flames. Her main clientele was made up of seamen and dockhands, liable to need tobacco at all hours.

'Mopes' stopped the car at the end of the street and walked the remaining distance. Outside the shop, he peered in at the steamy window and could descry just a blurry vision of the blonde Maudie beyond. She looked pretty much the same as she'd ever done. Bit fatter, maybe, but that suited 'Mopes' perfectly. And there was nobody else in the shop.

He opened the door and entered, the old-fashioned bell clanging noisily over his head. Maudie looked up, somewhat surprised that, for once, it wasn't a seaman. The big fellow in the soft hat, faded Crombie overcoat and tinted glasses was—so she believed—a complete stranger to her.

"Sixty fags," 'Mopes' said briefly, pointing to a display of his favored brand, and watched her through the green fog of his glasses.

She nodded but did not speak, setting down three twenty packets on the counter. 'Mopes' fiddled around in his pocket for a moment and then dropped the sovereign in her hand. She looked at it in astonishment.

"Present for you," he said, shrugging. "I've no other money on me. It's worth maybe forty or fifty quid, but you can keep the difference."

She looked at him. "What's the idea, 'Mopes'?" she asked quietly.

He had half turned to go but now he turned back abruptly. Her eyes—they had wrinkles around them now—were searching his face intently.

"Huh?" he asked woodenly.

"Who are you trying to kid?" Maudie asked. "I'd know that nutty-slack voice of yours anywhere. Even if it is years since I

last heard it. That was when you proposed to me. Remember? And I never saw you again afterwards."

"Yore crazy!" 'Mopes' said bluntly, and headed for the door, struggling to get the cigarettes in his pocket.

"Stop and turn round!" Maudie snapped, and there was something in her voice that made 'Mopes' obey. To his consternation, he beheld a .32 automatic held firmly in her right hand.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"Never mind. I've waited a long time for the off chance to get even with you for ditching me, 'Mopes', and maybe this is it. Are you so dumb that you don't know that ugly mug of yours has been splashed in the newspapers for killing that kid over at Grindberg's shop? Do you think I'm such a fool as to let you walk out, when I can turn you in? Come here!"

'Mopes' wandered slowly back to the counter, still struggling with his cigarette packets. He realized subconsciously that it was the blowpipe and capsule that were jamming them.

"That's a nice bit of hardware you've got there," he commented, eyeing the gun.

"Yes—and it's licensed. I need protection sometimes against the sort of characters there are around here."

'Mopes' was silent, his brain working slowly—and, as usual it tended towards homicide. He was wondering how this faded piece had ever attracted him. But then, she hadn't been so faded when he'd last seen her

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"You're mixed up in phony sovereigns, too," she went on, her eyes merciless. "That's been in the papers. Don't you ever read 'em?"

"Sure I do. You're a smart girl, Maudie—smarter than I thought."

"I'm certainly not so dumb I'm taking a phony sovereign and letting you get out of here. The next customer who comes in is going to the police while I pin you—just as I'm doing now."

'Mopes' sighed, tugged out the jammed cigarette packets, and tossed them on the counter. Then he felt in his other pocket.

"Get your hand outa there!" Maudie commanded.

"All right, don't get all fidgety. No harm in crossing your perishin' name off me list, is there?"

'Mopes' brought his fat notebook in sight, flipped the pages and then laboriously tugged out a pencil stump and lined through Maudie's name. She watched sourly.

"That bulgin' book full of girl friends? Must be the hell of a lot of 'em!"

'Mopes' shrugged—then, with a sudden lightning action, he flashed the book out of his hand and straight into Maudie's face. Inevitably, she jolted back and, in that instant, 'Mopes' smashed his right straight to her jaw, knocking her out completely. It was practically a repetition of the assault on Betty Lathom, except that in this case, Maudie was still living. Her heaving bosom showed it clearly.

'Mopes' glanced about him and then stuffed the cigarettes into the now empty pocket where the notebook had been. The

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notebook itself he couldn't spot at the moment; it could wait a few seconds, anyway; probably it was behind the counter. He had something more important to concentrate upon.

Again he looked about him; then, quickly, he took out his blowpipe and capsule. In a matter of seconds he had fitted two of the venomous darts in position and took careful aim. With a soft 'phut' they lauded in the soft flesh of Maudie's upper arm, drawing two tiny spots of blood. She stirred slightly in unconsciousness.

'Mopes' grinned and thrust the capsule and blowpipe back in his pocket; then he turned to look for his fallen notebook. It seemed to have gone under the ... Then the doorbell clanged as a customer entered. He gulped and began to sweat. At the moment, his stooping position behind the counter hid him. He shuffled quickly on all fours, reaching the back regions just as a blue-jerseyed seaman banged on the counter for attention.

"Maudie! Maudie! Come out, wherever you are!"

'Mopes', thinking of nothing but imminent danger to himself, fled through the dim little kitchen and escaped by the back door. In twenty seconds flat, he had pelted down the nearest alleyway to his car. He jumped in and was in the midst of the London traffic before he remembered he had never recovered his notebook. After dully thinking out the situation, he arrived at the conclusion that it didn't matter much, anyway. The book did not contain his name—only the names of girl friends he'd had, questionable jokes, and odd statements that made sense only to himself. And Maudie was done for, anyway, and wouldn't be able to speak. There was,



of course, the phony sovereign, which Maudie had put on the counter ... What the hell did any of it matter, anyway? He drove on, reasonably sure that all was well.

Back at Maudie's, however, things were happening. Deckhand Swanson, the customer whom 'Mopes' had glimpsed entering, did not take above thirty seconds to discover the sprawled body of Maudie and the peculiar puncture wound on her arm. He did not know what it signified, but he did know she was out cold. In ten minutes, an ambulance was rushing her to the general hospital. Once there, the authorities informed the Yard that a new snake victim had been brought in. Chief-Inspector Dawson and Harriday, both prepared for just such a contingency, were whipped from their respective homes to sudden duty.

In an hour, Maudie's place had been photographed fingerprinted and generally combed out. With this done, Dawson remained behind, tossing the phony sovereign slowly up and down in his palm as he stood thinking.

"We've got something, Bob," he said finally. "No snake ever did come into here—except a human one. That woman had only just been bitten about fifteen minutes earlier, according to the latest report from the hospital. That means the snake would still be here, and it isn't. That satisfies me that the snake-biting business is brilliant murder..." Dawson turned and took up the notebook from the counter. Since it had already been inspected and photographed for fingerprints, he could handle it freely.

"Whoever owns this has a mind like a cesspool," he said, studying some of the pages. "In fact, just the kind of mind to

contemplate murder without a single qualm. Okay, we've done all we can here. Let's get to the hospital now."

Leaving a police constable in charge, and advising the deckhand, who was waiting in a back room, that he might be required later, Dawson and Harriday wasted no time in getting to the hospital. Eventually, they were joined in an anteroom by a white-coated surgeon.

"How is she?" Dawson asked quickly.

"Still unconscious. We've given her an antidote serum but, so far, it hasn't reacted. Apparently, she's been very badly bitten. Quite frankly, Inspector, snake-bite is a little out of our territory. It's a specialist's job, and I can't be sure where to locate one."

"At all costs, that woman has got to be revived," the Chief-Inspector said curtly. "Even if only for long enough to tell us what happened. Maybe I can help. Where's the nearest phone?"

The surgeon led the way out of the anteroom and to the telephone in an adjoining office. Dawson picked up the instrument quickly, and rang a Whitehall number.

"That you, Bedford? Dawson speaking. Get in touch with Mr. Ensdale immediately and have him ring me back here. He'll probably be at home, and I don't know his private number. Hurry it up: it's urgent."

This done, Dawson put the instrument down again and began to pace slowly. The surgeon excused himself and returned a few minutes afterwards with a shake of his head.

"No recovery yet," he announced. "Who's Ensdale, anyway? Think he can do something? I never heard of him."

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"That's not very surprising. He's exclusive to the Yard, in the pathology and scientific branch. Knows a lot about snake-bite; investigated every victim so far—excuse me."

Dawson picked up the phone as it shrilled. Boyd Ensdale's voice came from the other end of the wire.

"Dawson here, Mr. Ensdale. I need your help—and quickly. There's a snake-bite victim here, but she isn't dead yet. She needs expert help, correct serum administration and all the rest of it. At all costs she must be revived."

"Whereabouts are you?"

"East London General Hospital."

"Okay. I'll come. Be as quick as I can."

"Thanks." Dawson put down the phone and looked relieved. "He's coming; everything depends on whether he'll be in time."

So, for all those concerned, there descended a deep uncertainty until Ensdale arrived—which was twenty minutes later. Though it was the early hours of the morning by now, he looked fresh and alert, carrying with him a significant looking black bag. Conducted by the surgeon to the room where the stricken Maudie was lying, Dawson and Harriday found themselves forced to wait in the anteroom once again. They had got through three more cigarettes before Ensdale reappeared.

"She's conscious," he said briefly, "and I think she'll live, too."

"Can I talk to her?" Dawson demanded.

Ensdale seemed to hesitate for a second, then he gave a nod.

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"Yes, go ahead. I'll come with you."

Conducted to the side of Maudie's bed, Dawson sat down and studied her intently. She was definitely conscious again, and fully comprehensive of her surroundings as well.

"I'm a police officer, Miss Vincent," Dawson displayed his warrant card. "I suppose you know what's been happening? That you were bitten by a snake?"

"So I'm told," she assented. "I remember being hit by one, but not being bitten."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Dawson said, tensing forward sharply.

"Meaning that somebody you'd dearly love to lock up came into my shop this evening—'Mopes' McCall. I used to know him in the old days and I think he was trying to renew the acquaintance. He tried to pass a phony sovereign, but I held him to the point of my gun. He threw a fat notebook at me, hit me in the jaw, and I passed out. I don't remember anything more."

"You don't remember any snake?" Dawson asked deliberately.

"No. Maybe 'Mopes' could tell you something about that if you can catch him ... hell!" Maudie broke off, wincing. "My arm's aching fit to drop off."

"Just take it easy, Miss Vincent," Dawson murmured "and thanks for telling me what you have."

Getting up, he jerked his head to Ensdale and Harriday and led the way back to the anteroom.

"The only explanation is that she must have been unconscious from the blow in the jaw when the snake-bite act

took place," he said, turning from closing the door. "Which is a damnable pity. I felt sure we'd learn for certain this time that the snake-bites are artificial."

"I think you're up the wrong tree there, Dawson," Ensdale said. "This woman's wound is identical to all those inflicted on the other victims and I still maintain it is genuine snake-bite."

"Then how did that snake vanish so quickly? I'm no expert, but I'll swear no snake would move that fast."

"It could, you know," Ensdale said. "Rattlers move very fast on occasions, particularly when they hear footsteps. Anyhow," he added, shrugging, "I've done all I can and, as near as I can tell you, Miss Vincent will probably recover completely. If you need me again, just let me know."

"Yes." Dawson looked preoccupied. "Thanks, sir. You've been invaluable."

Ensdale took his departure and for several minutes, Dawson remained nearly motionless, following a chain of reasoning; then, at length, he caught Harriday's questioning eyes. The Detective-Sergeant was looking very tired and very disappointed.

"All that sweat for nothing sir, from the looks of it."

"Not entirely Bob—not entirely. I'll grant you that we're hamstrung on the snake angle, but we've got another one A mighty good one, too! I mean the notebook, of course."

"Yes?" Harriday's brow creased as he tried to see the point.

"We know," Dawson continued deliberately, "that 'Mope' McCall has one weak point—women. Any woman on earth can make a sucker out of him. That much is in his own case

history at the records department. Now, suppose a highly delectable young woman were to insert an advertisement in the personal column of a daily newspaper, saying she had his notebook and wanted to return it to him. What then?"

"He mightn't read that particular paper," Harriday pointed out stolidly.

"You're a good policeman Bob, but you've no imagination," Dawson said patiently. "The ad would be in every worth-while daily paper, morning and evening and I'm darned sure 'Mopes' must read one or other of them in order to keep in touch with the outer world. On the other hand, he may rely on television or radio. If he does, we'll have to contrive something that way, but first, let's try the newspapers."

"He might bite," Harriday admitted dubiously, "but on the other hand. I can't see that there is anything incriminating enough in that notebook for him to take a risk to get it back. Certainly, we've got nothing out of it."

"We're trying the psychological angle," Dawson explained. "I've never yet known it to fail, especially with the vain type of criminal such as 'Mopes.' The advertisement must be well thought out. It's got to bring him out of his lair. The notebook is not valuable to us, but it will be to him, because it lists the addresses and phone numbers of dozens of girls with whom he evidently had contact before getting jailed. He'll try and get it back—even more so if he learns what a bright young thing has discovered it."

"How will he know that? The advertisement won't say so."

"Not to begin with. I'll show you later what happens. He might even be dense enough to give away his address and, if

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so, the thing's easy. Once nail 'Mopes', and we'll nail everybody including the brains behind this counterfeiting, snake-biting racket."

"You're not suggesting Maudie Vincent as the delectable one, surely?" Harriday asked, in surprise. "All due respect to her, but her charm's had it. sir."

"I'm thinking of Gwenda Blane," Dawson mused. "She's helped us before, and will again, I'm sure—for a consideration. Pretty as they make 'em, and as tough as they come. A very curvaceous sprat to catch a mighty big whale, Bob."

## V

BY MID-MORNING, Chief-Inspector Dawson had the 'Personal' advertisement framed in words that satisfied him, and it was immediately forwarded to every daily of repute. The possibility of an evening paper was one that Dawson ruled out as less likely to offer results. The other point he dealt with was suppression of all information concerning Maudie Vincent—at least, for the time being. Plainly, if 'Mopes' read that she had recovered, he would tie it up with the advertisement and probably that she herself was the possessor of his notebook; which, in itself, would be enough to prevent him walking into the trap. Depending on how matters were shaping, Dawson was prepared to circulate a false report concerning Maudie's death if necessary.

His next move was to have Gwenda Blane come over to the Yard and, as on other occasions, she did so the moment she was free—around lunchtime. Gwenda was a somewhat remarkable girl—artist's model, cover girl, swimsuit mannequin, and a chorine on occasion. She had beauty, brains and single blessedness and meant to keep all three. Above all things, she had plenty of courage and, more than once, had hired herself out as 'bait' for the Yard when they needed a girl of unusual attractiveness and plenty of intelligence.

"Whether this assignment will prove dangerous or not I can't say at this stage, Gwen," Dawson explained in a frank



statement. "You can hear the details and then take it or leave it. In any case, we're obliged to you for coming along."

The girl, fake fur-coated and smiling in that particularly icy way she had, merely shrugged.

"I know you Yard men occasionally borrow your sisters and sweethearts to help you out in a case, so why am I different from them? Anything for a change. But what's it all about?"

"Spurious sovereigns, a dull-witted killer, and maybe a brilliant and completely ruthless scientist."

"Spurious sovereigns? Sounds like the Grindberg business to me."

"It is. We can't use a policewoman for this job, either—they automatically give themselves away to those criminal types accustomed to them. What we're trying to do is drag a woman-crazy killer into the open. Once we've got him we hope to have the whole racket broken wide open. He'll talk before we're through with him."

"Who is he?" Gwenda asked.

"'Mopes' McCall. Do I need to say more, or are you up on your newspapers?"

The girl smiled faintly. "I've read about him, Inspector, and he seems to be a charming personality. Well, what do I have to do?"

"Read this first." And Dawson pushed across a copy of the advertisement he had worked out. Gwenda took it in a delicately manicured hand and read out the words:

"Why mope about looking for your notebook? I'm worth dating up, too. Young, pretty, and willing. If you want me and the notebook, contact..." Gwenda frowned slightly as she saw

the telephone number that concluded the advertisement.

"Thanks for the build-up," she murmured, as she handed the paper back. "But where is that telephone number? It certainly isn't my mine."

"It's the phone number of a flat you will occupy while working for us. Been used before on other jobs, but 'Mopes' won't know that. Go there, live there, and wait there. The moment you hear anything, inform me immediately. Mind you, I don't know that this dimwit 'Mopes' will even fall for the ad., or even see it—but we're hoping he will. Well, still with us?"

"Certainly, provided I'm allowed to retain my .32 automatic. I don't feel safe otherwise. It's licensed and everything."

"Technically, you're against the law," Dawson replied, "but we'll let that pass for the moment. Now, here's the address of the flat. You can use your own name; it won't signify."

Dawson scribbled it out and handed it over. "You can go in the moment you're ready, and this is the key."

"Kensington, eh? Swank part thereof. Well, thanks very much. How long do you suppose the job will take? I'm contracted a fortnight hence for a French stage show."

"We'll get results before then, Gwen, or else release you. Meantime, here's your check. Half now, half when we finish, based on the same terms as other occasions. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Gwenda smiled, rising and shaking hands. "I'll be on to you the moment anything happens in this business."

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Dawson saw her to the door and then turned to behold Harriday also looking at the door, somewhat in regret.

"Pity I don't fit into that part of the assignment, too sir," he sighed. "Of all the blondes I ever did see, she really..."

"Keep your mind on your work," Dawson growled, "and don't be too sure you won't be mixed up with Gwenda before we're finished. That's up to 'Mopes'." Dawson settled down at his desk and looked through the reports. "Nothing on the scrap iron dealers yet, I see, Bob."

"Afraid not, sir, though I've still a good few to visit."

"All right; keep on doing that. Not that I've any room to talk, either. I haven't located anything significant from the manufacturers of electronic equipment and similar gadgets. Our mastermind is keeping up to standard as far as subtlety is concerned. Maybe he's been ordering separate pieces from different firms to avoid buying a lot of stuff in one place."

"Could be," Harriday sighed, reaching for his coat. "And, incidentally, sir..."

"Yes?" Dawson lighted a cigarette and waited.

"I've been doing a bit of thinking on my own about this snake-bite business. If each snake-bite is a fake, how come that so brilliant a pathologist as Mr. Ensdale can't detect it?"

"I've wondered about that, too," Dawson murmured. "Very cunning snake-bite imitation. That's the only answer ... I suppose..."

Harriday reflected, hesitated over something, and then changed his mind.

"I'll carry on with the scrap iron," he said, and went on his way. Dawson turned back to his notes, particularly one that

he had made himself to the effect that a genuine snake-bite would show traces of saliva. He considered it for a moment or two, and then switched on the interphone.

"Dr. Andrews?" he asked, after a moment.

"Right here, Inspector. Can I help you?"

"Perhaps. I'm still fretting over those snake-bites. You examined the victims to commence with, and Mr. Ensedale confirmed your reports. Maybe you can tell me something. In the case of the victims you examined, did you find any traces of saliva in the snake-bite wound—as you certainly would from a genuine bite?"

"None at all. Puzzling thing, I know—but there it is."

"Then why did you state positively that the wounds were caused by a snake? Why not admit the possibility of a fake?"

"I'm not concerned with possibilities, Inspector; that's your job. I merely state the medical evidence. I said genuine snake-bites because I couldn't think of anything likely to duplicate them so completely."

"I see. But, in no case, was there a trace of snake saliva?"

"None."

"Much obliged." Dawson switched off and returned his cigarette to his lips, his sharp eyes narrowed over a thought. Then the jarring of the telephone disturbed him again.

"Dawson here," he announced.

"*Daily Monarch*, Inspector. We've had a hospital report that Maudie Vincent died an hour ago. Are we allowed to print that, along with the story of what was the cause of her death?"

"Died?" Dawson repeated, astonished. "But the last I heard of her, she was making good progress."

"So we thought. Apparently Mr. Ensdale, of your scientific squad, called in to see how she was going on, found her as good as expected, and then left. But an hour ago she died. Some kind of relapse from the snake poison."

"I see." Dawson thought for a moment. "Yes, print the story, by all means, but suppress all details concerning the Yard. You can say simply that she was killed by a snake in her shop last night."

"But there's more to it than that, Inspector! Have a heart! What about the phony sovereign on the counter, and that notebook you found on the floor..."

"Suppress all that. That's an order! You'll not be scooped, because the same order will go to the entire press. When anything big breaks—as it must before long—I'll see you get everything."

"Okay."

Dawson put the telephone down, his eyes hard. Then he checked with the hospital to make certain—but there was no doubt about it. Maudie Vincent had suffered a relapse and died. Not even a question of an inquest being held up for further enquiry. It would be a verdict of 'death from misadventure'.

In the meantime, 'Mopes' McCall was entirely satisfied with himself. The morning newspaper, delivered religiously by the village's only newsagent, and paid for by the Chief in some roundabout manner best known to himself, did not splash the fate of Maudie Vincent. It merely made a passing reference to

the fact—in an obscure corner—that she had been bitten by a snake and taken to hospital in a coma. Nothing more.

“And coma is the overture to death,” ‘Mopes’ told himself, between mouthfuls of a late breakfast. “Which makes me safe. She’ll pass out before she can say anything—if she hasn’t passed out already.”

Finding no other information, he had to content himself until mid-morning radio and television news bulletins—but no reference at all was made to Maudie Vincent, doubtless because she was not important enough in the general scheme of things. Nor was there any news in the early evening bulletins, either.

Disgusted and vaguely uncertain, in spite of himself, ‘Mopes’ settled down for an evening watching television and listening to the radio but, towards seven-thirty, his hermitage was interrupted by the arrival of the Chief. Grim-faced, he came slowly into the room, drawing off his gloves.

“Well, what s the explanation?” he asked coldly, as ‘Mopes’ struggled from the chesterfield and began to straighten his tie.

“Explanation, Chief? Oh, you mean I’ve got the television too loud again...”

“I mean the snake-bite which laid out Maudie Vincent. And put that damned thing off!”

‘Mopes’ obeyed, sweating a little. There was a diabolical expression on the Chief’s face that made him wish his hand were holding a loaded gun.

"Maudie Vincent?" 'Mopes' enquired vaguely. "Did you say snake-bite? I—I don't get it. Was she one of those I finished off the other night, like you told me?"

The Chief sat down. "I'll give you sixty seconds, 'Mopes'. Why did you dare to 'snake-bite' that woman without my orders? Why did you leave a false sovereign where everybody could see it?"

"False sovereign? I ain't seen nothing in the papers about a false sovereign..." 'Mopes' narrowed his eyes.

"You have only one paper here: I see nearly all of them in my capacity. One states distinctly that a false sovereign was left on the counter of the tobacco shop. What did you do it for, 'Mopes'?"

'Mopes' breathed hard, staring at the .38 that had now appeared in the Chief's hand. He knew that if he did not speak, his number was definitely up.

"I went for fags," he blurted out. "I had to. Only place I could think of. You didn't let me have any in the grocery order—else the feller didn't send 'em. Anyway, I chose Maudie Vincent 'cos I useta know her long ago. I went disguised an' I didn't mean to snake-bite her. She recognized me in spite of everything, an' to save things, I let her have it. I had to get out quick 'cos of a customer, an' I musta left the sovereign on the counter."

"Why didn't you use your own money?"

"I had none. I used it up the other night."

The gun lowered and finally disappeared. "All right. I believe that, 'Mopes', because you're too dumb to invent so consecutive a story on the spur of the moment. I'm not going

to do anything to you, because as far as I can tell, the police have not got anything out of the business. Plenty of suspicion, but nothing definite. What I am going to do is warn you."

"'Bout what?"

"Something may be attempted. You left your fingerprints in that shop, and the police will know they're yours. They will also know that if they can grab you, you can give everything away. So, to preserve yourself, and the rest of us, ignore any attempt that may be made to contact you. Understand?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. And don't try anything funny again, or I'll finish you for good. And don't think, either, that you're invaluable to me. A day will come when I won't need you any more and, when it does, I'll remember that you took far too much on your own shoulders."

Without saying any more the Chief departed. 'Mopes' grimaced, spat into the glowing fire and then resumed his sprawl on the chesterfield. But his mind very soon reverted to the Chief's last words.

"A day'll come, will it?" 'Mopes muttered. "We'll damned well see about that! If he can spring something on me just whenever he feels like it, I can also spring something on 'im—an' I will. Just give me the chance, that's all."

He got up again, switched on the television, and left it on until midnight. Then he ate as large a supper as he could find and went to bed. Next morning, the newspaper had a front page statement to the effect that Maudie Vincent, victim number five to succumb to a mysterious rattlesnake, had died. The police had no reason to suspect foul play, though



they were puzzled by the spurious sovereign. Nothing about him, nothing about his notebook having been found. He grinned widely to himself.

"So long, Maudie!" he exclaimed, raising his coffee cup. "Happy landings..."

For him, the matter of Maudie Vincent was literally dead and done with. He browsed through the news of the latest assaults and robberies, surveyed the pictures of a new batch of debutantes, and then looked at the 'Deaths' to see if anybody he knew had kicked the bucket. It was this survey that automatically led him to the 'Personal' column, immediately below. And it was the word 'mope' that caught his eye.

"Why mope about looking for your pocketbook?" he repeated slowly. "I'm worth dating up, too. Young, pretty and willing. If you want me and the notebook, contact..."

He stopped eating and read the advertisement right through again. Notebook? Mope? Was somebody trying to contact him without giving anything away? It took him a long time to realize that this was the general idea. It could only mean that another customer had found his notebook, or somehow got hold of it. Maybe that explained why the police had not mentioned it.

"Hellfire!" 'Mopes' ejaculated finally, as at last he worked things out. "I do believe it is meant for me! Who's she say she is? Young, pretty and willing ... Mmm—could be me all right. She musta read that blasted notebook to know about the dating up. Whoever she is, she's smart, or she wouldn't ha' put in an ad. like that! Just about my measure, I'd say."

'Mopes' swallowed some more coffee before he was pervaded with the final conviction that the ad. did apply to him. There drifted across his mind a memory of the Chief's warning: and, just as quickly, he discarded it. Here was a young, pretty woman—if she was to be believed—and she had somehow found the notebook and wanted to hand it back. It certainly couldn't be Maudie, because she was dead.

"Okay—what have I gotta lose?" 'Mopes' murmured. "Only thing is to figure out how to get in touch without givin' anythin' away."

The Chief had not trusted him with a telephone in the house. His first impulse was to dash out there and then to a phone box; then he checked himself. He had never appeared outside by day for any length of time, except in the car and, since the phone box was only a hundred yards down the road, there was no sense in getting out the car for that—or was there? Then 'Mopes' remembered something else, and cursed. He had no money. Only those blasted spurious sovereigns, until he received his next wage packet.

"Reverse the charge, you dope!" he told himself; then he shook his head. That wouldn't do, either. The operator would want his name. No reason why he must give his own name, though. Finally, he made his decision. He would use the car and phone immediately. This was urgent.

Accordingly, ten minutes later—disguised with his dark glasses as usual—he had reached the telephone booth, asked for the number given in the paper, and given his name as Johnson, so the charge could be reversed. At length, there floated to him a sweetly feminine voice.

Liquid Death And Other Stories  
*by John Russell Fearn*

"Hello? I'm allowing you to reverse the charge because I think I know why you have rung up."

"It's about the advertisement," 'Mopes' said, picturing the delectable vision at the other end of the wire.

"So I thought. What did the operator say your name is? Mr. Johnson?"

"That's it, Miss. Bobby Johnson. What do I do to pick up the notebook?"

"Well, now ... I'd better think about that. It's rather important, isn't it? Do you know where I found it?"

"I—I c'n guess," 'Mopes' answered uneasily.

"I found it in Maudie Vincent's Tobacco Shop. Just how I found it, I'll tell you later. It could do you an awful lot of harm if the police got it, couldn't it?"

"Mebbe."

"Tell you what you do," Gwenda Blanc said, after an interval. "Ring me back here in ten minutes and, by then, I'll have thought out some arrangement."

"Can't you fix something now?" 'Mopes' demanded. "I've precious little time to spare."

"I know, but we want things to be absolutely safe, don't we? I'm taking a risk, and so are you. I must work out some kind of plan. Ring me back—ten minutes from now."

"Can I reverse the charge—? I'm short of change."

"Certainly, if you wish. 'Bye for now."

The line clicked and 'Mopes' put down the phone. He was not sure whether he liked the set-up or not. Still, nothing had been done so far that could give him away. It was the ten minutes wait he didn't feel comfortable about. Anything could

happen in that time. Okay—if it did, he'd be ready for it. So he remained in the phone box, the car just within sight, and kept his eyes open for anything unusual.

Meantime, Gwen was speaking to Dawson at the Yard. It did not take her above a few seconds to give the details. "So—what do I do now?" she asked.

"Ask him to your flat," Dawson replied promptly. "By every means you know, get him to talk. That's the main thing."

"You'll be around somewhere, won't you?" Gwenda asked anxiously. "I'm panicky of having a gorilla like that locked up with me."

"We'll certainly keep watch," Dawson answered, "but we're not going to make any actual arrest until 'Mopes' has told everything he knows. For us to make him talk—since we're limited in this country as to how far we can go in that direction—may be difficult, but you can do it if you play the game right. Once we have all the information we want, we'll be busy. That drawing room of yours is wired up, by the way, and your entire conversation will be recorded by an operator in a room two blocks away. Good luck, and keep us posted. We'll know how you're fixed, by the operator being in constant touch with us here. Fix your appointment for seven tonight, if you can."

She rang off and, in the drawing room of her temporary flat, looked about her in surprise, wondering where the microphone might be. She even looked right at it, but was not aware of it, since it comprised the rosette in the ceiling, from which depended the electric light flex. Then the phone was ringing again and 'Mopes' was at the other end.

Liquid Death And Other Stories  
*by John Russell Fearn*

"Johnson 'ere," he said briefly. "Made up your mind, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Mr. Johnson—I've made up my mind. You be here tonight at seven o'clock, and you shall have your notebook. Maybe we'll have a little chat, too, eh? You sound the rugged type of man that I admire."

'Mopes' metaphorically preened himself. "That will suit me fine, Miss—er—what's the name, by the way?"

"Gwenda Blane. I'm an artist's model. The address is eleven, Caradoc Mansions, Kensington. Two floors up you'll find me."

"I'll be lookin' forward to it," 'Mopes' promised, and rang off.

For the rest of the day, he was preparing himself for the evening, titivating his appearance for one thing—which was about as useful as painting an old car ready for the scrap-heap—and removing marks from his clothing with a bottle of solvent. He once or twice had the presentiment that he was walking into a trap and, if so, was prepared to shoot his way out of it with the automatic he carried in a shoulder holster. On the other hand, the whole thing might be genuine, and he had no intention of missing an evening with an artist's model for anybody. And if the Chief came ... ? Well—er—oh, to Hades with the Chief!

Promptly at six-fifteen, as darkness was fast closing in, 'Mopes' set off in the car. He drove as far as a garage on the west side of the city and finished the journey on foot. He had no intention of giving any coppers the chance of noting the

car, taking its number, and then trailing him back to the mansion.

So, exactly at seven, he knocked on the door of Flat 11 in the Caradoc Mansions edifice, and almost immediately the girl herself opened it. 'Mopes' gave a gulp and adjusted his tinted glasses. He had been prepared for a girl worth looking at, but hardly for the feminine pulchritude that stood just within the softly lighted, scented drawing room.

"Mr. Johnson?" she asked softly.

"Yep—I'm Johnson." 'Mopes' clumsily pulled off his hat. He was glad the tinted glasses disguised the fact that he was staring hard at Gwenda. Anyway, he just couldn't help it. She was wearing a 'lo-and-behold' evening gown of cherry taffeta, so low, indeed, off the shoulder that even 'Mopes' was surprised. Her shoulders and arms, softly rounded, were matt white, and her definitely pretty face was exquisitely made up. Crowning it all was the honey-colored hair, gently controlled by a golden clasp.

"Well, come in," she invited, smiling. "I don't suppose, judging from your notebook, that you're the kind of man who believes in ethics. Like us being alone here, for instance?"

'Mopes' got one look from those blue eyes and did not waste any more time. He followed the bare-backed, curvacious Gwenda into the room and closed the door behind him. He tossed down his hat and then removed his tinted glasses.

"Why, I do believe you're ... 'Mopes' McCall!" the girl said slowly, staring at him. "I never thought of that possibility."

"Does it matter?" he asked curtly.

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"Not a bit. Might make things more exciting, in fact. I've often wondered what it might be like to come face to face with a killer."

Gwenda settled herself on the chesterfield, her arm laid along its back.

"Okay, if you want to be blunt about it," 'Mopes' growled. "What about me notebook? Let me have that, an' I'll be on my way."

"So soon?" Gwenda looked surprised. "But surely you have time to talk? Time for a drink?"

"Well, I..."

Without giving him time to answer, Gwenda got up again and swept, with a faint rustling sound, to a cocktail cabinet. After a moment or two, she returned to his side with drinks in her hands.

"Now, Mr. McCall—sit down and make yourself comfortable. I want to talk to you."

"Oh, y'do?" 'Mopes' sat on the chesterfield, since she indicated it; then, with a waft of perfume, she reclined beside him.

"To us," she said, raising her drink.

'Mopes' swallowed his drink at a gulp and then sat looking at her, trying to decide what was the matter with him. Normally, he dealt with women exactly as he chose, yet now he was side by side with one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen, he didn't know what to do about it. She was literally throwing herself at him, and he wasn't sure of himself.

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*by John Russell Fearn*

"You're not at all what I expected," she said, taking his empty glass and setting it down with her own on the occasional table. "A ruthless killer, an escaped convict, a man responsible for faked sovereigns—and you sit there like a little boy waiting for Sunday School to start."

"How'd you know all about me?" he snapped.

"The newspapers, of course. That face of yours has been pretty well advertised, believe me. But don't think I've any ideas about turning you over to the police..."

"You'd better not try!"

"Supposing I did? What would you do?"

"Blot you out, same as 'appened to Maudie Vincent." Gwenda's eyebrows rose. "Maudie Vincent? But I thought the papers said she died of a snake-bite wound. didn't they?"

"Mebbe she did." 'Mopes' compressed his thick lips, realizing he had already said too much. To his relief, Gwenda did not pursue the problem of Maudie, but she still asked very awkward questions, just the same.

"Wouldn't you rather turn yourself in, Mr. McCall, than keep dodging, the police? Don't you find it tough going?"

"Nope. I'm well cared for."

"Then you've got a wife—or friends?"

"I'm not sayin'—but I know what I'm doin'. Now look, baby—let's get to business. Where's my pocket-book?"

"No hurry," Gwenda said lazily, sprawling back on the chesterfield. "It isn't often I have a man of your type to talk to, and I mean to take advantage of it. What are you so jumpy about? You're quite safe here."



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*by John Russell Fearn*

"I'm not so sure about that. I don't feel safe when I'm not on me home ground. Now, if you wus at my place, where I'm stayin', it'd be different. I've always said the place needs a woman in it to brighten it up."

"Whereabouts is it?"

"Out in the country. Safer than here." 'Mopes hesitated and then plunged. "I could take you straight to it in me car. Then, if it's fun you want, we could really have it."

Gwenda smiled wryly. "I'm not that crazy, Mr. McCall—at least, not at the moment. Maybe, if I need a tough boy friend, I'll call on you some time. What's the address?"

"Never mind. The only way you'll ever get to my place is for me to take you. Now get that notebook, will you, and let me get outa here."

"Aren't you interested in knowing how I found it?"

"Not particularly—but you can tell me, if it makes you any happier."

"I walked into Maudie's shop just as a deck-hand was coming out. I went in for cigarettes and, to my surprise, this chap told me to keep an eye on the body while he phoned the police. I looked around and saw Maudie on the floor, and your notebook near her. I picked it up and read parts of it, then I decided I'd keep it instead of handing it over to the police."

"Why?" 'Mopes' demanded suspiciously. "What made you so keen on protectin' me?"

"I didn't know it was you. Could have been anybody. I rather fancied meeting the man who'd written some of the stuff in that book."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll take it, if you don't mind."

Gwenda sighed. "All right. Sure you won't have another drink?"

"Nope. Just give me the book and I'll blow."

Gwenda gave it up. It was no use trying any more, as far as she could see. 'Mopes' was completely ill at ease and nothing of her devising could overcome that. Rising, she went to the bureau, withdrew the notebook from it, and came across with it.

"Don't I get anything for saving you?" she asked.

"Not here you don't!" 'Mopes' snatched it from her. "I keep on telling you, baby, I'm not comfortable away from me home ground. Mebbe you'll change your mind and come out to my place? You'll be safe enough."

"That," Gwenda murmured, "is a matter of opinion. Just the same, I'll give it some thought. The boys I know are pretty boring."

"Then make up your mind quick. The car's waitin', and..."

"I'm not coming on the spur of the moment, Mr. McCall. I want to think it out first. You can ring me tomorrow if you like, and I'll see how I feel by then."

"Okay." 'Mopes' pig eyes gleamed momentarily. "You an' me could have one hell of a time ... I'll ring tomorrow mornin'. 'Bye for now."

He snatched up his hat with one hand and jammed his tinted glasses on his nose with the other. Then he was gone and, the instant the door closed, Gwenda lifted the telephone.

She waited impatiently as the line buzzed; then, at last, Dawson was on the line.

"Yes, Gwenda—what news?" he asked eagerly.

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"Nothing much—and you'll hear what went on when you get the recording. I've rung you to see if you can track 'Mopes' down. He's got a car, and..."

"You don't have to worry over that. 'Mopes' is being watched. He was seen to enter your apartment building and, naturally, he'll be trailed as he leaves."

"Oh well, that's all right. He left a few minutes ago. When you've heard the recording, Inspector, let me know what I must do next. As you'll find, I've left the door ajar—and, if helps matters, I'll walk into the lion's den."

"I'll ring you back," Dawson promised. "They'll be bringing the recording in any time now."

## VI

CHIEF-INSPECTOR Dawson did not come to any snap decision when he heard the recording played through.

The first time, he just listened; the second time, he made notes; and the third time, he had Harriday and Boyd Ensdale listen, also. Indeed, getting wind of what was transpiring, Ensdale insisted on being present to keep track of events. Apparently the mystery of the snake-bites was still worrying him.

"Well, there it is," Dawson said finally, lighting a cigarette. Then he glanced at the clock, which registered ten minutes past midnight. "And I hope Gwenda Blanc isn't sitting up waiting for me to ring her. I've still to think out what has to be done."

"I don't see why she can't be dispensed with," Harriday commented, stifling a yawn. "She did all she could, to judge from that recording, but obviously 'Mopes' was too cagey. We didn't get a thing out of it."

"Except his admission that he finished Maudie Vincent," Dawson pointed out. "That in turn proves what I've believed all along—that the snake-bites are deliberately created."

"Begins to look like it, in the face of that," Ensdale admitted, frowning. "Damned clover faking, though."

"Why do we have to waste any more time?" Harriday asked, spreading his hands. "The boys have traced 'Mopes' to that old mansion, so we know exactly where he is. Let's go and get him!"

"And, when we do, what happens to the rest of the counterfeiters and murderers?" Dawson demanded. "They'll vanish utterly when they know what's happened—as they will, thanks to the press. Obviously, Mopes' doesn't run that mansion for himself. It must be the master-mind himself who owns it, and he's the one we've got to get."

"You really believe," Ensdale asked, "that a precipitate arrest of McCall would scare all the others away?"

"I'm darned, sure it would; that's why I'm having Gwenda trying to pump McCall before we drop on him at his hideout."

"In that case," Ensdale said, "there's nothing for it but for her to carry on—accept his invitation to go to the mansion with him. She might succeed on his 'home ground', as he calls it, and you'll have to arrange to stand by and see she isn't in too much danger."

Dawson nodded slowly. "Yes, I think that's it. She could also explore the place while she's there and see if she can spot anything suggestive of counterfeiting."

"I could arrange it so that a wafer microphone is used there," Harriday said. "It will slip under a door or a french window somewhere, and give the boys a chance to record in a mobile unit. I could also watch that Gwenda is safe."

"Uh-huh," Dawson acknowledged. "That's a good notion. I'd stay on tap in case we discover where the others in the gang can be located, then I can tip off the necessary men to get busy."

"It also occurs to me," Ensdale said, musing, "that I may be able to help matters in general and this young woman in particular. I'll make up a phial of iltumine-X. If she can get a

chance to drop some of it into his drink, he'll talk his head off. As you know, we've used it now and again to make stubborn ones open up a bit."

"Illegal—but useful," Dawson acknowledged, "Okay, sir. That ought to be a grand help. Now I'd better give Gwenda the rough outline, then she'll know what to tell this gorilla when he rings her in the morning."

In half an hour, Gwenda knew the particulars, and also that she must call in at the Yard the following day for a final check-up and to collect the phial which Ensdale would have ready for her. She knew exactly how tough her assignment was likely to be but, nevertheless, she did not flinch from it.

And, early the following morning, 'Mopes' phoned as he had promised, reversing the charge, as before.

"I've been thinking it over," Gwenda responded, as his voice came through. "I probably need my head examining, but I've decided to come along to your place this evening. How do I get there?"

"You don't, sweetheart! I pick you up in the car and take you there. An' you'll have ter forgive me if I just blindfold you."

"What?"

"See the thing my way," 'Mopes' insisted. "You know what kind of a spot I'm in. I can't trust anybody—not even you—to see where I'm stayin'. If you agree to that, everythin' will be all right."

"Very well," Gwenda responded at last. "Where will you meet me? Here?"

"No. That might be kinda risky. Y'know the Royal Garage, a few yards from your place?"

"On the corner? Yes—I know it."

"Seven tonight, outside there. An', say..."

"Yes?"

"Wear that red dress you had on last night. I'm still thinkin' about it."

"I'll do that," Gwenda promised, making a grimace to herself. "Seven tonight."

The appointment made, she wasted no time in getting to the Yard to receive the final instructions. She found Chief-Inspector Dawson serious-faced but determined.

"Nobody could be more aware than I am of the risk you are taking, Gwenda," he said quietly. "And we appreciate it. However, Sergeant Harriday here will keep an eye constantly to your welfare."

Harriday beamed upon the girl as she glanced at him. "Be a real pleasure, Miss Blane," he promised.

"Whereabouts will you be?" she questioned.

For answer, Dawson spread out a sketch on the desk. The girl hunched forward in her chair and studied the diagram interestedly.

"This is a sketch of the mansion, as well as our boys could make it out in the moonlight last night, when they followed 'Mopes' back," Dawson explained. "Judging from the light in the curtained window on the ground floor here, this is the room 'Mopes' principally uses—and probably the one he will use tonight. Fortunately for us, it has a french window looking out on to the wooded grounds. Harriday here will be outside

that window. Beneath its frame he'll push what we call a wafer microphone—a flat, disc-like affair, which will pick up every sound from the room and transmit it to a mobile recording unit out in the side road here.” Dawson's finger stubbed the diagram. “To the receiving unit, there'll be a subsidiary line wired back to a pair of headphones. Harriday will be wearing them and will therefore hear everything that is going on beyond the window. Clear so far?”

“Excellent!” Gwenda smiled. “With so much reassurance, I'll give the vamp performance of my life!”

“If you find yourself getting into a difficult position with ‘Mopes’, just shout ‘Help me quickly!’ Harriday will take that as his signal to plunge in and rescue you. We hope that won't be necessary, because it'll spoil everything, but it's a wise precaution. Now—any questions you'd like to ask?”

“No, I don't think so. Assuming everything goes off all right, and I make ‘Mopes’ tell everything that's needful, do I walk out at the finish and leave him to it?”

“If you get everything needful from him, Harriday will step in at the finish in any case and arrest ‘Mopes’ on the spot. There will, of course, be several men about the grounds, ready for action. Summing it up,” Dawson finished, “this is your great moment, Gwenda. And here is a phial of stuff which Mr. Ensdale has made up.”

“Oh, yes; you mentioned it. If I slip it into ‘Mopes’ drink, it'll make him talkative?”

“It should do, yes. Try it, anyhow.”

Gwenda slipped the phial into her handbag and then got to her feet.



"Well ... here I go, Inspector. And I'll see you later on. You won't be at the mansion, I gather?"

"No. I'm staying here, so I can have all the necessary contacts in the event of urgent action being necessary. Good luck, Gwenda!"

She departed thoughtfully and spent the rest of the day in town, chiefly visiting a hair-stylist and a beauty parlor. Returning to her borrowed flat in mid-afternoon, she took her time over dressing in the cherry evening gown; then, when at last it was seven o'clock, she was outside the Royal Garage, hoping she would not get too disarranged in waiting for 'Mopes' to show up. The thought had barely passed through her mind before he drew up at the curb. Gwenda frowned a little as she beheld the expensive car. Evidently, 'Mopes' had somebody extremely influential behind him.

"That's my baby!" he exclaimed, alighting to the pavement and adjusting his tinted glasses. "Hop in—front seat ... no, back seat," he corrected. "I'd forgotten the blindfold."

"Do I have to do that?" Gwenda objected, settling down in the soft upholstery. "Surely you don't think I'd give you away? I'd only make myself an accessory or something if I did. Hobnobbing with an escaped convict is an offence, remember."

"I s'pose it is," 'Mopes' agreed, reflecting: then his pig-eyes swept over the girl's exquisitely gowned form and up to her pretty, though still protesting, face.

"Please!" she said plaintively.

"Okay—forget it. As you said, if y'talk, it'll only get you in bad, too. I'll risk it."

With that, he slid back into the driving seat and set the car in motion again. Gwenda sank back into the cushions and tried to get control over her fast-beating heart. At the moment, in spite of the reassurances she had received from Dawson as to her welfare, she was feeling scared to death. The die was really cast and, as far as she could see, 'Mopes' could have only one object in view in taking her to the mansion where they could be alone. Then she felt around inside the voluminous folds of her skirt until she detected the hard outline of her loaded .32 automatic. That might save her if things got out of hand.

Once the main London traffic was left behind, she had not the vaguest idea where they were going. 'Mopes' hurtled the powerful car down dark lanes and twisting side streets, quite unaware, in his excitement and hurry, that he was being shadowed every inch of the way—not by a car, which would have given itself away by head-lamps, but by a hoverplane three hundred feet up, which was tracing him by the beams of his own headlights. Dawson had not left anything to chance. The mobile recording unit was already quite close to the mansion, but well concealed, and the various watchers had taken up their positions.

So, at length, 'Mopes' came to the end of the journey. With an unaccustomed gallantry, he helped the girl out of the car and then opened the mansion's front door. Still feeling oddly sick, she kept beside him as he went across the dark hall and presently switched on the lights of the drawing room.

"There!" he exclaimed proudly. "Could you wish for anythin' better? I've spent all day dollin' it up."

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He pulled off his overcoat and hat and threw them on one side: then, tugging off his tinted glasses, he crossed to the coal fire and stirred it into a blaze. Meanwhile, the girl looked about her. Everything was certainly very comfortable and spacious. The french windows, she noticed, were masked by heavy purple drapes. She felt her breath catch a little as she detected, hardly visible, a flat disc, just discernible under the drapes. Evidently, it was Harriday's microphone, and unlikely to be seen unless deliberately looked for.

"Okay—let's have your cape," 'Mopes' said, and whipped it from Gwenda's bare shoulders almost before she realized it. He laid it across a chair back and then went to the cocktail cabinet. Gwenda wandered to the chesterfield, still retaining her handbag. From it she surreptitiously took the phial of drug and kept it in her palm.

"Like the set-up?" 'Mopes' asked, coming back and sitting beside her as he handed a filled glass over. "Cosy, huh?"

"Lovely," Gwenda agreed. "You've been working hard, Mr. McCall, to get it like this."

"Worth it, ain't it? And call me 'Mopes'. Everybody else does. I don't like that 'mister' business."

Gwenda smiled and raised her glass, then it suddenly slipped from her fingers and dropped on the floor, spilling its contents on the carpet.

"Well, of all the clumsy things!" She looked apologetic. "I must be nervous. It dropped right out of my hand."

"Think nothing of it, baby!"

'Mopes' got to his feet, balanced his drink on the arm of the chesterfield, then picked up the fallen glass after mopping

the floor with his handkerchief. In the few moments he was at the cocktail cabinet filling another glass, Gwenda quickly rid herself of the phial's contents into his own glass.

"There!" he said, returning. "Try again. And there ain't no need for you to be nervous. I ain't goin' to do anythin' to you. All I want is a woman to talk to, one who'll be friendly-like."

"Oh—I see." Gwenda drank slowly, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

"Y'know," 'Mopes' went on, musing and drinking in turns, "I've taken as big a risk as you in spendin' the evenin' like this. If the Chief wus to walk in and find us, he'd probably kill the pair of us. I'm not s'posed to have anybody here, 'less they're one of us. Too risky."

Gwenda looked startled. "Kill the pair of us? The sooner I get out, the..."

"Take it easy!" 'Mopes' caught her arm or she half rose and pulled her back on to the chesterfield. "It's a million t'one against him comin' in an', if he does, there will be a good warnin'. I spent quite a bit o' time riggin' a bell so that it'll ring if the front door opens. In that time, you can dodge behind them window drapes or some place."

"Then you'd better put my cape out of sight. That'll be a complete give-away."

"That's a thought," 'Mopes' agreed. He finished his drink, got up, and then hid the cape by the simple expedient of putting it unceremoniously in one of the sideboard cupboards.

"Another drink?" he asked, pausing by the cabinet.

"Not right now." Gwenda was feeling a trifle hazy even on one of the cocktails. "Let's talk."

"Fair enough." 'Mopes' returned to her, frowning a little to himself. He could not quite understand why his heart was racing so violently. It wasn't fear, or emotion—not even indigestion. It was something he couldn't explain.

"Anything the matter?" Gwenda asked, noticing he was anything but at ease.

"Nope. Just feel a bit tightened up, somehow. Mebbe your beauty's intoxicating me," 'Mopes' added, with a grin.

Gwenda relaxed into the chesterfield's cushions. "I say, 'Mopes'—who is his Chief of yours? He must be a clever man."

"He's clever enough, but he's a dirty swine. No respect for other people's feelings. As for murder—he takes it in his stride."

"Who is he really? I mean, do you know him?"

"Know him—? 'Course I know him!"

"When I say that, I mean do you know who he really is? This crime racket is only a side line, surely?"

"You bet," 'Mopes' acknowledged. "An' don't let's waste time on 'im, baby. We've better things to do."

"No harm in my asking questions, is there?"

"Nope—providing you don't ask too many."

Gwenda tightened her mouth a little. She was still having the utmost difficulty in getting any information, and far from the mystery drug having made 'Mopes' talkative, it seemed, instead, to have made him rather impatient.

"Time's gettin' on," he said presently. "Don't you think we ought to know each other better?"

"In—what way?" Gwenda's blue eyes searched his ugly face.

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For answer, he lunged suddenly forward towards her, his right arm encircling his waist and his left her shoulders. She was quite incapable of defending herself from the fierce, animal-like kisses he planted on her face and lips.

"That's better," he grinned, straightening up again. "Now we've made a start..."

Gwenda straightened up a little, breathing hard and trying not to show her real feelings. 'Mopes' studied her intently, his pig-eyes moving down from her face to her feet. Gwenda needed no imagination to guess what was in his mind.

"How—how many are there of you in this mansion in the ordinary way?" she asked, striving to keep her voice steady.

"Who cares?" 'Mopes' swung suddenly to his feet, his face flushed. "Get off that chesterfield, baby. I want to show you something."

Gwenda hesitated and, at that, he grabbed her arm so savagely she gasped a little, his coarse nails cutting into her bare flesh. In one heave he had yanked her up.

"Know somethin'?" he muttered, holding her tightly against him. "I think you've got other reasons for comin' here tonight than to just be with me. I've thought so all along, an' for that reason, I'm goin' to show you what it means to monkey around with 'Mopes' McCall!"

"You're crazy," Gwenda said, as calmly as she could, and pulled herself free. "My only reason for coming here is to be with you and, up to now, you've been a terrific flop. Unless you call that kissing act a good overture?"

She lounged away from him and he stood watching her, his eyes on the swing of her hips, the graceful curve of her

back and shoulders. Then, suddenly, he muttered something unintelligible and lunged across the room.

Gwenda heard him coming and spun round, her hand feeling instinctively for the gun in her skirt. Before she could get at it, he was upon her, his right hand seizing the front of her dress and wrenching it down the center.

"That's better!" he grinned, as she recoiled and made vain efforts to cover herself up. "Since you are an artist's model, you might as well pose for me. An' what in hell were you grabbin' at just now, when I came over here?"

He dived his hand at the skirt, ripping it savagely. The automatic fell out under such treatment and hit the carpet. Gwenda instantly dived for it, regardless of her efforts to hold her torn gown together, but one shove from 'Mopes' sent her stumbling away and he quickly snatched the gun up into his hand.

"Very pretty," he sneered, glaring. "So you come to spend the evening with me, an' park a gun, huh?"

He stood thinking for a moment whilst Gwenda regarded him anxiously, her ruined dress hanging in tatters about her. Then he suddenly seemed to make up his mind. He threw the gun on the nearby table and came straight for her again. What happened in the ensuing moments, she had little idea. She was pushed and shoved and manoeuvred around until she, too, finally hit the chesterfield and sprawled upon it.

"This," 'Mopes' panted, towering over her, "is where we start to get real matey, sweetheart..."

He whipped off his jacket and grinned sadistically as she twisted her head to look at him. For the life of her, she could

not remember the words of the emergency call she ought to give. Then 'Mopes' great body plunged down towards her, smashing the breath out of her.

It was at this identical moment that there came the crash of broken glass. 'Mopes' jerked up again, swearing, just in time to see a tall, broad-shouldered figure leaping across the room from the direction of the french windows.

"Who in hell ... ?" 'Mopes' dragged to his feet, then he gasped as iron knuckles hit him under the chin and knocked him spinning against the table.

"Okay," Harriday panted, as Gwenda looked at him. "I think I can handle this gentleman. I..."

"You'll handle nothin'!" 'Mopes' roared, as he realized Gwenda's automatic was right beside him on the table. "I'll blow the livin' day..."

Harriday dived straight forward, in a rugby tackle. Since he did not have a gun, he had no alternative but his physique and agility. His arm locked around 'Mopes' legs and brought him down just as the gun went off. Then the fun really started.

Gwenda raised herself up to watch as the two men rolled furiously about the floor, battering and hammering at each other. First one took punishment and then the other. They got up, and smashed each other down again; and, out in the grounds, the various men posted at different positions were unaware that anything was wrong. They could not see the french windows from their vantage points, otherwise they would have noticed the gleam of light when Harriday had broken in. Nor were they near enough to hear the breaking of



the glass, and in any case, the various shrubs around the house baffled the sound waves. As for the shot 'Mopes' had fired; the drapes had fallen back across the window and muffled it completely as far as outside hearing was concerned. Nothing could be heard at that distance.

Slowly, Harriday struggled to his feet, using the table to help him—and immediately 'Mopes' was up, too. He lashed out a jaw-breaking left, missed, and received one on the nose that drew blood. He swore, lunged, slamming a straight right into Harriday's stomach. He was in anguish as the wind was blasted out of him. He bent double—to jerk straight again from a blinding uppercut that toppled him backwards. Senseless, he hit the carpet and sprawled.

The instant she saw what had happened, Gwenda lunged from the chesterfield and dived for the window, but 'Mopes' snatched her arm as she fled by. With a powerful twist, he swung her round, an unlovely vision, with blood smearing his face and his hair disheveled.

"Nice work, baby," he murmured, tightening his hold. "So you had your boy friend planted, did you? You damned cheap little bitch! I'll make you smart for this night's work, believe you me! I've a way of dealin' with women who try and double-cross me..."

He paused, staring at the floor near the door. Still retaining his steel grip on Gwenda's arm, he stooped and picked up the disc microphone. Its wire was still intact, though twisted. 'Mopes' pondered for several seconds until the truth crystallized in his slow-moving brain.

"So that's it!" He flung the mike down and drove his heel into it. "Bin recordin' everything, huh? Cops just around the corner, and that mug was one of 'em in plain clothes. So you're workin' for the police? I was thinking as much! Right! Get movin'—an' quick!"

"Where—where to?" Gwenda was shaking, her eyes wild. She could not understand why no further help had arrived.

"I'll show you!" For answer 'Mopes' suddenly swung her over his massive shoulder, carried her from the room and up the staircase. She was aware of the cavernous darkness, of the corridor, and then light clicked on again and she found herself thrown down heavily upon a bed.

"Handy things, beds," 'Mopes' said, with a brutal grin. "I can tie you down and make you do as I say. Put a stop to your blasted struggling while I..."

"What's the idea, 'Mopes'?" a voice cut in.

'Mopes' swung round, bleary-eyed, and stared at the Chief as he stood in the doorway, a revolver in his hand.

"Hello, boss." 'Mopes' straightened. "I wus just going..."

"Shut up! Remember me saying some time ago I'd catch up with you one day? I seem to have done it. You're no longer any use to me. You've gummed up every damned thing from start to finish, bringing this girl here."

"But listen, Chief, I..."

The Chief fired, and 'Mopes' didn't stand an earthly. The black hole from the bullet appeared on his gray shirt over his heart and he reeled heavily to the floor. Gwenda turned and looked at the quietly dressed man in the doorway. He came forward slowly, revolver still leveled.

"It's a pity you know so much, young woman," he said, eyeing her disheveled hair and clothes. "You've only yourself to thank, for mixing up with scum like 'Mopes' McCall. Sorry though I am, I have to dispose of you."

Gwenda could only stare, too exhausted with reaction and fear to think of anything to say. Then, almost before she realized it, the Chief had snatched down one of the long curtain cords and began swiftly to bind her hands behind her. She made a brief, ineffectual struggle to get free, but had to give it up. Twisted on the bed, breathing hard, she found the Chief looking down at her.

"Apparently," he said, "Chief-Inspector Dawson has been surprisingly thorough. I noticed a mobile recording unit and men planted about the grounds as I arrived. In fact, the men in the recording van were wondering why recording had gone dead and were about to investigate. I managed to keep them away—as well as the men around the grounds. At the moment they have gone racing on a fool's errand, looking for 'Mopes' and you, and Detective Sergeant Harriday, whom I noticed lying flat out in the drawing room."

"You—you sent the police away?" Gwenda stared incredulously. "How could you? The head of this whole rotten outfit! How could you?"

"I have a way with me," the Chief answered dryly. "However, I am wasting time. Pardon me a moment."

Turning aside, he removed his hat and coat. Gwenda lay helpless, trying to fathom why he was wearing a white coat. He looked like a house decorator, a soda-fountain operator—even a waiter. He was good looking after a fashion, unless it

was a small graying imperial that conveyed the effect. In build, he was slight, but probably pretty strong. Then he turned and headed from the room.

That he had plenty of strength was revealed to her a few moments later, for he returned carrying Harriday's unconscious form in a fireman's lift. He dumped him near the bed, against the wall, and swiftly went to work to bind him up with the remaining curtain cord.

"Everything neat and tidy..." The Chief made a final examination of Gwenda's painfully tight cords, looked at the sprawled body of 'Mopes', with the burn-hole over his heart, then he carefully re-donned his hat and coat. Evidently he had only removed them during his exertions so as to have more freedom.

"This place contains so much of interest to the police if they return here, as they inevitably will, that I have decided to burn it down," he explained. "Fire is such a wonderful element, don't you think?"

He smiled slowly, his rapier-like cold gray eyes on the girl's face; then he turned aside and removed something from his pocket. It looked purplish as it lay in his hand after being shaken out of a small envelope.

"Permanganate of potash," he explained, seeing her eyes fixed upon him. "I pour them on the carpet, so, and..."

They streamed from his hand into a little pyramid. Then he held up a bottle of transparent bluish substance.

"Glycerine," he concluded. "Just an old chemical trick to produce a delayed action fire, you see. I pour the glycerine on the permanganate, and you notice it froths up. In a few

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minutes, during which time I'll have time to get clear, it will smoke and burst into flame."

He straightened up and turned away quickly. "Sorry I cannot stay longer. Goodbye!"

The door slammed and Gwenda lay staring like one hypnotized as—true to prediction—the crystals presently began to smoke, to glow, and then they burst into flame and filled the air with the stench of burning carpet.

## VII

IT TOOK SEVERAL seconds for Gwenda to realize that this was the end—that, in a very short time, the place would be in flames. Immediately she realized it, she began rolling herself desperately on the bed, finally dropping herself with painful impact to the floor. Twisting again, she seized one of the fallen blankets in her teeth and attempted to drag it along towards the now smoldering fire in the carpet and smother it; but long before her attempt could succeed, the smoldering became flame, and she had to roll in the opposite direction to save herself.

The window! Was that a possibility? No use if there were no men in the grounds any more, and she couldn't get free of her ropes, no matter how hard she tried. She coughed as smoke surged into her lungs and gave a desperate look around her. Then, to her amazement, she saw something quite unbelievable. 'Mopes' McCall, despite the obvious bullet wound over his heart, was slowly sitting up and rubbing his head dazedly.

"'Mopes'!" Gwenda's voice was a scream. "'Mopes'—you're not dead!"

"Huh?" He shook himself and looked about him, then he gave a start as he saw the smoldering fire.

"What the heck ... ?"

"The Chief did it!" Gwenda chattered on. "Tied me up, along with the Sergeant there, and set the place on fire with

glycerine or something. He didn't bother to tie you up since I suppose he thought you were dead. Get us free—quick!”

‘Mopes’ heaved to his feet, feeling at himself and frowning. Then, from his shirt pocket, over the heart, he drew forth his thick notebook and examined it. In a dazed fashion he peered at a bullet embedded within it.

“Can you beat that?” he asked. “The slug lost itself in me notebook—an’ the Chief didn't kill me, as he intended to. Ain't that nice? Ain't that really nice?” His face hardened brutally as he threw the book away.

“‘Mopes’—for the love of heaven...” Gwenda coughed savagely. “Get us out of here—the Sergeant and me. I'll do whatever you want afterwards. Get us clear of this fire.”

‘Mopes’ looked at it, seeing it was now beyond all control.

“I've no time,” he said curtly. “I've a score to settle with the Chief. Will his face be red when I turn up to settle with him!”

He hurtled for the door and Gwenda's despairing voice came to him again:

“‘Mopes’—you can't do it! You can't leave me and the Sergeant here...”

“Who can't? What the hell did either of you do for me but get me into the hell of a mess?” Just the same, ‘Mopes’ still hesitated. Gwenda was a woman, and a highly desirable one at that. Perhaps if he ... No! No use slipping back again. She and he were on opposite sides of the fence.

“I've a job to do!” he snapped. “I'm going straight to the Chief's home and straighten things up with him.”

Then he was gone and the door slammed amidst a swirl of smoke. Out in the corridor, he found the air comparatively clear and he wasted no time in hurrying down into the basement laboratory. Here he collected the double blowpipe, a capsule of darts, and then went on his way, homicidal viciousness in every line of his ugly face. Meantime, Gwenda had rolled herself away from the immediate source of the fire. By degrees she reached the spot where Harriday was lying and dimly showing signs of returning consciousness after the shattering blow in the jaw he had taken. When at last Gwenda did reach him, she did the only thing she could do to arouse him—lay flat on her back and dug her feet into him repeatedly—a performance calling for considerable effort with her legs and arms bound as they were.

After a while he responded and opened his eyes. Since neither the Chief nor 'Mopes' had switched off the light, he was able immediately to take in the situation—and what he saw and smelled dashed the last fogs of unconsciousness from his mind.

"We've got to do something—and quickly," Gwenda told him, raising her head and shoulders to look at him. "It won't be long before that burning carpet sets fire to the furniture and the bedding; then we'll really be in a mess."

"Can't understand where the boys are, that they don't come," Harriday muttered, straining savagely at the cord tethering him. "They must have an idea how things are..."

"The Chief sent them away. He told me that when he set the place on fire."



Harriday stopped struggling. "The Chief did? What in hell's the matter with our fellows to take orders from him?"

"I don't know—and, right at this moment, I don't care. What do we do? We've got to move fast ... oh, 'Mopes' has gone! I thought he'd been shot dead, but he wasn't. The bullet stuck in his notebook. He's gone to square accounts with the Chief."

Harriday muttered something at the turn events had taken, and then looked about him.

"Main thing is to get rid of these ropes," he said. "I can't get at the knife in my pocket, and I don't think you could, either. Nor will it be safe to try and wriggle over the burning carpet there and let it burn the ropes through: too painful and too likely to set our clothes on fire. So what the devil do ... I have it!" he exclaimed abruptly. "You say 'Mopes' just left here?"

"Uh-huh." Gwenda waited anxiously. "Did he lock the door there?"

"Not as far as I know. He just slammed it."

"Good! Then it's worth the effort of rolling to it and trying to get into the corridor outside. What I'm thinking of is the bathroom. There ought to be a razor there, since 'Mopes' is clean shaven. Or else a razor blade. We'll be free in no time if that's the case ... let's go!"

Without delaying any longer, they began dragging and rolling themselves towards the door, avoiding the burning area and coughing with every movement they made—so thick had the smoke become.

"So far, so good!" Harriday panted, as they gained the door. "Now for the tough part. Maybe I can brace myself."

He rolled and manoeuvred until his shoulders were against the door itself. Then, digging his heels into the carpet, he levered himself up inch by inch, using the door to support his back. Thuswise, he finally became upright enough to have the doorknob on a line with his bound hands. Gripping it with difficulty with his finger ends, he turned the knob and then toppled forward, dragging the door open with him.

The rest was again a matter of manoeuvre and wriggling as they both eased themselves out into the corridor. Having succeeded so far, and having clear air again to breathe, they were encouraged in their efforts. Certainly they had no idea where the bathroom was, but it had got to be found.

"Stay here if you wish, whilst I look," Harriday said, peering at the girl in the faintly reflected moonlight through the corridor window.

"Not on your life! I'm rolling as far from that burning bedroom as possible!"

So the painful, laborious progress was resumed—and for quite a while it was without result. They opened quite a few doors with considerable difficulty, to find they gave on to empty rooms—but at last they found the one they sought, and Harriday wasted no time in edging himself in a series of long, kangaroo-like leaps towards the mirrored cupboard over the washbowl.

He turned the cupboard catch back with his teeth and then looked into the interior. His eyes gleamed at the sight of a number of old razor blades carelessly flung into a grimy

looking tumbler. Again his teeth came into action and he lifted the tumbler out and then deliberately dropped it.

It splintered on the uncarpeted flooring beside the bowl, scattering glass and old razor blades all over the floor.

"That's it!" Gwenda cried in delight.

"Yes—but keep clear, or those bare arms of yours might get badly cut. I'm okay in this jacket—I hope! Here I go!"

He flattened himself down carefully and spent the next five minutes working into a position where his carefully investigating fingers could pick up either a blade or a piece of glass. It happened to be a blade and, after that, the rest was easy. Three or four edgewise movements with the blade cut the rope on his wrists and he quickly pulled himself free. In one minute flat he also had Gwenda free and helped her to her feet. She was looking about her in the dim light, doing what she could to fasten her rent garments in place.

"Here, take this," Harriday said, tugging off his coat. "Make you feel less embarrassed, maybe. And much warmer."

"Thanks." She took it gratefully and buttoned it about her. "I've got a cape in the drawing room, but maybe this is no time to think about it."

"Grab it as we go out," Harriday said, diving for the door. "You've put up with enough without losing a cape as well. Come on."

She kept beside him as they hurried down the staircase. By this time, flames were crackling from the bedroom they had vacated, and the whole big house was full of smoke. Gwenda detoured long enough to recover her cape from the sideboard cupboard, and then hurried with Harriday to the

outdoors—just as a party of men came running up. From the distance there came the sound of a fire engine's siren.

"Thompson!" Harriday exclaimed, halting as the men came up. "Where in blazes have you men been all this time? Didn't you know Miss Blane and I were in real trouble?"

"We thought you might be, Sergeant, when the microphone blanked out but, just at that moment, Mr. Ensdale came along with the news that you and Miss Blane had been spirited away round the back by 'Mopes'. He told us which way you'd gone, so we followed hell for leather. When we couldn't find any trace of you, we came back to make sure. I sent one of the boys to phone the fire brigade when we spotted smoke coming from an upper window."

"Who did you say came along?" Harriday asked, in wonderment.

"Mr. Ensdale. I assumed he was deputizing for the Inspector while he remained at the Yard..."

"And when he'd given you these instructions, what did he do?"

Thompson scratched the back of his head. "Don't rightly know, sir. We left him here."

"Oh, you did..." Harriday thought swiftly, then:

"Have your men do what they can to examine this house before it all caves in. There must be traces of the counterfeiting apparatus somewhere. Then get us to your car, and give me your phone."

"Right!" Thompson turned and gave his orders. By the time he had done so, the fire engine was sweeping up the driveway.

"Look after them, Mason," Thompson ordered, and then quickly led the way to the nearby squad car. Harriday and Gwenda tumbled into the back whilst Thompson took up his position beside the driver.

As they moved off, Harriday wasted no time in getting through to Whitehall—and Dawson. In silence the Chief-Inspector listened to the story Harriday had to tell.

"I just can't understand it," Harriday finished in perplexity. "I can concede that you appointed Ensdale to supervise things here for you, but I can't fathom why he gave an order which led all our men off trail, and nearly cost Gwenda and me our lives."

"Time you tumbled to the truth, Bob—as I did some time ago," Dawson replied briefly. "I never gave Ensdale any sanction to act on my behalf. I've quite sufficient faith in you. What you have told me simply confirms what I have suspected for a long time. Namely, that Ensdale and the Chief of the counterfeit racket are one and the same person."

"What? That's stretching things too far, sir..."

"Not at all. Why did Ensdale persistently claim that all the snake-bites were genuine? Why did Maudie Vincent die so suddenly after Ensdale had called to see her—and probably slipped her something that finished her? Why did he insist on being present at our final conference to see how things were going, as he put it? Lastly, he's one of the cleverest physicists we've got. There's a host of reasons why it must be he, Bob, and I rather expected he'd betray himself tonight, which is one reason why I kept out of the picture. Anyhow, I can't explain more now. I'm acting immediately to have him

arrested. He'll probably be at his home, satisfied that he has rid himself of all danger. See you later."

With that, Dawson rang off, and looked at Gwenda.

"Well?" she asked quickly, as she settled herself beside him. "What did the Inspector say?"

"Plenty—but the main thing is that he's going after Ensdale. He's the man we've been looking for all this time!"

"Mr. Ensdale?" Thompson repeated, turning sharply in his seat. "But surely that's wrong? He's..."

"Dawson's satisfied, Thompson, so there's nothing I can say. Look, Gwenda; have you ever seen Mr. Ensdale yourself?"

"No."

"Then—what did the Chief look like when he burst in upon you tonight?"

"Oh—middle-aged. Hair going a bit gray. Spare build. Very piercing gray eyes. Quiet way of talking, but very purposeful. Oh, yes—he had a little imperial."

Harriday smiled wryly. "Ensdale to the life—except for the beard. Presumably he wears that as a slight disguise. I assume he had no beard when he spoke to you and the boys, Thompson?"

"No, sir."

"No wonder he knew so much," Harriday mused. "However, maybe we'll learn more at the Yard. Carry on, Thompson, and let's see what's happened. I have the feeling that maybe 'Mopes' McCall will settle everything for us. He'll be the last person Ensdale will expect to see."

"And 'Mopes' won't even have to search for him," Gwenda put in. "You probably heard him say, over the mike, that he knows the Chief's real identity?"

Harriday nodded and relapsed into moody silence as the car got under way again—and, at about this time, another car, driven by 'Mopes', the one he usually used, was drawing up at the corner of Endersby Place in Central London. Some distance along Endersby Place was the Georgian-style home of Boyd Ensedale, as the ex-convict very well knew.

Alighting from the car, 'Mopes' locked it and then moved with purposeful strides down the street, pausing when he came opposite to number seventeen. It lay on the opposite side of the street so, well out of range of the nearest street lamp, 'Mopes' pondered the house carefully. It was solid, as became its period, and was one of a row. There was light behind the curtains of the downstairs room and the front door came flush with the street.

'Mopes' eyes rose to the upper rooms. No lights came from there, but there was a network of solidly built drainpipes, with the main drainpipe connected between numbers seventeen and nineteen.

"Easy," he muttered, "'specially at this time of night."

He glanced once more up and down the street, noted that it was deserted, and then sped swiftly across it. Shinning up a drainpipe, especially such an easy one, was no task to 'Mopes' and, in thirty seconds, he had reached the bedroom window. The old-fashioned catch responded instantly to his penknife and, hardly making a sound, he slid into the room and closed the window softly.

His training as a housebreaker led him to keep quiet for several seconds, 'smelling' things out, as he called it, and accustoming his eyes to the gloom. By degrees, he made out the room's detail in the reflected glow from the lamp further down the street. There was the bed, the usual furniture—and that was that.

"No antidote likely to be 'ere," he told himself. "On your way, feller!"

He drifted to the door, opened it, and peered out into the passageway. Everything quiet and dark. He passed along it, crept down the stairs, and finally paused at the door under which there lay a bar of light—the room he had seen from the street. Listening outside it, he heard the rustle of paper now and again, and a slight cough.

Finally, he looked through the keyhole, and could see part of an armchair, a glowing fire, and the lower half of a man's profile. There was no doubt that it was Boyd Ensdale, minus his torpedo beard, and also minus the white surgical coat that he had been wearing earlier.

"So you sit there and read, calm as you like, after tryin' to kill me, huh?" 'Mopes' whispered, straightening again. "You're in for one helluva shock, believe me!"

Satisfied that his victim was alone and just 'asking for it', 'Mopes' prowled again until he came to the door that led to the cellar, a region inseparable from the house architecture. Below there might be that which he sought.

He crept down into the darkness, taking care to shut the upper door behind him. For light he used what few matches



he had with him and presently discovered he was in a cellar that had been converted into a scientific laboratory.

"Just as I'd 'oped," 'Mopes' murmured and, using up his precious matches, he began a search of the shelves, peering at the neatly labeled bottles. He was commencing to fear he would never find that which he was seeking when a bottle apart from the others, quarter full of a transparent liquid, caught his eye. The label said: 'Anti-Ser-Rat', which, to 'Mopes' ponderous brain finally suggested 'Antidote-Serum-Rattlesnake', or something like it.

"Chance it, anyway," he murmured and, taking the bottle from the shelf, he poured its contents down the sink and re-filled it with water. Replacing the bottle in the exact spot, he crept silently back up the stairs and re-opened the door into the hall.

To his horror, the full-bodied glare of a torch struck him in the eyes and, from behind it, came a faint gasp of surprise. Instinctively, he slammed the door shut again and flung himself down the steps as a gun exploded in the hall, whanging a bullet clean through the door panel.

'Mopes' reached the cellar floor and half fell over. He had a pretty good mental impression of his surroundings, and quickly fled to one of the far corners, behind the staircase. Here he worked rapidly in the darkness, bringing out his double blowpipe and loading it from the capsule. It was no easy job in the dark, but long practice with the fiendish darts had made him a past-master.

Then the lights came on full blaze and there were cautious footsteps on the stone steps. 'Mopes' still waited and, at length, the voice of the Chief reached him:

"No use your skulking down there, 'Mopes'. From upstairs I can operate a switch that will fill this basement with chlorine gas and choke the life out of you. Before I do that, though, be kind enough to enlighten me as to how you come to be here. I fully believed I'd finished with you."

'Mopes' did not answer. He was watching and listening keenly, his blowpipe ready for action.

"A pity you won't explain it," the Chief said in regret. "I have to think I miscalculated. However, since you won't talk to me, I may as well talk to you—perhaps cheer you on your way to the Eternity to which you are certainly going. This evening, whilst engaged with the delectable Gwenda Blane, you probably found your emotions were out of hand, that you were even more bestial than usual. In case your dumb brain has been puzzled by that, I should explain that I prepared a special drug to create just that effect on your nerve-centers, and I'm sure the resourceful Miss Blane would find a means somehow to add the drug to your drink."

'Mopes' eyes narrowed as he remembered the incident of the girl's fallen glass. Less clearly, he recalled his own queer feelings and the subhuman promptings that had assailed him.

"I flatter myself I calculated everything very nicely," the Chief continued. "I reasoned you would go berserk, that Sergeant Harriday would break in to the rescue of the lady, and that you probably would get yourself arrested. Things did not happen quite that way—but at least I achieved my main

object, which was to have you so out of hand that you would not tell that girl anything. I hope you didn't become sentimental and save them from the fire which I started?"

"No, I..." 'Mopes' checked himself, annoyed that he had broken his silence, but it was too late now. He heard the feet coming lower down the steps. He stood crouching and waited, blowpipe ready.

"Incidentally, 'Mopes'," the voice added, "you ought to have more sense than enter the home of a scientist, and imagine you are safe. I have quite a few photoelectric cells scattered around to protect myself against intruders, an essential precaution to a man of my—er—unorthodox pursuits. Several times the warning light flashed in my drawing room, so there is no mystery about my knowing you were present—or at least, that somebody was..."

The voice stopped suddenly and, in an opposite corner of the basement, something clattered noisily. The gangster swung towards it, his heart pumping and, in a matter of seconds, he saw it was a golden cigarette case, which had been thrown to distract his attention. He grasped all this in split seconds, but in those split seconds lay a fatal gap. Boyd Ensedale jumped the remainder of the steps, swung his gun, and fired. Once—twice—three times.

'Mopes' twitched and gasped as the bullets bit into him. He fell on his face, the still loaded blow-pipe in his hand underneath him. He could still think in a hazy kind of way, but his body would hardly respond. It was clamped in the steel vice of an ever-increasing pain.

“No mistake this time, my friend,” Ensdale said in cold tones. “And florid acid can very soon take care of your complete elimination. I only wish I knew when Harriday and Gwenda Blanc died—or if they did. They can make things somewhat difficult for me if they have the chance to speak to Thompson and his group of dolts...”

By this time, Ensdale was half talking to himself. He took a final look at the motionless ‘Mopes as he finished speaking, and then turned away towards a guttapercha carboy which evidently contained the florid acid he had spoken of.

‘Mopes’ was subconsciously aware of the movements, of the scrape of feet on the floor, and it penetrated his dying brain that he had left his scheme of revenge unfinished—which gave him just the necessary urge to finish the job.

With a stupendous effort, he raised himself on one elbow and fixed Ensdale's back with malignant eyes. Shakily, he put the blowpipe to his lips and, with deliberation and literally his last breath, blew the darts. Then he was dead, the blowpipe clattering from his hand.

Ensdale turned, clutching the back of his neck as he felt the vicious sting of the poisoned icicles. He wrenched them out and stamped on them, stared at ‘Mopes’, then again brought out his gun and fired twice into the corpse. This done, he turned swiftly, took the snake-bite antidote from the shelf and filled a hypodermic syringe as quickly as possible.

The syringe loaded, he whipped off his jacket and rolled up his shirt-sleeve...

“Stand right where you are, Mr. Ensdale!”

He looked up with a start. So preoccupied had he been in his own physical danger, he had not thought of, nor heard, anything else. Now he beheld the grim-faced Chief-Inspector Dawson on the steps and, behind him, were three constables. But none of them appeared to be armed—a fact which made Ensdale smile rather bitterly. He hesitated for a second, deciding whether to use his gun or not; then his natural coolness came to his rescue.

“Well, gentlemen—I'm standing. What's the matter?” Dawson finished the journey from the steps and came across, as Ensdale slowly lowered his shirt-sleeve again.

“Not much use my wasting time, Ensdale,” Dawson said. “You're under arrest. I'll complete the formalities at the station. Meantime, it's my duty to warn you...”

“Don't recite that rubbish to me, Dawson.” Ensdale adjusted his cuff-link. “For what am I under arrest? What's the charge?”

“Murder, attempted murder, counterfeiting, and arson.” Dawson gave a dry smile. “Practically everything in the book, I'd say.”

Ensdale leaned casually against the bench, trying not to show in his expression the pain he was commencing to experience as the snake venom bit through the bloodstream.

“You know, Dawson, I've always had quite a respect for your abilities, but I'm becoming discouraged. When you creep into my house and indict me as a common criminal, you're laying yourself open to plenty of trouble. I'm sure the Assistant Commissioner won't approve what I tell him.”

"You can stop bluffing," Dawson said briefly; then, reaching forward suddenly, he removed the bulge from Ensdale's right-hand pocket and handed it to the constable behind him. Ensdale watched, and his eyes were straying to the dead 'Mopes' in the corner.

Dawson saw the movement and strolled over to the corpse. He examined it briefly; then, pulling on his gloves, he carefully took up the blowpipe and dropped it into the cellophane envelope that he withdrew from his pocket.

"Your very active snake, I assume?" he asked, coming back to where the scientist was half crouched by the bench, biting his underlip to keep control of himself.

"Stop—stop jumping to conclusions," Ensdale said. "You can never do anything to me, or anybody else without absolute proof—and that you haven't got! You can find a man over a corpse, the knife still gripped from the fatal blow: but if you haven't seen the fatal blow, and got witnesses to prove it, you're lost. Or do I need to remind you of that loophole in English law, known as 'the reasonable doubt'?"

"You always did know how to talk, Ensdale," Dawson said curtly, "but on this occasion I've no time to waste. Take him away, boys, and one of you phone for an ambulance to remove our lamented friend on the floor there..."

The constables began moving—and so did Ensdale. He turned abruptly and, from the shelf over the bench behind him, snatched down a phial of what appeared to be glycerine. With it upraised in his hand, he faced Dawson again.

"No you don't, Dawson!" he snapped. "I'll not be ordered about by you, your confounded men, or anybody else! Lay a

hand on me, and I'll drop this—and that will be the finish for the lot of us. It's mercury fulminate, in case you're wondering, and there's enough here to blow this house and its immediate neighbors to Hades."

Dawson tightened his lips, signaling the constables to make no further move. For a moment or two there was silence, and Dawson was the first to break it.

"You know as well as I do that you can't keep this up indefinitely, Ensdale! Put that damned stuff down and behave with some sense!"

Ensdale winced as a spasm shot through him. His face went a sickly shade of gray.

"Stop giving me orders, Dawson! I'm the one who can afford to do that at the moment, and I'm telling you to get off my premises, and take your men with you. I'll give you half a minute, and if you don't, I'm going to drop this bottle. I'd prefer we all get blown to bits than that you should nail me."

"Which is as good as admitting that my accusations against you are correct?"

Ensdale did not answer. He bent slightly under the tightening anguish of the snake venom. Dawson moved forward slowly until he had reached the bench.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "You feeling ill?"

"Mind your own business!" Ensdale straightened up again, his upraised hand quivering dangerously.

"I'll make one guess," Dawson said, abruptly snatching up something from the bench. "You're hoping to use this!"

Ensdale breathed hard as he looked at the hypodermic, ready filled for use, in Dawson's hand.

"Give that to me," he whispered. "I'm going to drop this bottle if you don't!"

Dawson took a step or two back, shaking his head. "I don't think you will, Ensdale. You love life as much as anybody else, and you'll not kill yourself as long as you can overcome that snake-bite venom. That's obviously what's wrong with you. The blow-pipe on the floor beside 'Mopes'; you with your shirt-sleeve up as we came in; this hypo, ready filled..."

"Give—it—to—me!"

"I'll give it to you on two conditions. One of them is that you give me that mercury fulminate, and the other is that you admit the facts I have already outlined. We can save a lot of time that way, and I have my witnesses right here."

"That's damned unethical, Dawson—and you know it full well! No policeman can enforce a confession under duress."

"Technically, no—but I'm entitled to use any means I consider advisable to get at the truth—and that's what I mean to do."

Ensdale glowered, perspiration commencing to trickle down his face. Then, after a few seconds, he handed over the mercury fulminate, which Dawson promptly gave gingerly to the care of the officer nearest him.

"Well?" Dawson raised an eyebrow. "You are the man we're looking for, aren't you?"

"Yes." Ensdale did not make any attempt at denial this time. "And I'd have got away with it, maybe for years, if that bonehead 'Mopes' hadn't gummed things up..."



"Your statements about the snake-bites were necessarily false, because you wanted to safeguard yourself?"

"Naturally. You'd have done the same."

"I'm not concerned with what I'd have done. I'm concerned with the fact that you never proved the presence of saliva, the one thing which would have proved the claim of genuine snake-bite. I was also struck by the surprising coincidence of Maudie Vincent having a relapse after you called to see her at the hospital. Obviously, you fixed that relapse very neatly."

Ensdale shrugged. "Snake venom was already known to be in her system, though neutralized. The presence of a little more would not excite suspicion—nor did it. I merely gave her a second shot, so that she would not talk too much."

"You are remarkably frank," Dawson remarked, vaguely puzzled.

"Why not? Having admitted one thing, I might as well admit the remainder..." But, just the same, there was an enigmatic light in Ensdale's sharp eyes. He appeared to be thinking swiftly.

"I assume you insisted on joining our final conference so that you could discover exactly what we meant to do?"

"Naturally."

"I'm glad you did. I'd suspected you for a long time, and that move satisfied me. You had no real need to be so interested, not being actively engaged on the case, beyond the pathological side. Very ingenious, Ensdale. An imperial beard for the Chief, and none for Ensdale. Right?"

Ensdale mopped his face. "For God's sake, Dawson, stop playing around with me and hand over that hypo. I can't stand any more of this!"

Dawson complied and watched in silence as Ensedale quickly bared his arm again and sank the needle into a vein. He depressed the hypo-plunger to its limit and then smiled grimly to himself.

"That's better!" he said, in relief, "or will be, when it gets circulating. Well, gentlemen—anything more?"

"We'll be moving," Dawson said. "And I'm glad to see you are taking this business sensibly, Ensedale."

Ensdale drew on his jacket and buttoned it precisely.

"Before we go, Dawson, I have one or two experiments in progress in this basement. Have I your permission to switch off the current?"

"Go ahead," Dawson agreed, watching narrowly. "But don't try anything funny."

The scientist turned away to a switch panel, pulled out a number of plugs, snapped over several make-and-break switches, and then looked about him.

"I'm ready," he said, but in striding forward he bent double and nearly fell to his knees. Immediately, Dawson and one of the constables helped him to straighten again. There was anguish in every line of his face.

"The—the antidote's a long time working," he panted slowly. "I only hope you didn't let me have it too late, Dawson. If you did, that makes you a murderer, too."

"Or an unwitting judge." Dawson answered. "We'll give you a hand up the steps."

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“No—no—I don't need that. I can do it better by myself. You needn't think I'm trying to attempt anything. I'm far too ill for that.”

Holding his middle and biting at his lips to stifle cries of pain, Ensdale tottered to the steps and began to climb them. Dawson nodded to his men and began to follow. He kept immediately behind Ensdale until the top stair was reached, then the scientist unexpectedly swung round and lashed out his foot. How much the effort cost him in physical anguish could not be measured. All Dawson knew was that he received the savage blow straight in the face, the whole world seeming to explode in sparks around him. He stumbled backwards, knocking over the man coming behind him.

Then Ensdale was beyond the doorway to the hall, and it closed with a violent bang.

## VIII

DAZED, BLOOD STREAMING from his face from a deep gash in his cheek, Dawson struggled upright again as his men helped him.

"Never mind me!" he panted, whipping out his handkerchief. "Get after Ensdale—quick!"

At that, one of the men bounded to the top of the stairs and shoved violently on the tightly locked door. In a moment or two he was reinforced by his colleagues and, in unison, they shoved and kicked against the panels, without result. Dawson watched them, mopping his face and fuming by turns.

"Get something from below," he ordered. "There must be a something we can use as a jimmy, or a crowbar or..." He stopped, breaking off into a fit of uncontrollable coughing as a heavy odor wafted past him and nearly stopped his breathing.

"That's chlorine gas!" one of the men ejaculated, startled. "I'd know it anywhere."

"Gas—gas—or otherwise, we want something to open this door!" Dawson got his voice back with an effort; then he turned to attempt the task himself, using his handkerchief both to cover his mouth and protect his gashed cheek.

It was when he reached the floor of the basement, the coughing men coming down behind him, that he realized how dense the gas was becoming. It could be heard hissing somewhere.

"Ensdale must have done this when he monkeyed around with that switchboard," one of the men said, looking about him with watering eyes. "If we could find where ... there!" And he pointed to a nozzle projecting from a tank rather like an oxygen cylinder.

Even to approach it, however, was useless. It was emitting the deadly gas freely, and its nozzle was electrically controlled. To deal with it without masks was a hopeless proposition.

"Here!" Dawson had been exploring hastily, and now started to unclamp a heavy vice from the bench.

"This ought to smash the door through."

Coughing and gasping, their eyes watering as the choking fumes grew denser around them, the men began to struggle with the clamps of the vice and, at last, got it free. It took two of them to carry it up the steps. Dawson and the remaining man followed them, handkerchiefs pressed to their faces.

In three massive blows, the vice crashed through the wood of the hall door—but, instead of tumbling into the hall beyond, it clanged against something metallic, and then fell down into a cavity beyond the door.

"I'll be damned!" Dawson muttered. "A steel slide. We can't get through that. Evidently Ensdale had this house of his fixed for any eventuality."

The four men looked at each other anxiously, struggling to get some fresh air into their lungs—then one of them snapped his fingers.

"This basement may originally have been a coal cellar! There could be a grid or something to throw the coal through!"

Immediately they blundered down the steps again, hurrying into the basement beyond the laboratory section. Here the air was a trifle clearer, but their hopes of a coal chute or grid were instantly dashed. A steel slide was in position here, too, fixed in well-greased grooves, and probably electrically controlled from somewhere in the house above. Every means of escape was sealed.

"Damned cunning swine, isn't he?" Dawson muttered, still mopping his damaged face. "Only one thing for it, boys, if we don't want to be choked to death mighty soon."

"What's that, sir? Try and smash a way through the wall?"

"No. That wouldn't do any good. I was thinking of that mercury fulminate. Which one of you has it?"

One of the men looked rather astonished, and then scared. Carefully, he felt in his uniform jacket and finally produced the phial. Dawson took it and gave a frown.

"To the best of my knowledge, mercury fulminate is a form of grayish crystal," he said. "This is either mixed with something else to give it its syrupy look, or else Ensdale was just bluffing, knowing we wouldn't dare argue!"

In fascination, the constables watched as he uncorked the bottle and sniffed at it. He smiled bitterly.

"Acetone! Can't you smell the peppermint?"

"I can't smell anything but that damned chlorine!" one of the constables muttered, "and it's getting thicker, sir. Ensdale was fooling, then?"

"Obviously. He knew we'd not dare to argue, and probably imagined that, since he is a physicist, we'd think he'd doctored the stuff up somehow. Fact remains it's no use ... better see what else there is."

They returned into the laboratory section of the basement, but they could only search for a few minutes before they found the fumes of the still escaping chlorine gas too much for them. They retreated into a far corner of cellar without having accomplished anything, and even here, the fumes were becoming denser, keeping all of them in a constant state of coughing.

"Surely," one of the constables asked, "there ought to be an acetylene cutter in a laboratory like this?"

"Very probably," Dawson agreed, "but when you're nearly knocked senseless by the gas, what's the use of trying to search? If any of you men have lungs strong enough to cap that chlorine nozzle, we might accomplish something; I can't do it—I'm bronchial even in the normal way."

One of the constables suddenly made up his mind, driven by the desperate thought that death was the answer if something was not done immediately. He took as deep a breath as he dared of the mephitic atmosphere, then set off with his handkerchief clamped to his mouth and nose. The others watched him, struggling desperately to keep their senses.

After a while, however, the constable came back, and allowed his pent-up breath to escape in an explosive gasp.

"That—that's not doing the damage, sir!" he panted. "It's empty and labeled 'oxygen'. There's a sealed oxygen cylinder

above it, and another one of sealed hydrogen on top of that. The chlorine is at the very top, coming from a jet let into the wall. Can't do a thing about it ... we got the wrong idea."

"Oh—hell!" Dawson looked about him in desperation; then, quite suddenly, his eyes gleamed. "Wait! Did you say a cylinder of oxygen and one of hydrogen? Sealed?"

"According to the labels on them—yes."

"I've got to have them! Also that empty Dewar flask from by the wall there."

The constable nodded, but Dawson did not expect him to do the task all by himself. He jerked his head and advanced, holding his breath as much as possible, disregarding the ooze of blood still trickling down his cheek.

To remove the two unwanted cylinders was not difficult, with four of them to handle the job and, in the process, they could see the jet from which the chlorine was apparently coming. It was too high up to be got at, however, let alone capped, and in any case, Dawson seemed to be in possession of some new idea.

Under his directions, as they battled with their tortured lungs, the cylinders were carried to the top of the stone steps, whilst Dawson and the remaining man brought the big Dewar flask, probably used originally for the storage of liquid air. Up at the summit of the steps, the chlorine gas was not so dense, due mainly to its fairly heavy specific gravity, which kept it, as yet, at the lower levels.

"What's the idea, sir?" one of the men questioned, as Dawson directed them to hold the Dewar flask upside down on a level with their shoulders.



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"An experiment," Dawson answered briefly, busy with the nozzle of the oxygen cylinder. "Think yourselves lucky I'm in the scientific division. My aim is to get two parts of hydrogen and one of oxygen into this Dewar flask, in which they'll remain, if it's held upside down. I've got to guess my bulk measurement, but it ought to be near enough. After that, we need a fuse of some kind. The moment the flame gets near those combined gases, it ought to blow the steel door and maybe half the house to blazes. It's our last and only chance, before the chlorine gets too dense. Fortunately, chlorine has an affinity for both hydrogen and oxygen, so there'll be no trouble in that respect."

The constables looked at each other and said nothing. They knew little of chemical formula—at least, not in such a specialized way. All they could do between spells of coughing was support the flask whilst Dawson operated the nozzle of first one and then the other, directing the released gases into the inverted 'goldfish bowl'.

"Right!" he said, finally. "That's as near as we can get it. The proportions are roughly right. Lower the flask, boys, wrong way up."

He was obeyed. This done, he raised one edge slightly, and kept it supported by means of a sheet of paper torn from a notepad from his pocket, which he formed into a wedge. With some more of the paper, twisted into long lengths, he made a fuse that trailed erratically down the stone steps to about half way. Then he looked at the men.

"This may be our finish, boys," he said quietly: "The explosion will be terrific—it always is with even a small

proportion of oxygen and hydrogen—and for that reason, everything may come down on top of us. Our aim and hope is that that steel door, or the wall surrounding it, will be blown away. Ready to try it?”

The constables nodded grimly.

“Right—get below, into the furthest corner of the cellar and I'll join you in a moment.”

The men wasted no time, and neither did Dawson. He flicked his lighter, applied it to the paper fuse, and then hurried down into the suffocating, odorous atmosphere as fast as he could go. Here he joined the constables, and they all crouched with their faces to the wall, waiting tensely. Such a long interval elapsed, it seemed to them that something must have gone wrong.

Then it came—ear-shattering in its violence—to the accompaniment of a blinding flash of energy as the two gases united to form water. Immediately, Dawson went hurriedly to the steps.

“We did it!” one of the men cried behind him. “Or rather—you did, sir!”

There was no doubt about it. The steel slide itself was still in place in its runners, the explosion not having been powerful enough to blast through it, but the surrounding wall was a crumbled ruin of dust, brick and mortar. Over everything there hung a dense cloud of smoke.

Dawson led the way out through the aperture, thankful to breathe comparatively clear air again. Reaching the hall light switch, he depressed it and, to his satisfaction, the light came up, glimmering through the ashy haze. It was also at this

moment that there came a sudden commotion at the front door.

One of the constables moved quickly to open it. Instantly Harriday, Gwenda and Thompson came hurrying in.

"You all right, sir?" Harriday asked quickly.

"Just about—except for a lovely gash in the face—hello, Gwenda, still in one piece in spite of everything that's happened?"

"Like you—just about!" She gave a wan smile.

"Where's Ensdale?" Thompson demanded. "And what's been going on in here? We heard the explosion as we came up. We came as quickly as we could."

Dawson gave the details and then added: "Which makes it a pretty hectic night's work for all of us. I'd better get on to the Yard immediately and have them tip off the boys to get on the hunt for Ensdale. After that, we'll get the rest of them. Oh, yes, there's an ambulance needed for 'Mopes'."

Dawson turned and caught sight at the nearest door—the drawing room—which was slightly ajar. He moved forward, pushed open the door, and then paused in surprise. The light was presumably on from when Ensdale had left the room to track down 'Mopes'.

And, on the floor, his hands tightly clenched in a final paroxysm, was Ensdale himself.

"I'll be a—!" Dawson stopped and gazed down on the figure for a moment, then hurried forward and made a quick examination.

"Dead?" Harriday questioned, coming in with Gwenda behind him.

"Absolutely." Dawson frowned to himself and stood up again. "I don't understand it. He used the antidote for snake-bite, because we watched him."

Shelving the subject for the moment, he crossed to the nearby telephone and raised it. In a few minutes he had given his orders to the Yard; then he looked at the corpse again. Finally, he left the room and descended into the ruined basement. When he returned, he had the bottle marked 'Anti-Ser-Rat' in his hand.

"It looks to me," he said slowly, "as though 'Mopes' McCall was not such a bonehead as he looked. I've just made a test of this stuff below, and it's plain water. No wonder Ensdale got no result from it!"

Harriday shrugged. "Come to think of it, that's just poetic justice in a way. He fooled the lot of you with phony mercury fulminate, so he could get the better of you and have the antidote given to him, and 'Mopes' had fooled him by turning the stuff into water. Makes you wonder where double-dealing and lying ends, sometimes."

"I don't think it makes me wonder," Dawson replied, putting the bottle on the desk. "There's a corpse in the cellar, and there's one here. They speak for themselves, in a fashion. As for the rest of 'em connected with this unholy set-up, we'll find them one by one, and bring them to account. The one main tragedy, to my mind, is that a man as clever as Ensdale was, should have been so criminally-minded. If he had been entirely on our side, what couldn't he have done to make the world a lot safer for law-abiding citizens?"

## DEATH ASKS THE QUESTION

### I

#### *Fiend incarnate*

THE HOME OF Abner Hilton was situated in a none-too populous region several miles from Philadelphia. It stood in solitary magnificence in its own grounds—a passably prosperous looking place, its nearest neighbors being a dozen similar homes at regular distances. To back and front there was nothing but wild, open country—the former looking over rugged moorland to a distant hill; the latter towards the smoky line on the horizon that denoted Philadelphia itself.

Within the dilapidated, depressing interior of the Hilton home, Abner Hilton sat scowling at his broken, dirty nails. The internal surroundings were as filthy as he was. Weak daylight filtering through the half-drawn Venetian blind glanced on faded, rotting wallpaper. It touched the spare furniture of the place, the most substantial article being an unusually long deal table provided with sloping wooden runnels on either side.

In the room beyond, turned by the poor, half insane Hilton into a bedroom, the same drab daylight fell on muddy gray tangled sheets and dust caked floorboards.

Gloom, depression—subhuman morbidity. All these things stalked the jetty shadows of the horrible place and filled both the rooms and Abner with a certain hellish meaning.

He was waiting—waiting for his young niece to visit him. He had not seen her since her childhood. She was worth a fortune in money and he wasn't worth a dime.

The thing to do then was to kill her, very skillfully, and throw the blame onto her fiance Courtney Wayne, a young Philadelphian engineer. Once it was done he could have the money for himself under the will of his dead brother, the girl's father.

For months he had brooded over the idea in his rotting little retreat. She would come, surely. The outside of the house looked quite prepossessing. The neighborhood was fairly select and quiet. Finally he had written a letter. His one time culture had enabled him to write it very convincingly, expressing the urgent wish to see her and convey a confidential message that had been left in his keeping by her dead father.

Yes, it had been a very clever letter ... And now he sat, a tattered, unshaven figure, eyes glowing with the unholy light of murder-lust—waiting, waiting. She would be here any time, now. For an instant his gaze shuttled to the battered alarm clock on the mantel; it was just three o'clock, the time appointed. That meant...

He jumped to his feet abruptly with a sharp and triumphant in-take of breath. There was a knock on the front door. The tap of a woman's hand, beyond doubt. Just the sort of tap Mary would give, he reflected. Dear, sweet child ... He chuckled viciously to himself as he moved along the dusty hall, then flinging back the massive bolts he wrenched the door open.

His hungry little eyes flashed over a young woman modestly attired in a warm winter overcoat, golden hair peeping from beneath her hat. She was just as pretty as she'd been as a child, he decided. Not quite so luxurious in clothes as he had expected; there wasn't even a car visible in the drive. Evidently she had come by train to the local station ... All these thoughts took perhaps two seconds as he surveyed her, then she started to speak—but he interrupted her with a raised, skinny hand, motioned inside the drab hail.

"Come in, my dear," he invited gently, but to his irritation she drew away nervously.

"No—no, thank you. I only just wanted to know if—"

"Yes, yes, of course—I'm your Uncle Abner. Come along in."

"But I—"

Hilton's lean jaws snapped together. There was no time for argument. Reaching forward suddenly he clutched the girl round the waist and flung his free hand over her mouth to stifle her cries of fright.

"You darned little fool!" he panted, dragging her within and slamming the door. "Do you want the whole damned place to hear you? Why can't you do as your uncle asks and—"

He stopped, momentarily surprised. The girl had fainted in his arms. For a moment he stood glaring down into her ashen face, then staggering beneath her weight he carried her into the living room and laid her on the long deal table.

Rubbing his skinny hands together he looked at her closely, puzzled for a while over the apparent cheapness of her clothing as he wrenched the overcoat from her

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unconscious form. For a girl worth a fortune she wasn't dressing half as well as he would have expected.

Still, that didn't matter—evidently the countryside was no place for finery. Besides, what did clothes matter anyhow? His main object was to be rid of her and put his predetermined plan into action.

Working with the swiftness of movements long rehearsed he tightly bound her wrists and ankles to the underside of the table legs. A piece of filthy rag thrust between her teeth and tied securely into position effectively gagged her. Another length of rope secured across her neck held her head tightly.

"A fortune, eh?" Hilton muttered, surveying her helplessly trussed form. "We shall see, Mary, my dear ... We shall see!"

Turning, he strode through the dimming daylight to the rickety sideboard and pulled a long carving knife and a saw from the left drawer. Gently he laid them down beside the girl, rubbed his palms softly together in ghoulish anticipation. Grunting impatiently he lighted an oil lamp and placed it on the hook over the table.

His actions were deliberate—the brutal, inhuman actions of a fiend.

First he sliced the knife down the girl's clothes, tore them away from her body then bedded them down in the empty fire gate. His cruel eyes rested for a while on her lissome nakedness under the dull lamp glow. Broken teeth glinted in a ghoulish smile as he found she had recovered consciousness and was trying desperately to raise her pinioned head.

"Oh, no, my dear," he said gently, glaring into her terror stricken face. "It is of little use trying to scream now—the gag



will take care of that. It's my turn! Not a trace will remain by the time I'm finished with you. Mary Lillian Digby will vanish off the face of the earth!"

The girl struggled again, threshed and twisted as far as the ropes would permit, pulled her head upwards until the constriction of the cord set the veins bulging in her forehead. Then again she relaxed, dumb, staring blue eyes fixed on Hilton's grinning face. Suddenly he turned away and went into the adjoining kitchen, brought forth two large buckets and placed them at the ends of the table runnels.

Complacently he nodded, picked up the wickedly pointed knife—then drove it with all his strength between the girl's heaving breasts, gave it a left hand twist that struck clean through her heart.

There was a faint moan from behind the gag, then her struggles ceased. Blood began to well from the knife wound in her breast. Unmoved, Hilton smiled. With a steady hand he withdrew the blade and began to cut swiftly, hacked and carved until at last he had removed the heart itself. Eyes bright with madness he laid the bluish organ gently to one side, sucked breath over his broken teeth in sadistic glee.

Again he returned to the mangled thing that had been a young woman. He worked ceaselessly until perspiration drenched him from head to foot, worked to the sound of blood dripping from the runnels into the buckets. Time and time again he traveled with them into the filthy kitchen and emptied them into a tub.

So, little by little, he dismembered the body, cut away the legs, arms and head, left only a bleeding torso with a gaping

ragged hole where the heart had been torn out. Panting hard from his exertions he stared at the dismembered organ.

"At least you can never beat again!" he muttered. "Not even in a dead body! It is safer with the heart removed—detached..."

He brooded over that, then suddenly looked up with a start as there came a heavy pounding on the front door. For an instant he hesitated, staring at the pulped mess on the table. Then quickly wiping his hands on a filthy rag he sped through the crawling shadows of the hall and opened the door gently. The dying light fell on a young, well-dressed man with a clean-shaven face and determined blue eyes.

"Well, what do you want?" Hilton demanded irritably.

"You Abner Hilton, sir?"

"Certainly I am. What of it?"

"I believe Mary came along to see you this afternoon? I saw her come in as a matter of fact, a little while ago. I thought I might as well join her. I'm Courtney Wayne, her fiance."

"Oh, I see!" Hilton's face lighted with sudden understanding. In the gloom the young man failed to notice the subtle craftiness that crept into it. "Pray come in, young man—I've rather been expecting you. You must excuse the dim light but unhappily the current is off—a fuse, you know. I'm an old man and don't know much about these things."

"Maybe I can fix it for you, sir," Wayne remarked, and stepped into the shadows.

The instant he did so fear crawled through him. The damp, odorous air was heavy with the reek of human blood; the

whole place stank like an offal dump. Abner Hilton felt his powerful young hand close on his arm.

"Where is Mary, sir?" his voice demanded from the dark.

"Right ahead," the old man chuckled. "We were talking in the lamplight, owing to the fuse. Go on—right ahead down the passage to that door there. You can see the light."

Wayne hesitated for a moment, then obeyed. In a few moments he gained the open doorway and started into the dreary surroundings. Instantly his eyes alighted on that ghastly horror on the table. The room was like a charnel house; the glow of the softly swinging oil lamp in the hall draft cast its dimness on things that sent his appalled mind tumbling madly in the depths of hell.

"Mary!" he screamed insanely. "Oh, God! I'm mad! That can't be my Mary there—"

"That *is* Mary," Hilton informed him, closing the door softly and moving towards the fireplace. "Mary—or what remains of her! You didn't expect it, did you? Thanks for coming like this—it's saved me the trouble of sending for you."

Wayne's voice cracked in hysterical horror and fury over the words ripped from his lips.

"You fiend! You filthy, murdering devil! You've killed her—even dismembered her body—mutilated her face! Oh, God, why didn't I get here sooner—"

"That is Mary, but *you* killed her!" Hilton said tonelessly. "I will arrange that later—"

He broke off as Wayne made a sudden violent leap towards him. It was the very action he had been expecting.

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Instantly his hand came up from behind his back and was revealed as clutching the heavy iron poker from the grate.

Wayne never realized clearly what happened, as he pitched senseless to the filthy, blood spattered floorboards...

II

*Heartbeats of the Slain*

Wayne returned to his senses with the realization that he was firmly bound to the heavy old-fashioned fire grate. His eyes, blurred with the pain from his damaged head, stared drunkenly at the dancing, leering face of Abner Hilton in the lamp glow.

With a low snarling laugh the old man came forward, shook his skinny fist malevolently.

"I waited until you recovered, young man," he said throatily. "I wanted you to see everything right through to the end! You might as well—the police will want to accuse you." He went closer, hot fetid breath blowing in Wayne's face.

"Do you realize what I'm going to do to you, Courtney? I intend to break your will—turn you by slow degrees into an imbecile! By torture—by mental anguish, by whatever means I can and as soon as I can! Clever, isn't it? And well worth it!

"You see, with you and Mary both out of the way—you as her murderer, in a fit of insanity, it leaves only me to collect. So good of you to follow Mary here. Now watch!"

Wayne didn't answer. He felt already that his mind was on the verge of cracking under physical pain and the added horror of gazing. Yet gaze he did, with fascinated nausea, as the inhuman Hilton continued his work.

The knife carved flabbily into the unresisting flesh of the thing that had been a woman; the saw grated viciously over

bone. Every sound of it went through Wayne's body and brain as though he were the victim.

By slow degrees through what seemed endless hours he saw the corpse carefully cut up into pieces and thrust into a heavy sack. Then Hilton became fiercely active. Lifting the buckets of blood he vanished into the kitchen and there came the sound of running tap water. When he returned he was rubbing his hands complacently.

"So easy to dilute the blood to the consistency of weak dye and pour it down the sink," he breathed venomously. "That is what the police will find you did! I will tell them that. You cut the body into sections and made it unrecognizable, hoping for the perfect crime. The remains will be buried in the garden. Remember that!"

So saying he seized the sack and pulled it along the floorboards to the back door, leaving behind him a smear of blood that deeply stained the boards. Wayne watched glassily, stunned with horror. He would not, could not believe that he was seeing all that remained of Mary being carried away in that sack.

He screamed at the thought—raved and cursed with impotent, helpless fury, wrenched and tore at his ropes with the ferocity of a madman but all to no purpose.

Thirty minutes later Hilton returned, the sweat of exertion dewing his lean, brutal face.

"Hard work, digging," he said ominously. "She's well bedded down—a good four feet. And when she went down my chances of inheritance went up. Understand? Say something, you idiot—say something!" He struck him savagely in the face

with the flat of his hand, but Wayne remained silent. His mind was utterly numbed.

In a daze he watched the old man complete the details—watched him clean the table and floorboards with caustic, swab out the pails, and then set fire to the clothes in the grate. Turning at last from the glowing ashes he indicated the bloodstained knife and saw it laid carefully on one side.

“Evidence! He breathed maliciously. “Evidence when the Police come—evidence that you did it! You killed Mary Lillian Digby!”

Wayne remained mute; his head drooped between his shoulders with the heaviness of unconsciousness. Hilton went forward and examined him closely, convinced himself it was not a trick. Only then did he loosen the ropes, seize the young man by the shoulders and drag him into the filthy, dark apartment that had once been a second drawing room.

Working swiftly he rebound his ankles and wrists—spread-eagled him on the barren floor. Skipping back into the kitchen he brought hammer and massive curved staples, fastened the ropes around them then drove them deep into the boards.

“Guess that'll hold you,” he muttered, reflecting—then again he went to the kitchen and presently returned with a large can of water, slightly punctured in the base to permit of the water dripping through drop by drop.

With fiendish ingenuity he fastened it to the old electric light fixture above, carefully arranged it so that the drops fell steadily on the forehead of the pinioned, unconscious man.

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Torture—absolute and vicious—torture calculated to break a man's mind, not from pain but from the agonizing anticipation of each icy drop through endless hours.

The intense gratification at the thing he had done did not abate in Abner Hilton the next day. After a few hours of sleep—remarkably peaceful considering the inhuman brutality of his crime—he entered the second drawing room to survey his prisoner, dimly visible in the light drifting through the chinks in the drawn Venetian blind.

He found Wayne conscious again, still tightly bound on the floor, face drawn into tight, weary lines of suffering, water dripping down it from the almost empty can over his head.

"You—you inhuman fiend!" He muttered the words thickly. "You devil! Do you think you can get away with this?"

"I know I can," Hilton replied affably, rubbing his hands. "I'm sorry I can't make the room warmer—unfortunately there is no fireplace in here. Nor can I offer to release you."

Wayne glared at him dully. His body was already numbed and stiff from his immovable position and the icy draft blowing under the door. Only his head seemed to have feeling, felt near the bursting point with the leaden dropping of the icy cold water, more searing than molten metal. His jagged nerves were keyed into intense agony of expectancy for every drop.

"Sorry, too, that I can't offer you anything to eat just yet," Hilton went on sardonically. "I have little to spare, but I'll see you get enough to keep you alive until the police come. Water, though, you can have in plenty," he added grimly.



With that he went out and refilled the can, put it back in place, and left the tortured man to himself again.

So, throughout the day, Wayne suffered exquisite tortures, he felt his mind slipping little by little under the terrible strain. Abner Hilton waited in fiendish expectancy for something to happen—but nothing did.

He had expected inquiries for both Wayne and Mary, but neither came. Instead a host of invisible presences seemed to watch him silently in dire and horrible reproach for the sin on his soul. Most of the fears he dismissed with a sneering grin on his feral lips.

Once he glanced through the rear kitchen window towards the spot where he had buried Mary's remains, and beheld it untouched. Then he returned to commune with himself in the shadows.

Late in the afternoon he moved into the second drawing room, cut Wayne's limbs free from the staples but nonetheless kept him securely bound.

"I'm going to be merciful to you," he said thickly, delivering a kick in his aching ribs. "I'm giving you a respite; tomorrow I'll resume the treatment. In the end I'll break you!

"When the police come I'll say it was you who attacked both Mary and me. Understand!" His bitter little eyes glared in the flickering light of the lamp in his gnarled hand, hurled mental suggestions into the torture-weary mind of the man sprawling on the floor ... All ideas of escape were stillborn in Wayne's brain. He could hardly even think, so overcome was he by exhaustion.

Hilton left him at last and so, for two more days, the ghastly business went on. Wayne was alternately tortured and released, given only enough meager food and water to keep him alive in order that he would be able to speak when the law finally caught up.

And, just as Hilton had hoped, he was hardly master of his own will any longer—almost did believe by the endless hours of implacable hypnotism the old man indulged in that he *had* killed Mary. The horror of her death and the continued torture had become a crushing obsession slowly warping his mind.

Only at times was he aware of himself, realizing with leaden helplessness that nobody would be concerned about his disappearance. He had been on a vacation from his normal work in any case and only Mary knew. Mary! Merciful God!

It was on these occasions of self-assertion however that he tried with pained weariness to work free of the ropes holding his wrists. The staples holding them were fairly rough; in time he might break through his bonds. But it would take days.

On the third night, puzzled by the continued absence of action, Hilton went to bed early, lay awake gazing at the darkened, chilly room. Then at last he turned on his side amidst the dirty sheets and closed his eyes.

The silence was still disturbing him—even Wayne in the adjoining room was curiously quiet, working silently and laboriously in the dark on the ropes that held him, fraying away the tough thickness little by little with muscles that were cracked and aching.

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Then, as he lay silent, Hilton heard something. There crept into his senses a dull, ticking sound, heavy with apparent distance.

Tick—tick—tick. With the measured beat of a metronome, gradually becoming louder. Very slowly creeping up by imperceptible degrees, until at last the faded walls of the entire room groaned with the pulsating mystery.

Thud—thud. Thud—thud. Rhythmic, insistent, inhuman.

At last Hilton sat bolt upright in the bed. One skinny hand clutched the dirty tattered shirt that served as night attire. Staring wildly into the gloom he listened with twitching face muscles to the still resolute beating, for all the world like a gigantic human heart.

Heart? That thought knifed into his rotten brain. Instantly his memory was transferred to the heart he had cut out of the girl. He had cut it out to be sure life could never return, and now—

Clammy sweat drenched him as he listened. His breath rasped over his stumpy teeth. There was no way of telling exactly where that awful sound was coming from. It might be to one side, above or below—he could not determine. It seemed to fill all space.

Throb, throb, throb...

"No!" he shouted hoarsely, leaping out of the bed. "No! Stop!"

And instantly the sound ceased!

The whole house seemed to become mute, horribly silent after the torturing rhythm of the beating.

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With dragging footsteps and sweat-drenched face Hilton moved to the adjoining room and twisted the door key with trembling fingers. All was quiet within. Wayne lay like a log in the dim gloom, stirred only slightly as a match flared in Hilton's quaking hand. The old man's hoarse voice came to him.

"Courtney, you heard it?" he demanded thickly. "You heard that beating?"

"I heard nothing," Wayne muttered dully, and relaxed again.

For a moment the old man stood gazing at him, then he went out. Wayne lay silent for a while after he had gone, wondering what he had been talking about. He certainly had heard nothing. Then once more he set to work on the laborious task of fraying through his ropes.

In the meantime Hilton returned to his room and waited a long time in the shadowed gloom, but the mysterious sound was not repeated. At last recovering some of his courage he climbed into bed, nerves tensed for a recurrence of the sound.

Presently he heard it, very soft and low, that measured beat sweeping up from nowhere.

Louder and louder became the ticking, mad, nerve-racking tempo. Hilton shot out of bed once more, again screamed for it to stop—and as before it obeyed. Weakly he staggered to the front hall door and opened it, stared out toward the dimness of the drive.

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Slowly he crept outside and looked about him, down past the many rear out-houses with their sloping roofs. There was nothing unusual visible—only a quiet, dark immensity.

He knew not how long he stood shivering in the night breeze. His next clear remembrance was of being back in his bedroom. He crawled back onto the bed at last and lay in frigid horror for the return of the beating—but the night passed quietly and he awoke again to the gray glimmerings of an ashy dawn.

III

*"Why Did You Kill Me?"*

SHAKEN BY THE experience of the night Abner Hilton felt like a trapped animal. Though he did not believe in the supernatural, though he inwardly boasted that he had no conscience, he could not altogether rid himself of the remembrance of his crime. Time and time again the vision of the slain girl rose up before him.

In his mind he could again hear the sloughing of the knife as it carved her flesh, the grate of the saw against her bones.

He scraped together a scanty meal and then went in to his prisoner with a few crusts and some water. Wayne looked at him dully, but behind his back his hands were slowly pulling away the remainders of his frayed rope. A night of rubbing on the floor staple nearest to him had cut them through. They gave way just as Hilton was bending towards him.

Instantly his fingers closed round the old man's skinny throat, sent the meager meal hurtling through the air. Hilton was pulled down to the floor with Wayne's fingers crushing hard into his leathery neck.

Wayne wished desperately he could get to his feet, but his bound ankles prevented it. His only hope lay in strangling the old man where he was—but in that he was doomed to failure. With a sudden vicious twist Hilton wriggled sideways, brought round his foot with all his strength and kicked Wayne violently in the ribs.

He gasped with the sudden pain, desisted in his effort to get to his feet—and in that moment Hilton acted. He had the advantage in every way. Wayne was bound and weak from his ordeal; Hilton was free and furiously energetic.

“So you thought you'd escape, eh?” he breathed venomously. “You thought you'd fool me, huh? Well you won't!”

With that he dived away and snatched up the heavy, dirty plate on which he had brought the food. Even as Wayne tried to get up the plate came down on his head with stunning force, edgewise. He sank down mutely, blood streaming from a scalp cut.

“It was you who plotted that heart beating stunt!” Hilton screamed. “You! I don't know how, but you did it! You'll not do it again, Courtney. Damn you, no! I'll kill you first!”

Savagely he rebound his victim's ropes, spread-eagled him back in his old position. Then he refilled the can and stood looking at the unconscious figure in vicious glee.

“You can stay that way until I want you! Without food and without water—at least to drink! No more leniency—no more leniency!”

And with that he stamped fiercely from the room, slammed and locked the door.

Only once did he return, and that was towards evening. Wayne was half-conscious, muttering supplications for release. The old man's feral lips twisted in an unholy smile; his only response was to make sure the water can was refilled then he went into his bedroom to pass the night.

But the instant he entered the gloomy shoddiness—for the oil in his lamp was exhausted—he felt a strange fear clawing at his heart. The memory of the night before returned to him. He sat on the bed edge, listening with one ear half cocked for some sound of the heart, but instead there came something else, something that sent the blood crawling in streams of ice through his withered body.

*"Abner Hilton, why did you kill me?"*

The merest whisper, an ice-cold question that seemed to creep from the Unknown. It started Hilton's heart racing madly, set crawling fingers of ghastly fear clutching at his vitals.

*"Abner Hilton, why did you kill me?"*

It was stronger this time—a woman's voice calling softly, from an incredible distance. As in the beating of that enigmatic heart it was impossible to guess the exact source of the sound.

*"Why did you kill me?"* Words dreary with anguished reproach.

He leaped savagely to his feet and stared madly round him in the dimness. Viciously he struck a match, but the flickering light revealed no change. It went out and scorched his fingers.

*"Imagination!"* he panted hoarsely. *"Imagination—or nerves!"*

*"No, Abner Hilton—neither imagination or nerves, but the voice of the woman you killed,"* the voice answered somberly.

*"You slew me, carved my body into pieces and buried the remains! You tore out the heart—but in the heart there is not*



life—only in the mind. The mind lives on. In the end I will destroy you, as you destroyed me!”

With a pallid face he listened to the words, heart racing agonizedly against his skinny ribs. *Her* voice—the voice of Mary Lillian Digby—speaking from hell knew where!

Suddenly he found relief in action. As before he made straight for the second drawing room and stared in palsied fear at the bound figure of Wayne. He certainly was not responsible.

Mad with fright he left him and blundered outside into the half clouded moonlight, glared about the sodden grounds of his home with the eyes of a maniac. Just as on the previous night there was nothing to disturb the aching quiet.

Breathless, shaking with fear, he returned inside at last, bolted the heavy front door with fingers that were oddly brittle. Cold seeping waves of superstitious fear were clawing at his evil heart.

As he tottered uncertainly down the hall, striking match after match to allay the crushing dark, he tried to convince himself that it was all imagination. That he hadn't heard anything. It was some trick of Courtney Wayne's; it *had* to be!

He twisted round and fumbled along to the second drawing room again, passed inside and examined the spread-eagled man closely, was forced to admit as before that he was *not* responsible. He was a silent, stupefied man, water trickling down his ashen face from the slowly dripping can.

Very quietly Hilton withdrew again into the abysmal dark of the hall, nearly wept with rage and fear as he found his

matches were exhausted. Weakly, knees like jelly, he clawed his way back into the main living room and stood for a while in the jetty gloom, eyes staring at the hazy gray oblong where the window lay.

Turning he searched for the rickety chair and dropped his leaden limbs into it. Spittle was drooling unheeded from his quivering lips; sweat drenched his skinny body. The complete ghastly fear of a supernatural unknown had him in its grip.

For nearly an hour he sat there and heard nothing. A blank nothing that hemmed him in like a living, avenging presence. The only sound he once detected was a long drawn out groan, which he knew came from Courtney Wayne as he returned to consciousness.

A third look at the bound man convinced him; he was still there in the very dim moonlight filtering through the blind. In some odd way he was glad of the man's presence; it did something to alleviate the terrible fear numbing his being.

An hour later quivering, brain-numbing reaction set in. With heavy feet he scraped along to his bed and lay face down upon it, trying to muffle his ears to the dreaded sound he was afraid to hear. Softly, gently, came the resumed beating of that heart—and above it the awful, sepulchral voice.

“Abner Hilton, it is dark and cold in the grave you dug for me! I cannot rest. I am returning to life, to the land of mortals, to ask you face to face why you killed me! I am not dead, Abner Hilton. *I am alive!* Listen to the beat of the heart you cut away! Listen to it, gathering power!”

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Shaking like an aspen Hilton listened—could not help himself. The voice ceased and the subdued rhythm of the heart became swifter, louder.

Pat, pat, pat, pat...

"You hear, Abner Hilton?" the voice breathed. "I live! I have come back from the grave to ask why you killed me! Look in my grave! Dig down deep and you will find I have gone! Dig! *Dig!*"

## IV

### *The Remains Walk!*

HILTON COULD STAND it no longer. With a desperate scream he leaped out of the bed, blundered through the dark to the kitchen, felt round frantically until he encountered the handle of his shovel. Panting hard he wrenched back the outer door and charged madly into the garden outside, plowing heavily through rank soaking weeds and grass to the clear soil space where he had put Mary's butchered remains. With savage desperate movements born of ghastly fear he drove the blade into the earth, shoveled the soil to one side. He worked with mechanical frenzy until the blood pounded insanely through his veins and drove his heart to erratic spurts of beating.

On and on he shoveled, flinging the loose earth away with the ease of a maniac, until at last his spade ploughed through the sack in which he had placed the remains. Shaking with fright and exertion he pulled it free, gazed with stupid eyes as it moved drearily in the night breeze.

It was indeed empty! The remains had gone!

"No!" he muttered desperately. "No—no, it can't be! I'm going mad! I know I'm going mad! You couldn't rise from the grave! You were utterly destroyed—dismembered! You—"

He stopped, the sack falling from his nerveless fingers. The moon, which had been shining diffusely through ragged clouds suddenly emerged from their midst with a pale and

leprous glow, cast its pale silver over the unkempt grounds and the hole of the grave.

But it was to none of these things that Hilton's mind was directed—his fixed, incredulous eyes were chained to a figure walking slowly towards him along the uneven ground.

It appeared to be the naked figure of a woman, arms extended towards him! And as she came nearer he could behold quite clearly against the whiteness of her skin the black marks at the joints of her legs and arms where he had cut them from the body! One other, round the base of the neck, held him mute.

Making hardly any sound she quietly advanced, coming nearer and nearer, and still he stood paralyzed with numbing shock.

"Abner Hilton, you killed me!" she said at last, in the same dreary grave-ridden voice he had heard in the house. "I have come back—to ask you why you did it!"

Within six feet of him she stopped, a lovely but forlorn figure, hair moving slightly in the mild wet wind. Clearly he could distinguish the graceful curves of her body, the rounded formations of her breasts—but upon one of them was a dark patch—a hole where he had torn out the heart to make sure she would never come back.

Never come back! That realization burst in his diseased mind like a bolt of living fire. He found action at last in a desperate, piercing scream, turned swiftly and went blundering and gasping over the uneven ground—anything to escape the woman who had risen to question her fate.

Even as he flew over the ground, driven by insane terror, he could hear feet racing after him—not the sound of woman's feet but the heavy clomping of a nightmare creature.

Thud, thud, thud, like the beating heart he had heard.

He threw himself screaming through the front doorway, into the hall. His fingers twisted the key of the second drawing room door and he went flying inwards to hurl himself beside the silent figure of Wayne.

"Courtney, in God's name save me!" he screamed frantically. "Save me! She's come back! Mary's come back from the grave!" His trembling fingers wrenched a penknife from his pocket, slashed through the ropes holding the tortured man. "Save me, Courtney! Say you will! It's Mary!"

That jerked something of consciousness into Wayne's leaden brain. He stared into the dark, down, at the dim, pawing, gulping figure on the floor beside him. Stiffly he tried to move to his feet—then his eyes jerked round at the sound of feet in the hall. A light was bobbing along it.

Cold terror surged through him too as in the doorway he beheld the same naked woman's figure that Hilton had seen—a woman who stared tensely, wounds on her rejoined limbs clearly visible. Almost at the same moment the owner of the storm lantern became visible, pushed the woman to one side and charged forward, clutched the screaming Hilton round the neck.

In the light of the storm lantern on the floor Wayne dazedly watched what took place, saw a powerful shouldered man with a face of frozen hate clutch Hilton's skinny throat in

sinewy fingers, crush into it with all the strength at his command.

“Kill my daughter, eh?” His bitter voice knifed in the quiet. “Cut her up, would you? My Annie! By God, you filthy butcher, this is where you go to the hell you deserve!”

Hilton tried to speak but the compressing fingers would not let him. His miserable body threshed madly on the floor. Slowly but surely his struggles became weaker and at last ceased altogether.

Only then did the man rise up and kick the corpse violently with his heavy shod foot, turned, then stared at Wayne in amazement.

“You're alive!” he shouted hoarsely—and with his words the girl in the doorway seemed to arise from her horrific trance and advanced at a run.

Wayne felt convinced in that moment that he was going insane at last—for the girl *was* Mary! There could be no mistaking her face. Mary, yes—naked, with scars of her hideous death still upon her. Mary!

His lips moved to utter her name then even as her white arms reached towards him he relapsed into darkness and brief rest.

Wayne realized as he came back to consciousness that he could only have been senseless a few minutes. He was lying on his back, all his ropes removed, the face of Mary and her rugged-faced companion bending over him. The only change was that she was now wrapped in an overcoat.

"Courtney, dear—Courtney!" she breathed, gathering him into her arms. "Thank God you're alive! I thought you were dead—that was why I helped Craven here."

Dazedly, weakly, Wayne raised himself on one elbow and stared toward the light of the lantern.

"What—what's it all about?" he asked helplessly. "I saw you cut in pieces by that fiend, Mary—I saw it! A moment ago you were naked; I saw the marks."

The girl smiled faintly. "Only tights, Courtney, marked on the joints with black paint. Cold, yes—but the only way to drag this fiendish uncle of mine into the open."

"Come to think of it, I didn't see your face when—when Hilton butchered you," Wayne shuddered. "It was utterly unrecognizable, and..."

"It isn't really so complicated as it seems, sir," the man muttered. "This filthy devil intended to kill Miss Digby here, but instead he killed my girl Annie. She was canvassing this district for radio set orders. We had got a little business together and were doing quite well."

"Actually, Courtney," Mary intervened; "although I said in my letter to you that I was coming to see Uncle, I changed my mind at the last moment. It seems that Mr. Craven's daughter arrived at almost the time for my appointment. Evidently Uncle didn't give her the chance to speak, and not having seen me for years he mistook poor Annie for me, both of us being fair and young."

"That must have been it," Wayne nodded drearily. "As for myself I was afraid for you and came to see if I could help you when you visited your uncle. There wasn't time to come



to your home first, so I came straight here. I saw somebody like you enter the house whilst I was still a distance away; after that I came in and saw..." He stopped, brokenly.

Mary slowly nodded "I got worried when I couldn't get any news of you. All I could find out was that you'd started on a holiday. Closer inquiry, though, revealed that you'd followed me here.

"I decided to come here after all and it was evening when I arrived; that was the evening after I should have come, of course. The first person I ran into was Mr. Craven in the grounds. He had just dug up some remains out of a sack—"

"I'd found that Annie had last been seen at this place," Craven muttered bitterly. "I found bloodstains on the grass and traced them to that newly dug hole. I identified the remains as those of Annie—there were certain birthmarks on her body that only I knew about. It was she all right.

"Well, I couldn't see any real motive for the brutality until Miss Digby happened upon me; then I began to see what had happened—how my poor girl had got what was intended for somebody else. It seemed pretty evident that you had probably gone the same way since you had disappeared.

"Both of us wanted vengeance on the old fiend and were prepared to go to any lengths to exact it."

"And yet you didn't go to the police?" Wayne asked wonderingly.

"Police!" derided Craven contemptuously. "What could they do? Just give this devil here the hot seat for murder. That wasn't enough for me—I wanted to torture him as he had

tortured my poor girl—I wanted to drive him mad with my own efforts.

Miss Digby felt pretty much the same way about your disappearance. Of course, we had no guarantee that you really were dead, but we suspected it as the only explanation. The best way to find out was to get Hilton out of the house and look for ourselves—and that demanded something pretty ingenious. We managed it, between us.”

He paused and smiled reminiscently. “Being a radio engineer came in handy,” he went on grimly. “I got a microphone and small loudspeaker and lowered them by wire half way down the main chimney breast.

“I knew that in common with all houses of this old type the main fireplace flues would end in one chimney, so the sound would travel to all rooms possessing a fireplace. It was fairly certain Hilton would occupy such a room. It was easy to get to the roof by the outhouses, without much noise either.

“Once that was done Miss Digby and I went to our apparatus, just beyond the range of the back grounds. The microphone in the chimney picked up every sound that Hilton made; with headphones we could visualize his movements. Every time he went to bed the mattress springs squeaked. As to the voice of the woman it was Miss Digby herself speaking into our own microphone, which of course emanated from the loudspeaker in the chimney. The heart effect was simply a ticking alarm clock, made louder or quieter by a volume control on the microphone.”

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Wayne nodded slowly. "I begin to see now why Hilton was so frantic. For myself I heard nothing; this room has no fireplace. Besides, I was unconscious most of the time."

"When he shouted for the beats to stop we naturally obeyed the order, hearing him distinctly," Craven breathed. "That got him! He really thought the devil was after him. Just the same we didn't tempt him out the first night; he needed time to think and work himself up into a real frenzy of fright."

"We did that tonight, of course. Miss Digby joined me again after sundown, complete with an outfit that looked like my girl risen from the grave. The rest you know. Of course it was I who took away my poor Annie's remains."

"And you?" Wayne asked slowly. "You've murdered Hilton. That is against the law, fiend or not."

Craven shrugged his heavy shoulders and looked down at the corpse.

"I'm going to give myself up and trust to the mercy of the law. With your evidence too and my dead girl's remains where is the jury which would convict?"

"We'll back you to the end," Wayne said quietly, getting to his feet with difficulty.

The girl's arm went round him supportively as she helped him from the drab house. As they passed into the cool night air they looked away to the east.

Ragged dawn was already creeping over the misty, saturated countryside. Somewhere amidst it perhaps, abandoned and alone, was the fiendish soul of Abner Hilton...

## FOOLPROOF

JUDGE RUFUS LANGTON sat alone in the library of his small hunting lodge at Railsby Bend. The heavy law book in his hands, the soft cone of light from the desk-lamp, the dark walnut of the shadowed room, were things apart from the raging fury of the winter storm outside.

Only rarely did he glance up. The book was good reading. But he had to keep his eye on the clock. His son and daughter-in-law were due any time, roads permitting

The whining of the wind, the slashing cut of the rain down the long window panes, effectually muffled from him the slight sound of the nearest window catch being lifted with a knife blade. He only became aware of his seclusion being disturbed when the black velvet curtains suddenly billowed inwards and a blast of icy wind surged into the warmth of the room.

Instantly he was on his feet, bewildered, his first thought being that the gale had snapped the window catch. He soon saw how wrong he was as he beheld a figure standing in the opening, a figure in dripping mackintosh and sodden felt hat. An automatic was gripped tightly in his hand.

"Make no moves, Judge Langton! Sit down!"

Langton's legal brain registered the situation instantly. He tightened his lips, dropped into a chair with hands upraised. The intruder reached rearwards, shut the window, then came forward slowly. He stopped when the desk-light glinted somberly on the gun.

"You don't know me, do you? His voice was low-pitched, merciless.

Judge Langton shook his iron-gray head. He was trying to place the lean, rigidly set face, the resolute jaw, the darkly smoldering eyes, the whipcord body.

"No, I don't know you." he muttered, his voice calm. "And I wish you'd come in by the door instead of upsetting me like this. You can put that gun away, too. I am alone, and quite unarmed."

"You think I don't know that?" his visitor asked laconically. "I have kept a tally on your movements for months, Langton—and now you are going to get what's owing to you. Understand?"

Langton's powerful face set into grim lines. He peered again into the shadows.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?"

The man sat down in the chair opposite and held his gun steady on the desk edge. "My name's Joseph Gell," he replied slowly. "Does that stir anything in your memory?"

"Gell? Gell?" Langton frowned reflectively, slanted his eyes to the desk drawer containing his own revolver, then shook his head. "I guess it doesn't. I don't seem to—Wait a minute!" he broke off. "Gell! Somebody of that name was condemned to death a couple of years ago. Peter Rayburn Gell. Convicted of murder in the first degree."

The visitor nodded slowly, and raindrops spattered on the blotter from his sodden hat.

"Right!" he acknowledged grimly. "Your memory isn't so bad, at that. Peter Gell was my son. He took the rap because

the high-ups responsible for the mess wouldn't come into the open. They left him holding the bag—and you condemned him. Remember?”

“He was convicted of murder,” Langton retorted. “Foul murder, Gell. He killed a woman and a man in cold blood. He openly admitted it; and he got the full penalty.”

“He died,” Gell said slowly, “because he followed orders and wouldn't squeal, a fact which you and that damned jury didn't—or else wouldn't—take into account. You guys on the side of justice, so called, have a law that says ‘a life for a life.’ You might as well know that we fellers on the other side have a law that works out the same way—only sometimes we're a bit longer enforcing it! I say you killed my boy just as if you'd murdered him. You knew the real culprits, but you wouldn't stir yourself to bring them into court.”

Langton smiled frozenly. “Whatever they did, whoever they were, your son had to answer for his individual crimes! He confessed to murder, and was executed ... You're not the first one, by any means, who has tried to get at me for the sentences I've given out—”

“Shut up!” Gell ordered. “You're doing the listening, not me! I vowed when you sent my boy up that I'd get you. Work kept me busy for a time—forging, if you'd like to know. Doesn't that make your hair curl? As soon as I'd cleaned up enough dough, I stepped out and got on your track. I fixed myself at a small place outside this village. I made myself nice and popular with all and sundry—including Sheriff Ingleby. I took the name of Grant and everybody thinks I'm a

retired businessman. All so I could be near you. Swell set-up, eh?"

"So *you* are Amos Grant," Langton breathed. "I've heard of you."

"I've waited my chance," Gell went on. "I studied your place here. I figured the best way to get in, the shape of the windows, everything. I knew when you'd be here. I knew even when you'd be alone..." He stopped for a moment and smiled crookedly. "I'm going to kill you, Langton," he said gently.

"And go straight to the executioner?" Langton parried, fighting for time. He was in a tight spot and knew it.

"No, not the executioner. This job is foolproof. See?"

Langton's eyes strayed back to his revolver drawer, but Gell's automatic still pointed unwaveringly. Langton forced an apparent calm.

"Gell, you're a damned fool! My son and his wife are coming here later on this evening from Chicago. If you kill me, they'll find my body before you have a chance to—"

"They are, eh?" Gell's eyes gleamed briefly. "Good. Fits in nicely with my plan—"

He broke off as with a sudden lightning movement, Langton's right hand whipped up the heavy law book he'd been reading. In one hurtling movement he flung it unerringly at Gell's hand, spinning the automatic out of his clutch.

Langton dived, snatched at the desk drawer and tore it open. He was too vigorous—the draw came right out and flung its contents across the carpet. Before he could leap Gell had recovered his automatic and stood poised and ready.

"Better take it easy," he advised coolly. "Thanks for doing that. Your own gun will make it simpler..."

He picked it up warily in his handkerchief, jerked it open and glanced at the loaded chambers. He put his own gun away, slipped on a glove, held Langton's revolver steadily.

"Wait a minute—!" Langton shouted hoarsely, but at that identical moment, Gell fired.

The bullet struck clean into Langton's forehead, left a powder mark from the nearness of the fire. A willing trickle of blood went down his ashy, startled face. For a split second he remained standing there motionless—then he dropped heavily to the carpet.

Abruptly Gell was transformed into a man of action. Tearing off his wet hat and mackintosh, he hung them on the fireplace so they dripped to the warm hearth. Then he removed his solitary glove and substituted rubber gloves on both hands, flexed his fingers for a moment.

Working at top speed he commenced a systematic search of the desk, using Langton's own keys. At last he found the material he needed—a bundle of old letters and notes in Langton's own handwriting, together with a fountain pen. To Gell, a man whose very existence depended on his brilliancy as a forger, the next part of the scheme was comparatively simple.

Snatching notepaper he made several scrawls, then began a complete letter. In it he stated briefly that responsibilities, known and unknown, had driven Langton to suicide. The letter was skillfully signed, "*Rufus Langton.*"



Gell read it through, nodded, sealed it in an envelope and penned the superscription—"To Whom It May Concern." He left it conspicuously on the desk

Then he put the keys back in Langton's pocket, hauled him into the chair by the desk, slumped him in the correct position. The revolver he put on the desk close to the outflung right hand. No slip-ups there, either: Langton had been right-handed all right.

Gell surveyed the result, then looked closely at the carpet for some sign of bloodstain. There was none; he had moved Langton in time ... He turned to the fountain pen, but in his urgency to fix it in Langton's fingers, he nearly overlooked the contradictory aspect.

"Can't be," he muttered. "He wouldn't shoot, and *then* write..."

He whipped the pen away, cursed as it fell out of his hand. He turned, looking for it on the floor, trod on it. When he raised it, the nib was cross-legged.

For a moment he was nonplussed. No other pen on the desk: no nibs either, far as he could see. Then his eye caught the glint of a gold clasp on Langton's breast pocket. In an instant he had whipped out a fountain pen and unscrewed the cap. Nib was fairly similar: he could take that chance. He laid it down carefully, suggestively. Not likely this would be a murder problem anyway. He had laid his plan too well for that.

He made a final search, bundled the specimen forgery notes he had made into his pocket, along with the broken pen. The rest was a simple job. He removed all traces of wet

from the polished woodwork near the window with his handkerchief, took his nearly dried coat and hat and donned them again, holding up the hems of the mackintosh so no stray drops could sprinkle. Then he retreated backwards out of the room, using the door this time. As he went, he removed all traces of mud he might have left behind.

The front door automatically latched itself behind him as he passed outside.

Immediately the full tearing fury of the wind and rain smote him. Long before he had completed the short journey along the rough shale pathway to his coupe, concealed in the main village road just outside the gates, he was struggling for breath and soddened with the downpour. All to the good, anyway, this weather; wash away all possible signs of footprints.

The moment he had slipped in the driving seat he slammed in the first gear; soon he was streaking hell for leather down the road. Rain swilled in cascades down the windshield, blurring the vision of half-flooded road ahead. Wind twisted the steering wheel like a live thing in his fingers. He went on at desperate speed, following the only road into Railsby Bend village itself, a distance of perhaps five miles from the Judge's lodge.

The village loomed up at last, sepulchrally dark and gale-swept. Gell's car swished through the puddles of the empty high street, with its dim wavering lamps and rain-glistened houses, lights shining dully behind window shades.

He went on until he came to Sheriff Ingleby's office: then he jammed the brakes and came to a skidding standstill.

Leaping from the car he dived for the warm, lighted interior of the place.

Sheriff Ingleby, thin and angular, with a bald head fringed with white fluff, was sitting reading beside the glowing iron stove, pipe in mouth, glasses on nose. He looked up in surprise over his lenses at Gell's sudden wet and spattering entry.

"Why, Mr. Grant! I sure didn't expect to see anybody around here tonight—certainly not you. Anythin' I can do?"

Gell smiled cordially enough under his dripping hat. So far, his plan was working perfectly. Five miles in seven minutes wasn't bad going on such a night. Then his eyes moved from the Sheriff's clock.

"Guess you wouldn't be seeing me now, Sheriff, only I'm nearly out of gas another seven miles to cover to get home. The filling station's too far off, even if it's open—which I doubt. I've just come from Chicago, and believe me it's been one lousy trip!"

"Yeah, I can imagine," Ingleby sympathized. He rose stiffly to his feet, and slipped into huge oilskins.

"If I remember right, I've a gallon of gas over in the garage I can let you have. Be right back."

Gell nodded and moved to the warmth of the stove. As he stood there, his mind clarified the last details. The Chicago alibi was foolproof, too: Jed Gunther, big businessman on the surface, racketeer deep down, had promised to provide the necessary verification that Gell had been in Chicago. Of course, a little forging job would be required as payment, but then—

Suddenly Ingleby was back with a can of gasoline in his hand.

"I reckon there's only half a gallon, but you can have it," was his comment. "I guess you—" He glanced round in irritated surprise as the telephone bell sharply interrupted him. Grumbling he moved across to the instrument. "Hope no guy has gotten himself into a mess on a night like this..."

Gell took the can and moved to the doorway. As he stood re-buttoning his mackintosh, Ingleby's words floated to him in snatches—

"Can't get through you say... ? Huh? Yeah, sure I understand ... Okay, I'll see he gets to know, but I wished you'd picked a better night ... What? Sure, I'll do it right now."

Gell waited for no more. He was down the steps, fiddling with his tank, bracing himself against the lashing wind and rain. By the time he had added the spirit to the already half-full tank he was aware that Sheriff Ingleby was near him, pulling back the doors of his garage.

"Nice dam' job to send a man out on!" he complained, as Gell casually inquired the trouble. "Serves me right for being generous. No need to do it—but I likes to give service..."

"Of course," Gell said, handing over the empty tin and the money.

"Message to deliver—Judge Langton's place," Ingleby growled. "A good five miles from here, I guess."

He turned away with that, climbed into his own car. Gell hesitated over asking more, then he decided otherwise. The nature of the message did not matter: what *did* matter was

that luck was favoring him. Beyond doubt, Ingleby would find the suicide, and the short lapse of time would serve to strengthen the alibi.

Grinning to himself, Gell climbed back into his coupe, started off again into the raging storm.

Fifteen minutes later, Gell was home. His first action was to practically empty the car gas tank in case of a possible investigation, then the legitimacy of his call on the Sheriff could be proved. Oil he also drained plentifully. Generally he left the earmarks of a car that had covered a good distance and consumed plenty of fuel.

Then he went into the house, washed, changed into dry clothes, concealed his automatic, and afterwards repaired to the cosy warmth of his study dining-room to eat a much-needed meal, and reflect on his scheme.

As he ate, the storm, if anything, seemed to increase in fury. The rain beat and splashed against the windows; the wind screamed in every nook and cranny. Momentary thoughts of flood from the River Kilvon, twenty miles distant, assailed his mind. If that happened, he might possibly be washed out by morning. It had happened once: it could happen again.

Then as he considered this unpleasant prospect he was abruptly startled by a hammering on the outer front door. A faint smile touched his hard lips. So Sheriff Ingleby was on a trail of inquiry already, eh? Good!

He opened the door and registered mild astonishment as the dripping form of Ingleby trooped in. He pulled off his

oilskins in a flurry of raindrops, then went across to the crackling fire.

"Well, I'm darned glad to be outa that stuff for a few minutes," he declared with feeling. "Never saw a night like it in years."

Gell quietly agreed with him, proffered a drink that Ingleby consumed with slow satisfaction. Then he said:

"I'm here to bring a bit of a shock, Mr. Grant. You know Judge Langton, of course? Well, he's—committed suicide."

"No!" Gell's exclamation came in a half whisper of amazed horror: it was just the right inflection. He gave a little puzzled shake of his head. "Well, this is bad news, Sheriff! But—but when did it happen?" he asked curiously. "I was talking to him only two days ago. I suppose it must have been recently, and you found it out tonight?"

Ingleby stood with his back to the fire, shook his head moodily.

"Y'see, I had a message for him: his telephone was out of order with the storm so the message was put through to me. You remember I started off for his place? When I arrived there, there was no answer. I waited a while, knowing he ought to be there somewhere, then as nothing happened, I became worried, and forced a way in. I found him dead at his desk with a suicide confession right in front of him. Shot himself in the head at close range. I left a man down there in charge and went in search of Doc Morgan. He figgered Langton shot himself around eight-thirty tonight."

"Poor old Langton," Gell sighed regretfully.

"Naturally I've to make a few inquiries as to his reasons for suicide. He just said 'responsibilities, known and unknown,' but that conveys nothin' ... You say you talked to him two days ago?"

Gell nodded. "I seem to remember he said something about feeling depressed, now I think of it. Tough work, being a Judge."

"Yeah..." Ingleby looked thoughtful. "Did he make any particular statement that might hint at suicide?"

"Not that I recall." Gell was frowning a little now, but still at his ease. What the devil was the old fool getting at, anyway?

Ingleby looked up suddenly from studying the rug. His lean face was grim.

"No, I'm danged sure you don't recall! Langton didn't commit suicide. He was murdered!"

"What!" Gell ejaculated, starting. "But Sheriff, who on earth—"

"Keep right where you are, Grant—if that's your right name." Ingleby's hand was closed now in his right pocket. There was a significant bulge there. "I'm not joking," he added, drawing the revolver to light. "You're under arrest on suspicion of the murder of Langton."

Gell could not help his gasp of surprise. "Why—you're crazy! What the hell right have you to come in here and make an assertion like that? Why, I was with you at the approximate time of this—this murder! You must remember!"

"I remember," Ingleby said curtly. "But that don't make no difference to me. I'm going to book you! You figgered on a

perfect alibi, knowing that it wouldn't be possible to reckon to a few minutes just when Langton died. But you tripped up on one or two things, Grant! You placed a fountain pen in Langton's hand with which he supposedly wrote his suicide confession...

"What happened to the original pen that wrote the note doesn't make much odds: what *does* make odds is the fact that the fountain pen had no ink in it! The barrel was dry as a hone and the rubber tube had a hole in it. Langton musta worn it for an ornament."

The sudden flaw took Gell off his guard. He began to bluster, but Ingleby cut him short.

"An' there were other things! Scratches on the window-catch, a spot or two of mud from outside, on the carpet, one or two raindrops still slightly wet on the blotting pad..."

Gell flamed, "Damn you, man, flimsy evidence like this isn't going to get you any place! Where's the motive? Anybody might have done it. I couldn't have done it, I tell you! I was driving from Chicago all this evening until I got to your office. Ring up, and find out!"

"I reckon I don't need to do that," Ingleby replied grimly. "You say you didn't stop until you got to my place?"

"Right!"

Ingleby seemed to reflect for a moment. "S'pose you know Langton was expecting his son and daughter-in-law tonight, from Chicago?"

"How should I know?" Gell snarled.

"I just thought you might. It was the son who telephoned me at my office—he and his wife are stranded outside Railsby



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Bend. They wanted me to tell the Judge they couldn't make it."

"So what?" Gell snapped.

"So this! You say you didn't stop any place. What time did you cross the Kilvon River Bridge?"

Gell gestured impatiently. "How should I know exactly? About half an hour before I reached your place, I suppose. Couldn't have been more."

"That's what I reckoned," Ingleby said, smiling bleakly. "A distance of fifteen miles. But the point is that Langton's son also told me that the bridge had been washed away two hours before you got to my place! Yet you didn't stop anywhere! By no possible means could a car have gotten across the river into Railsby Bend tonight! It only struck me later when I remembered you saying you'd come from Chicago."

The Sheriff stopped, his lips taut.

"Better get your things. Grant. You've some explaining to do! And hurry up!"

## BEAST OF THE TARN

REVIL DRAYCOTT had never really liked the cat, anyhow. It was too clever, too intelligent, and seemed to hurl constant reminders at him of the time when he had slain his wife and thrown her body into the bottomless depths of Gilpin's Tarn. She had died with the vow that her cat would avenge her when it, too, died. Strange sort of statement—probably the empty vaporings of the dying.

Just the same, Draycott did not like the cat. It followed him everywhere, in the fields or sheds as he went about his farming work; sat by him as he milked the cows, took up a position directly opposite him whenever he had a meal.

There was something uncanny about its devotion to him, and a strange fire was always kindling in its big great eyes as though it knew his secret and waited only for a chance to rake him with vicious claws.

In appearance it was not a particularly unusual animal—merely one of the tabby varieties with a bushy tail and solid bullet head. Only its eyes were different—big, hypnotic, accusing.

Draycott tolerated its presence for nearly two years after the carefully planned “disappearance” of his wife, only hesitating to kill it because of the vow she had made. But there came a time when he was goaded into action—when the creature, in snatching a trifling morsel of food from him, dug its sharp claws into his brown hand,

Instantly he leaped up from the table, scowling down on the blood oozing from the scratches. His cruel gray eyes shot to the cat as it scuttled away from him.

“You blasted little green-eyed devil!” he burst out furiously. “What the devil did you do that for? By heaven, I’ll show you what I do with brutes like you!”

The cat slunk further away, tail down and eyes gleaming. But it did not slink far. Stooping, Draycott seized it by the scruff of the neck and, holding it at arm’s length, walked across the farmyard to the neighboring barn. Once there he dropped the animal inside a sack and closed the neck, oblivious to the creature’s wail of fright.

His tea forgotten in his smoldering anger, Draycott slung the bag over his shoulder and marched outside, through the farmyard and to the meadows beyond. He continued steadily onward toward the winter sunset, ignoring the threshing burden he clutched so immovably. His mind was focused on one spot, which he had not visited for two years: Gilpin’s Tarn, about a mile and a half from his farm, just outside the village of Little Benton. Once in those bottomless waters the cat would worry him no more—would disappear as completely as his wife had done.

He gained the place at length and dropped the sack. The mewing from within fell unheeded upon his ears as he stood looking over the quietness to the lights of the village, and beyond them to the horizon bulk of Michigan. All was quiet save for the faint medley of sounds from the distant circus sideshows, at Little Benton on one of its periodic visits. Yes, everything was quite deserted.

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His gaze dropped presently to the black waters of the tarn itself, lying at the bottom of the craggy hundred-foot drop. Some said that the tarn had once been a mine; still others averred that it went straight down into the maw of hell. Idle village gossip, of course, but nonetheless here was an excellent place in which to throw bodies that must leave no trace.

Draycott hesitated for the briefest instant, suddenly recalling the vow of his wife. If he killed the cat—

With an impatient shrug he stooped, and picked up a small boulder, fastened it securely to the bag neck. Then seizing the entire bulk in his hands, he flung it far out into space, watched the stone jerk downward and plunge into the midst of those scummy, evil depths. The bag vanished in an eddy of frothing bubbles.

He stood grinning and looking down, squatting on his heels and waiting until the bubbling ceased and the tarn became placid again. It was nearly dark when he stood up. Everything was still quiet, and a threat of impending rain hung in the heavy air. An evil miasma was rising from the somber waters below. With the slightest of shudders, stricken suddenly by a peculiar fear of the calmness, Draycott turned and retraced his way home.

Yet at every step he took, he could mentally see the cat; see its eyes regarding him in the swirling wraiths of mist rising from the wet ground, could hear as though afar off its plaintive mewing.

“Nasty, rotten little beast,” he muttered thickly, rubbing his unshaven chin reminiscently. “About as bad as its

mistress. Funny to think how they both went down in the tarn." He brooded over that and in a vicious, vengeful frame of mind finally gained the farm once more.

That night he slept badly, and was glad to get up in the coldness of the very early morning and prepare for his small milk round. For a reason he could not fathom, he found it impossible to rid himself altogether of the memory of that animal.

It had gone down so swiftly, so silently. Just that little vortex of bubbles. Just like his wife had done, helpless, never to be found again. No body—no proof. That had been clever! Now she was with her beloved cat again on the other side of eternity—

Draycott surprised himself standing with his mouth gaping, pursuing his reflections. With a start he realized how far his conscience had taken him back along the road of murder and hate. Pulling himself together, he forced himself to attend to his work and prepared for the morning round.

Things seemed different that morning. Everybody he met seemed apart from his own troubles. By the time he arrived home again in the late evening, a somber and heavy gloom had descended upon him. He was alone; his two cowhands had left for the day. In morose silence he prepared his solitary meal.

As he slowly ate by the light of the oil lamp, his eyes settled on the shadowy spot where the cat had always squatted at mealtimes. In his mind's eye he could again see those big, silently accusing eyes, the only eyes that had seen him murder his wife and drag her out in the dead of night to

the tarn. The animal had followed at his heels, been the only silent witness to the crime. He reflected that he would have drowned it there and then had it not been for his wife's dying threat.

Well, what of it? He smiled twistedly. The cat was dead now, and no harm had come to him. Obviously her words had been the ravings of one on the edge of eternity.

Just the same, it mightn't do any harm to have a look at the tarn and reassure himself. He couldn't altogether feel too sure that all was well there.

"Chasin' a crazy idea, I guess," was his growling comment, as he rose and lighted a storm lantern. "About time I took myself in hand, instead of behavin' like a durned fool."

He slipped into his oilskins, seized the lamp and went outside. Soft drizzling rain was falling, making the ground of the fields beyond the farm sodden and mushy. He progressed deliberately, alone in a world of cold and dankness. His emotions dropped to zero. Jaw outthrust, eyes staring ahead, he clumped steadily in the tarn's direction.

Finally he gained it. Setting down his lamp on a ledge of rock, he stared reflectively into the stenching stagnation below. A low sigh of relief escaped him at seeing nothing different. His inner expectations of some supernatural manifestation were unrealized.

He turned to go at length, satisfied—then abruptly stopped. The storm lantern nearly fell from his hands with fright, and his goggling eyes fixed themselves on the mushy, ill-defined path at his feet. For there, clearly imprinted, were

the marks of an animal's foot. A large foot, too, complete with claws, heading away from the tarn.

Draycott had no idea how long he was held transfixed by that unexpected sight. It held his body and soul with its spell, but at last his eyes jerked from the imprints to the tarn again. A quivering hand pulled shudderingly at his lower lip.

"No—no, it can't be!" he shouted hoarsely. "You couldn't have gotten out of that tarn! You couldn't!"

He fell silent again, shaking so violently that he had to rest for a moment against a nearby rock. The oppressive quiet hemmed him in. His scared, disordered mind painted that quiet with all manner of incredible fantasies. He could have sworn that he heard the voice of his wife, thin and far distant, rising from those murky depths—accusing him, laughing at him, triumphant in the knowledge that her beloved cat was abroad in the dark waiting to spring, to exact a tearing, snapping vengeance for the brutal thing he had done.

Weak from strain, he forced himself up at last and staggered shakily along the path. Immediately he left it, the tracks of those feline feet vanished in the crushed and rain-sodden grass of the moorland. Fright was cramping him now. He went forward at a half run, convinced that some shadowy terror was waiting to emerge from the tarn and seize him.

It was then, as he ran, that he became conscious of something else. Not an echo of his own sogging, sloughing footfalls, but a deliberate and steady padding in the gloom some little distance behind him. When he stopped the sound stopped too, and left him alone in that horrible, dank emptiness.

He twisted a fearful face toward the dark behind him, but saw nothing. He went on again, more slowly, not looking where he was going—and suddenly found himself flat on his face in the mud with the storm lantern dashed out beside him.

“Who's—who's there?” he screamed hoarsely, as he scrambled up again. “Why are you following me like this? Who are you?”

There was no response save the croak of a bullfrog at his feet, sending his heart slamming harder than ever. For a full minute he stood gaping into the drenching, obscuring mist, then there came to his ears a low and chilling whine like the cry of a whipped puppy. Instantly his mind flashed back to the plaintive cry the cat had given when he'd pushed it in the sack.

“You!” he shouted hoarsely. “You're out of the tarn—dead! You're three times your size! Waiting there in the dark—”

He twirled back again and commenced to run blindly through the abyss, heart bumping against his side until he thought it would fail him and drop him into eternity. The padding feet were swifter now, bounding after him, carrying something he couldn't see but which his anguished mind knew was some gargantuan reincarnation of the helpless animal he had drowned. The warning of his dead wife was coming true—

By the time he reached his cottage he was in a pitiable state. Mud-smothered and drenched in rain and sweat, hand shaking so much he could hardly raise the door latch. He stumbled blindly within and fumbled with matches—stood



shivering violently as the yellow flame kindled into an amber glow.

Silence grouped around the farm now—heavy, suggestive silence that had a portent of impending disaster. Draycott found himself moving about on tiptoe, afraid to disturb the quiet. His oilskins rustled unnervingly as he tugged them off amidst a shower of raindrops.

Then he moved to the fireplace and tried to coax the smoldering embers into some semblance of life. Failing, he sat by the darkened grate in the deep shadows and tried to compose himself.

His mind was on fire now. Memories of his wife and the cat pulsed alternately through his brain. The tarn, the prints of the enlarged cat, the wail in the mist, the soft footfalls that had followed him back—they were all gigantically magnified in his brain, sent gelid stiffness into his joints and nerves.

Suddenly he stiffened. That wailing again! It reached him clearly from the silence outside, the wail of an angry, lonely beast. Trembling he rose up and snatched down a rifle from the wall, though even as he did so he knew it would be useless against something reincarnated from death itself.

Step by step, shaking with each movement, he went to the window and pulled aside the faded curtains. What he saw was an actual physical as well as mental shock. Dimly visible in the reflected light from the swinging oil lamp was the face of the drowned cat, incredibly huge and ferocious, fur plastered wetly to its head just as it had emerged from those water logged depths.

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*by John Russell Fearn*

Dazed, weakened with horror, Draycott's terrified eyes fixed their gaze upon the horrible fanged teeth, upper lip drawn back in a hideous snarl of vengeful cruelty.

Then the eyes—brazen, malevolent orbs boring from the midst of that frame of sodden fur. Blazing green, catching the light—Draycott fell backwards, overpowered with the shock, and groped weakly for the table for support.

After a while he steadied himself and slammed over the huge bar of wood that bolted the door, tremblingly clutched his gun once more as there came a fiendish scratching and tearing at the woodwork, accompanied by a throaty growling and snarling.

"You can't come back!" Draycott screamed madly. "Evelyn, my wife, if you are anywhere within hearing, call off this terrible cat! I can stand anything but this monstrous reincarnation of the creature I destroyed! Please—please, I beg of you! You were right in saying that the cat's death would avenge you! I admit it! Take it away!"

As though in response to his sobbing entreaty silence fell again. There were no sounds from outside. Little by little Draycott began to recover himself, gradually convinced himself that somewhere in the unknown his long-dead wife had heard him and recalled the hideous reincarnation back to the mystic hell from which it had emerged.

He relaxed a little and cautiously lifted the heavy wooden bar from the door—opened it very gently. But the instant he did so something vomited from the dark outside to the accompaniment of a piercing, paralyzing shriek. A vast body,

terrible claws outspread, hurtled inwards and struck Draycott clean in the chest, sending him hurtling backwards helplessly.

“Evelyn!” he yelled madly, struggling frantically. “Evelyn! Call off this cat of yours! Call off this cat—!”

Then his words froze as his arms stiffened helplessly, powerless to ward off that fanged abyss of death closing in upon him—

The following day the *Little Benton Times* carried a report that was brief but significant. It read:

Mr. Revil Draycott, well-known farmer of Little Benton, met his death last night in tragic circumstances. All day yesterday a tiger, escaped from the Little Benton circus, was being searched for unsuccessfully, owing to the mist. Its trail was finally picked up at Gilpin's Tarn and the animal itself was found at Mr. Draycott's farm. Unfortunately Mr. Draycott was evidently killed in trying to attack the tiger, which had obviously been attracted to the farm by the livestock.

The tiger is now back in the circus and Mr. Draycott's death will be much regretted by those who knew him.

## SAFETY IN NUMBERS

WHEN ANDREW DENHAM first saw the letter lying open on the bureau in Evelyn Carstairs' flat, he felt that it was confirmation of all the suspicions he had developed in the four months he had been engaged to the girl. There was nothing definitely wrong, of course—no visible sign that another man had come into her life, but—Anyway, the letter was there, open for anybody to read.

Ethically, Andrew had no right to look at the letter at all, but being on familiar terms in Evelyn's flat, he stood looking at it as he waited for her to finish dressing for their theater date. He hesitated, asked his conscience a couple of questions, then picked the letter up and read it—

*Thursday*

*Dearest Evelyn,*

*I shall be looking forward to our little meeting as arranged. I have something awfully important to ask you.*

*With all my love,*

*Ernie*

Andrew put the letter down slowly and scowled.

"No address even," he muttered. "Must be on very intimate terms, especially to add 'with all my love'..."

He looked about the comfortable room as though expecting to see some signs of Ernie, but there were none. Only that adoring letter left on the bureau so blatantly—

Then Evelyn came bustling out of the bedroom, exquisitely gowned, drawing a fur cape about her shoulders. Andrew studied her absently—the sheen of her blonde hair, the delicately applied make-up on her face. She was definitely a good-looking girl, with a figure as perfect as her vocation of salon mannequin demanded.

“Well, well, Andy, why so serious?” she enquired, smiling. “We’re going to the theater, not the dentist’s, remember!”

He gave a start. His darkly handsome face broke into a forced smile.

“Sorry. Just something I was thinking about ... Come along.”

He opened the door for her, then he hesitated outside.

“Got your key? Since you say you’ve only one you’d better make sure.”

She looked in her handbag and while she did so he idly studied the door with its bulbous-curved numbers—129. Two screws in each number, and even they seemed too many. He found himself thinking what trifling details one notices sometimes when waiting—

“Yes, I have it,” Evelyn said after a moment, and with a nod he pulled the door shut.

Four doors further along the lengthy, softly-carpeted corridor there were voices raised high in anger—a man’s and a woman’s.

“All right, all right, if that’s how you feel about it!” the woman’s voice was shouting. “I’m sick and tired of you and that’s the truth! And don’t slam the door as you go out. The screws on the numbers are coming out already—!”

"Nice people you live amongst," Andrew murmured, as the girl and he stood side by side in the self-service lift on its journey to the ground floor.

She shrugged. "There have been quite a few complaints bout Mr. and Mrs. Baxter in 126. They fight like cat and dog. It's high time the management did something. Thank heavens I'm four doors removed from them—but I honestly think the tenants of all the flats on our floor must hear the rows."

The lift came to a stop. Andrew pushed back the grille-gates and followed the girl out to the taxi he had ordered. He said nothing during the journey to the theater, and even when they got there he remained with his lips firm, looking at the gleam of the satin-faced curtains across the stage.

"Is anything the matter, Andy?" Evelyn asked at length. "You seem to have very little to say for yourself."

"This isn't perhaps the time to say that I'm thinking—just before the show starts," he said; "but tell me something! What's come between us during the last few weeks?"

"*Between* us?" she repeated, surprised.

"Oh, I know it's nothing obvious—nothing you can nail down as an absolute fact, but I've had the feeling that ... Well, that perhaps I'm not the all-in-all fiance I used to be."

"But, Andy, how absurd! Whatever gave you that idea?"

"For one thing you cancelled three of our evening dates on the run, and gave no logical explanation; for another you asked that the date of our wedding be postponed indefinitely—"

"But Andy, I *told* you—purely for business reasons!"

"For business reasons, eh? And I was mug enough to believe it—then! Suppose you tell me who *Ernie* is?"

Evelyn stared at the challenging dark eyes. She seemed about to answer when the orchestra struck up the overture. She had to wait for a moment or two and during that time a change of expression came to her face. Her mouth hardened and her eyes lost their light of cheerful interest.

"How do you know about Ernie?" she asked briefly, during quieter piece in the music. "From that letter I left on the bureau?"

"Exactly—that dear loving letter! He has something 'awfully important to ask you' and he signs himself 'With all my love'—That explains everything! The reason for canceling our dates, the reason for postponing our wedding ... Business reasons indeed! He's somebody else you've taken on, isn't he? I'm just a nuisance and you want to be rid of me!"

The girl was silent as the music thundered. She was obviously thinking hard. Then she said coldly:

"I always had the feeling that you were the suspicious, insanely jealous type, Andy, and now I'm sure of it. When you'll even descend to reading my correspondence..." She got to her feet suddenly and looked down at him. "Allow me to pass, please."

"But—but what about the show?"

"I prefer not to see it, thank you!"

Andrew got up awkwardly. He could not make a scene there and then with the audience packed in around him and casting curious glances. Muttering under his breath he

followed the girl up the gangway and caught her arm as they entered the foyer.

"Look here, Evelyn, at least explain yourself—!"

"Explain *myself* indeed!" Her gray eyes blazed scorn at him. "It seems to me that that's all on your side. Let go of my arm, and don' t ever speak to me again!"

She tugged herself free, and he stood watching her stalking sway amongst the late theater-comers. He did not attempt to follow her. Lighting a cigarette, he stood thinking.

"Probably just what she wanted, anyway," he muttered finally. "A clear chance to break with me—-and did she seize it!"

He turned aside and went into the bar, spent perhaps half an hour consuming drinks more for the sake of something to do than aught else. As he drank, his suspicions deepened, reformed, and took on diverse shapes.

She *had* cancelled three evening dates in a row. What other reason than for another man—for Ernie? Couldn't be because of her work when the salon closed at 5.30. And she *had* said they must postpone their wedding for a while. Business reasons! The only reason was that she wanted to be rid of him before the walk to the altar. The whole thing was now perfectly clear.

And how—Ernie! Evelyn had made a fatal mistake in leaving that letter lying about, unless she had been femininely clever and had left it on purpose to build up to the final break.

"Women!" Andrew muttered, staring at his empty glass. "Tricky as cats! Give 'em half a chance and they'll get their



claws into you—But who does she think she is to treat *me* like this?”

He got to his feet, swayed a little, and stared round the smoke-hazed saloon. He suddenly realized that he had taken it all lying down. She had treated him like a tiresome schoolboy—It had not seemed to matter much then, but it did now. The number of drinks he had consumed insisted that he demand an explanation.

Unsteadily he left the bar, went through the foyer and to the outdoors. The fresh air cleared his head somewhat. He began to walk briskly, arrived at the big building containing Evelyn's flat some fifteen minutes later.

Sullenly he walked across to the service lift, had some difficulty in dragging over the grille-gates and finding the right button—then he pressed it and glided slowly up the shaft. He was nearing the top when the blur in his mind was pierced by a woman's voice—

“Good-bye, Ernie—best of luck!”

Andrew started and dragged himself erect. He wished his head were not quite so confused, that he had been listening properly to the voice, But *Ernie*—?

His eyes narrowed as the lift came to a halt at the floor he wanted. A big, broad-shouldered man, well dressed and in the early thirties was standing waiting for it. He gave Andrew a glance and stepped into the lift, then as Andrew remained standing looking at him he made a motion.

“Going down, sir?” he enquired.

Andrew drew the grille into place and fumbled for the ‘Ground Floor’ button.

"Yes," he whispered. "I'm going down ... with you!"

"Oh! Well, that's all right, then."

"So you think it's all right, do you?" Andrew's voice was still low; then he suddenly stabbed at the 'Stop' button and brought the lift to a halt between floors. He gave a crooked smile.

"What in thunder's the matter with you?" the man demanded. "Are you drunk, or what?"

"You're Ernie, aren't you?" Andrew asked bitterly; then as the other nodded in vague surprise Andrew added, "We're in just the right place to thrash this out! The lift's stopped between floors and nobody can open the gates or reach us until we get to a floor-level again ... So *you* are Ernie!"

The man looked at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes, I'm Ernie—and I know who you are too! You're the man who's been in my way! Well, I'm glad to have seen you, anyway—" He tugged out a Yale key and held it up between finger and thumb. "You see? I'm the one who's going to do the talking from now on!"

He broke off as Andrew suddenly lashed out with his fist. It took Ernie on the side of the jaw and sent him reeling against the wall. Simultaneously he caught the back of his head on the button-box control, gasped, then slumped weakly to the floor.

Andrew stood glaring down on him, his lips compressed—then with sudden savagery he snatched the key up from where it had fallen from the man's hand.

“Even got the key to her flat, eh? And the only key, too! More than I ever got! I'll show that two-timing little she-cat!”

Andrew paused, staring at the inside coat pocket of the man. The lapel had fallen aside to reveal the butt of a revolver, sheathed in cellophane. For a moment Andrew hesitated, then he snatched the gun out, tore away the cellophane, and found it was a .32. Funny for a private citizen to be carrying a gun ... must be a reason.

He was too reckless, too inwardly worked up with fury and drinks to care much what he did. He snatched out the man's wallet and went through it quickly. Practically the first thing he encountered was a warrant-card which read—'Criminal Investigation Department. Metropolitan Police. Name, Ernest Billings. Rank, Detective-Sergeant. First Class. Height 5ft 10 ins. Hair black. No distinguishing marks.'

A Detective-Sergeant, of all people! Then why the gun? He knew enough of law to realize that an off-duty policeman would not normally be carrying firearms—

It didn't signify. What *did* signify was that Evelyn had obviously transferred her affections to him, that she had called “Good-bye” to him, and therefore must be at home—and here was a gun!

Things seemed to link up in Andrew's mind. Half mechanically he broke the gun-magazine and looked at it. Two spent cartridges were ejected. Four other bullets remained intact, unfired.

He made up his mind. He sent the lift down to the ground floor and looked anxiously into the entrance hall. There was nobody in sight at the moment. Opening the grille he dragged

the unconscious man out and dumped him outside the gateway—then he returned into the lift and sent it upwards again.

His pulse throbbing and his feet unsteady he walked out into the corridor, leaving the grille-gate wide open. The hangover from the drink was blurring his vision a little. It seemed to be upsetting his conception of distance too. He had always thought it was further along the corridor to Evelyn's flat—only it wasn't. Right here before him was 129.

He glanced about him once and then tried the key. It fitted exactly, and being a Yale that meant it had to be Evelyn's flat. Softly he turned the key and entered the dimly lighted room beyond. There was only a reading lamp, shining on a blonde head, just visible over the top of the divan. Andrew knew the sheen of that lovely hair.

He stared at it malevolently, wondering why Evelyn had pulled the divan round to the fire instead of leaving it in its usual position by the wall—then he gripped the revolver tightly and fired—four times—straight at the head before him.

It vanished. There was a thud as the woman's body fell to the floor.

"If you don't want me you'll certainly not get Ernie," he muttered; then he backed uncertainly out of the room and closed the door, stood breathing hard and gripping the knob on the outside.

As though from far away he was conscious of the sound of feet plodding up the rubberoid stairs. In fact there were two pairs of feet—He turned stupidly to look. It was quite impossible, of course, but there, supporting the dazed but

now fully conscious Detective-Sergeant Billings, stood Evelyn, still with the fur wrap about her shoulders, her expression a mixture between puzzlement and anger.

"Are you all right now?" she asked the Detective-Sergeant.

"Yes, miss—and thanks for your help." Billings looked at the gaping Andrew. "If you'd have shut the gates, sir, this young lady wouldn't have needed to help me upstairs. We could have used the lift ... And I'll take that gun if you don't mind! *And* you might explain why you hit me in the jaw!"

Andrew stared at him. "Gun?" he repeated absently.

"The one in your hand ... And you've messed it up beautifully, I see! I had it in a cellophane envelope to preserve fingerprints. It belongs to a case on which I'm working..."

Andrew handed it over mechanically, his eyes moving to Evelyn.

"Where—did you come from?" he whispered. "I can understand you helping Ernie here, but—"

"Ernie?" Evelyn repeated blankly. "But—but don't be absurd! When I came in after a walk round after that row we had I found the Sergeant in the entrance hall, holding his head. He said somebody had hit him and asked me to help him upstairs so he could see in this flat here ... Now I find the man is you, of all people!"

"Then—this *isn't* Ernie—?"

"My name's Ernest Billings," the Yard man said, sniffing the gun. "And this gun has been *fired!*" he added ominously. "By God, if you've shot your wife—!"

"Wife?" Evelyn repeated in bewilderment.

Billings raised his eyes to the Yale lock on the doorway. The key was still in it. Sudden alarm on his face he dashed into the flat and looked about him. When he came out again his face was grim and he clamped a hand on Andrew's arm.

"I think you'd better come along with me—"

"Andy, Andy, what have you done?" Evelyn demanded hoarsely.

"I dunno. I thought this was Ernie—"

"But not *my* Ernie!" Evelyn interrupted. "'Ernie' is simply the short for 'Ernestine.' She's my best friend. We go lots of places together. I'd have told you tonight only I thought you were so horribly suspicious I decided against it."

"Oh!" Andrew licked his lips. "And—and the nights you wouldn't keep our dates? The postponement of the wedding?"

"I *told* you—business reasons. On the nights I cancelled the dates I was at the salon trying on some new secret creations for export. I couldn't breathe a word about them. I postponed the wedding because of the possibility that I might be sent abroad to demonstrate..."

"I don't know what all this means, but I *do* know you've shot Mildred Baxter dead!" Billings said grimly. "I see the mistake now. I mistook you for her husband when you seemed to know all about me. I was in love with her and her husband was making her life a hell. I called in here to night on my way to headquarters to ask how she was getting on with divorce arrangements—"

"But you had the key to Evelyn's flat!" Andrew insisted. "It's still in the door there!"

"My key's here," Evelyn said quickly, pulling it out of her handbag.

"I had the key to *Mildred's* flat," Billings stated. "She gave me a spare one so I could see her at the times her husband was away. I've never seen him personally, of course—"

"But the number's 129! It says so!"

All three of them stared at it. There was no doubt about it—then they glanced round at an interruption. A janitor wearing overalls was approaching along the corridor. As he came up he looked at the three in puzzlement. Then Billings pulled the door to hastily.

"Evening, folks," the janitor greeted. "Anythin' I c'n do?"

"Er—no," Billings said.

The janitor shrugged, pulled a screwdriver out of his pocket and went to the door. Deliberately he turned the '9' round to its normal position of '6' and screwed it tight.

"Worst of these darned numbers," he growled. "Only two screws in each of 'em, and not very good screws at that. Always coming out. Same as here now—One screw loose, left in the top of the loop, workin' like a central pivot as you might say. The top screw comes out of the tail and the heavy loop on the tail makes the number turn right over ... I should ha' fixed it earlier. Mrs. Carter rang down this morning and said the door numbers screws were comin' loose. Must be through slammin' the door too hard..."

The janitor sighed and put his screwdriver back in his pocket.

"Well, that's that. Never do to 'ave two rooms with the same number. Might be mix-ups, eh?"

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Andrew stared after the janitor as he went off whistling.  
"Might be!" he whispered. "My God, if only you knew!"



## GLASS NEMESIS

I ARRIVED in New York's Hotel Europa in a crate with straw wrapped around me. Once I was yanked into the daylight I took my place amidst hundreds of other short, transparent cylinders like myself.

Then, after a period of being filled with all manner of spirits, after being caressed by the lips of men and women alike, I found myself in Room 402 on the third floor.

One evening, about nine o'clock, a man and woman came in, both in evening dress. I liked the look of the woman; she was young and pretty—but the man was a grim piece of work. Lean face, dark, with a voice like caustic soda.

Anyhow they got around to talking. I figured they were husband and wife. As the man talked he picked me and my fellow up from the tray and started to pour spirit into both of us. But he did something kind of different to me. Turning a little, he poured powder into me and handed me over to the girl.

Her hand closed around me. She drank my contents and relaxed in the armchair. The man started talking again.

"There's only one thing to do with people like you, Mary, and I've done it! Since you won't give me grounds for divorce, I've made my own grounds. I'll marry Claire Blake in spite of you!"

The woman's voice was low and bitter. "You know, Barry, you are a rotten beast! The rottenest I've ever known! What's more, I'm going to put Claire Blake wise to the fact before

you start in to two-time her, as you have me ... You're only after her seven million dollars, so you may as well admit it. 'That's why you want to be rid of me!'

She stopped talking and put me back on the tray. Picking me up, Barry started to polish my outside with a handkerchief. When he was through he polished my companion both inside and out and left it as clean as a new window.

"Turning waiter?" questioned the woman, laconically.

"No, my dear. Just a little preparation, that's all ... I'm meeting Claire tonight at the West Fork Road-house at ten o'clock. That gives me very little time to finish things off here first..."

He put his handkerchief in his pocket and studied the cloying dregs in my base.

Suddenly the woman tried to get to her feet, but she fell back. Holding her white throat, she shouted, hoarsely:

"Barry! Barry, what have you done to me? I'm—I'm choking—"

"That poison's pretty fast," he answered, and his voice, reminded me of steel blades rubbing together. "I've polished my own glass inside and out and your glass on the outside only. That leaves it clear for this..." Taking her quivering hand he clamped her fingers around me, then let her go. Grinning viciously, he said: "Evidence for suicide, my dear..."

The woman just couldn't do anything but gasp and gulp hoarsely. Barry went out and locked the door from the outside ... For a moment nothing happened, then driven by

the frantic urge for air, for relief, the woman suddenly writhed out of the chair and dropped to her knees.

She tried to reach the window, but just couldn't make it. Instead she clutched hold of me and hurled me base-foremost at the window, breaking the glass. Her weak, strangled cry of "Help! Air!" followed me—then I thudded down on leather.

I didn't break. I'm pretty tough. I was in the car park back of the hotel. The car park attendant was bawling a little distance off.

Then his voice came close to the open two-seater in which I'd landed. Silks started rustling and suddenly a smartly dressed young woman clambered into the driving-seat beside me. Since it was pretty dark she didn't see me, of course. Pursing up her painted lips she started to whistle.

Something bounded out of the gloom and plumped almost on top of me. A dog of sorts: Great Dane, I think it was. A real hefty brute, anyway ... The girl made him lie down, then had her bags fixed in the rumble seat. She looked at her watch, then started up the engine. The car went smoothly into the High Street and headed out of town at a spanking pace.

Now and again she looked at the dog and said: "Take it easy, Kong; don't be so darned affectionate! I've got a wheel to look after."

We were on the main country road, heading west when something sharp started pulling at me. It was Kong's hefty paw. He raked me over then thrust his huge, wet tongue in my insides, started licking and licking until he'd taken up all that sediment. Then I rolled into the corner and stopped

there. The dame was doing sixty-five and kept looking at the dashboard clock.

"I'll only just make it for ten if I step on it," she muttered, then she pressed her foot harder on the accelerator and sent the ear screaming through the dark down that ribbon of country road.

All of a sudden Kong started to move uneasily. His paws kneaded up and down like engine pistons. He let out the most horrible wail, as though he'd heard music being played somewhere.

The girl looked at him momentarily, startled. Then she snapped out: "Kong! Sit down! Sit down—!"

Half her sentence was drowned out by the roar and hoot of a car trying to overtake not half a mile behind. It couldn't have been doing less than seventy.

Kong howled again and leapt up entreatingly. In trying to draw the girl's attention to himself he struck her in the face with his paw ... She screamed wildly, jammed her feet down helplessly on clutch and brake pedals, then let go of the steering-wheel with the sudden shock.

The car slewed round giddily and went shooting diagonally across the road. The overtaking auto stood no chance—Steel, rubber, glass and leather compressed into a triangular hell of destruction. Bags initialed 'C. B.' vomited from the rumble seat...

I rolled out to the side of the road. Some time after the woman dragged herself free, blood running down her face, her clothes torn and ripped. She looked for her dog and couldn't find him.

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Then she staggered across to where a figure lay in the road, the head bent at an unnatural angle. There was a pause filled with the crackling of flames, then she screamed frantically:

"Dead! Oh, God—! *Barry!*"

## THE WAILING HYBRID

### I

#### *The Living Heart*

AS HE DROVE swiftly through the night Jeff Rowland's thoughts were pleasant indeed, as he dwelt with a certain schoolboyish satisfaction on the circus he had attended in Castleford village not an hour before. It represented his fourth successive visit.

Helen Vane had been there, of course, performing her usual magic and snake-charming act. There seemed to be no snake she could not handle, from a cobra to a boa. Helen—a delightful girl, appealing strongly to him by the very reason of her fearless cleverness. He thanked the fortune that had led him to see the first performance—and her. Not yet had he spoken to her, but he meant to do so before the show moved on.

Then Rowland cursed hotly as with blaring high-powered horn the car behind suddenly drew level with him, headlights blazing wildly. Instantly he swung his own steering wheel madly to the right, bounced crazily on uneven banking.

With bitter eyes he stared at the sedan momentarily level with him, clearly illumined in the reflecting headlights. He caught a glimpse of a dark, swarthy face under a soft hat. The face was leaning low over the steering wheel, oblivious to everything save demoniacal speed. But that was not all!

Rowland nearly overturned his car in amazement at the transient vision that followed.

For one clear instant he caught a view of a girl beside the driver, head of golden hair dropped heavily back on the leather cushions with all the indications of unconsciousness. Across her mouth was a tight band, obviously a gag. Then the car was on its way, thundering and bumping on in clouds of dust into the dark.

"Helen! Helen Vane!" Rowland breathed mechanically. "In that car! I'd know her face anywhere!"

He twisted his car to the road level and for nearly two miles kept the sedan in sight. Then it suddenly veered off the lonely country road and went zigzagging away along a barely defined path across open fields. Its rear light presently vanished, perhaps because the driver realized he was being followed. Rowland promptly extinguished his own lights and watched with narrowed eyes through the windshield. The moonlight helped him considerably, enabled him finally to see the car slide into the shade of a massive dark residence, completely isolated from other evidences of habitation.

At that he slowed down, stopped finally within a quarter of a mile of the place and climbed out on the rough road to take stock of the situation.

The solitary residence was surrounded by tall, heavily foliated trees and high railings. Going closer, Rowland found the massive double front gates locked; beyond them twisted an overhung drive leading into somber darkness.

Not a light gleamed in that lonely place, not a sound came from it; yet within it was surely Helen Vane.

Rowland's lips tightened. He walked the length of the spiked railings and stared between them in some surprise at numberless glass structures resembling conservatories, or hothouses, joining the residence. At first sight it might have belonged to a nurseryman, a raiser of trees for estates; except that nurserymen do not kidnap girls and drive like maniacs.

Jeff Rowland didn't hesitate any longer. Exercising care over the vicious spikes, he climbed the railings and dropped into the tree-laden grounds, picked his way between the well-tended flowerbeds. Finally he came to the largest conservatory and stood studying the open-top ventilator. If he could get through that—

The thought was no sooner in his mind than he had gripped an outlet pipe and was shinning swiftly up it. Gaining the glass roof, he knelt carefully on the wooden framework and eased himself forward to the inviting skylight.

To clamber through it and drop into the warmth of the conservatory was only a moment's work.

For a long time he stood tensed and listening, surrounded by a heavy mid-tropical heat; then it gradually dawned upon him that he could hear a soft moaning, a sighing which proceeded from the stifling, vaguely moonlit greenery.

For an unaccountable reason his scalp began to tighten.

The moonlight was casting its pale glow upon sickly green and twining branches, branches of a plant resembling hypertrophied honeysuckle and occupying one large bed to itself. And it was from this that the noises were emanating. Perplexed, Rowland went closer to it, found himself stiffening



in frozen amazement as the groaning suddenly changed into the voice of a woman, filled with exquisite anguish.

“Free me! In the name of mercy—free me!”

Rowland stared with popping eyes into the heart of that slimy, sweating hothouse and saw something unbelievably weird—the head and shoulders of a strange woman which projected above the hot, oozing soil; a woman who was, as green as the plant that coiled about her, whose thick hair hung in rippling black folds to the soil. She was buried up to her bosom; her arms moved weakly with supplicating, serpentine motions. From her lips, contorted by some unbearable agony, spewed desperate entreaties for release.

“Who—who are you?” Jeff Rowland blurted out, bending toward her.

“Release!” she groaned back. “Release me, I implore you!”

For a moment the idea of quicksand occurred to him—that she was sinking into this green filth. But that didn't explain her nudity or how she had gotten into the midst of this twining mass of plant. He stepped forward determinedly onto the soil. Instantly the quicksand conception was shattered. It was quite normal.

“Quickly!” the woman screamed, writhing in agony.

“*Quickly!*”

Rowland nodded promptly, wondering what particular pain was affecting her so violently. Stooping down behind her, he clamped his powerful hands under her armpits and pulled upward with all his power. Something of extraordinary strength seemed to pull him back—something that caused the woman to scream again and again. Once more he pulled and

she abruptly came free, sending him stumbling backward to fall amidst the plant's coil. Like a sigh on a breeze the girl muttered two last words.

"Thank God—" Then her face froze into its expression of unutterable anguish, her eyes glazed and became fixed.

Jeff Rowland, sprawled, immovable, frozen with sick horror at the sight now in front of him. God—the girl had no body below her upper torso! It was completely severed just above the abdomen, leaving green, smothered entrails and complex nerve endings trailing back into the slimy green pit from which he had dragged her.

Now he understood her agony; her mad desire for release. In some inhuman fashion her very body had been provided with roots, linked to the tree itself. She had been a quasi-plant! A deep and deadly sickness stole over Rowland at the thought, and with it the remembrance of Helen Vane. Monstrous! If such a thing were to happen to her—That thought jerked him to his feet, quivering with smoldering rage. Then he looked up sharply as the conservatory was suddenly swamped in brilliance.

"Don't move!" a voice ordered coldly. "Stand exactly where you are—and raise your hands!"

Slowly he obeyed, waited while footsteps came from behind him around the plant bed. Then he found himself staring into the darkly swarthy face of the man he had seen in the car, the cold black eyes fixed menacingly upon him,

The man smiled bitterly. "I was wise in expecting you, my young friend," he remarked dryly. "I suspected you might follow me in your car. My judgment of human nature was

correct, even to your using the conservatory window I opened especially for your benefit. I have been detained in my surgery, otherwise I would have come much sooner to see if you had arrived. I might even have stopped you from ruining my work—.” His black eyes traveled to the dead hulk of the woman, then around the sinuous masses of the weird plant.

“You have meddled quite a deal, haven't you?” he asked slowly. “Now I shall have to alter my plans—”

“That girl there!” Rowland broke in passionately. “Who is she? How in hell's name did she get like that? It's—it's vivisection!”

“No—just art,” the man corrected him smoothly. “I am responsible, of course. My name is Doctor Calvin Kaylor; I am a retired botanical and anatomical surgeon experimenting with new types—types which none of my blasted contemporaries would believe in. The fusion of a human being with a plant! A fusion that you have spoiled, damn you! You tore out the living heart by the roots!”

His cruel eyes settled on the green cavity from which the stump of a girl had been torn.

“Living heart!” Rowland breathed in fascinated horror. “You don't mean—”

“I mean that that girl was the heart of this plant. She would have grown into a plant woman—a flower of divine beauty. It means I shall have to start all over again.”

“Not with Helen Vane!” Jeff Rowland shouted frantically. “Oh, I know you've got her here—that's why I came! You can't do such things, damn your black soul!”

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Dr. Kaylor sneered coldly. "There's plenty I can do, so get that straight. I have Helen Vane here, yes. My intention was to use her for quite a different experiment, but thanks to your infernal meddling she will have to take this girl's place. The plant will die, otherwise. Later I may find a similar use for you—probably you can take the place of Helen Vane in my other experiment ... Now turn around and get going, through that door! Go on!"

Rowland's fingers twitched with the desire for action, but he was no fool. Upon him rested the life of the girl he had admired from afar. He kept his hands up and walked through a long dark passage with the doctor behind him, then under further directions he turned into an apartment that was obviously a surgery, stacked with impeccably clean but nonetheless grim-looking instruments.

Before he could ask any further questions or make any moves, chains and manacles were clamped on his wrists and ankles, holding him tight to the wall. It was not so much himself he was thinking about now as the sight of the limp, nude girl lying on the central operating table, slender body and limbs held firmly in the grip of spotless white.

There was no denying the fact that it *was* Helen Vance, her face still softly made up from her performance in the circus ring!

II

*Hothouse Horror*

ROWLAND shuddered.

"So you are wondering what it is all about?" Kaylor asked cynically, coming forward. "It isn't really so very complicated. I have already told you that I am finding a way to bridge the gap between animal and plant life. I believe that with that plant in the conservatory, a specially matured one, I can foster a new type of living being—a woman born of a plant, who will perhaps one day in the course of evolution give birth to beings like herself. I *know* it can be done!

"That woman you so kindly saved was my first experiment—some village girl whom nobody traced, of course. Her heart was the life of the plant; her bloodstream was the sap; her organisms kept it going. You will remember she was already green herself—"

"You Godless devil!" Jeff Rowland whispered. "You're nothing but a fiend!"

"How like the words of my contemporaries before I retired here to work in secret," Kaylor sneered. "I think—"

He broke off and moved to the operating table as Helen groaned faintly and squirmed in her bonds.

"So you've recovered?" Kaylor asked bluntly.

At that she jerked her head up, twisted her face around and stared at Jeff Rowland, apparently without recognition. He felt a trifle put out; he was convinced he had attracted her

attention from the front row of the circus. Evidently the state of her mind had banished all thoughts and memories.

"What's—what a happened?" the girl asked weakly, her eyes dilating in sudden horror as she beheld her unclothed form and buckled straps.

"I'm Dr. Kaylor," returned the scientist coldly. "I first saw your photograph in a paper advertising your circus when it visited Philadelphia. I kept track of you until the show came near here. I saw your show three nights ago and decided then that you were just the type I wanted for my work—blonde, healthy and young.

"Tonight I captured you outside your van just after your act—gave you chloroform and brought you here. Unfortunately, the original purpose of my kidnapping you goes for nothing; I have other uses for you now. You can blame this man here," and he nodded his head toward Rowland.

The girl's face fixed in an expression of deadly fear. She squirmed and twisted helplessly in the straps. Rowland tore on his chains with the ferocity of a maddened animal, aching to get his fingers on this fiend, this monster with the ridiculous excuse of a plant woman. But was it an excuse? The memory of the severed woman returned to his mind in a sudden wave of nausea.

"Kaylor, for God's sake let her go!" he screamed hoarsely. "I beg of you to do that!"

The surgeon-botanist was not even listening. His eyes were fixed on the helplessly writhing girl.

"I want your body, your heart—your life," he breathed. "And I shall have them! Nobody can get into this house without my knowing it. Nobody except this man knows you are even here. I chose my time well—Yes, you will be a very beautiful experiment, my dear!"

Kaylor stood gloating over her, watching the straining of her soft limbs, the wild terror in her staring blue eyes. Then suddenly jerking into life, he wheeled an anaesthetic machine into view, swiftly moved the switches, and clamped the cone over the girl's face.

Jeff Rowland watched with surging passion as Helen Vane twisted and wriggled frantically, gulped and shouted hoarsely under the cone. The straps left crimson welts on her skin as she tugged against them. Then her struggles grew weaker; for the second time that night she relaxed into complete unconsciousness. After a while Kaylor removed the cone and stood regarding her once more.

"It makes it difficult, being the only man who knows the secret of my work," the surgeon remarked, grinning ghoulishly as he washed his hands in antiseptic fluid. "I cannot have assistants. However, I think she will remain senseless for the next ninety minutes, and I'll be through by that time."

"Through?" Jeff Rowland choked. "In heaven's name, Kaylor, what are you going to do? If you touch that girl—" he threatened.

"Don't be a damned fool," the surgeon cut in harshly. "There is no sentiment in my business. You'll watch this

through, and see for yourself what will shortly happen to *you!*"

Rowland fell into a stunned, dead silence, heart thudding against his ribs. His horror began to mount as floodlights suddenly came up over the table and bathed the girl in their shadowless brilliance. Kaylor slipped quickly into sterilized overalls, again washed his hands and then donned rubber gloves. Finally, when fully masked, he moved a spotless instrument tray forward and began to tabulate his various glittering devices, made sure they would be at hand as fast as he needed them. His single-handed operation promised to be a feat of no mean skill.

Jeff Rowland felt that he would go mad with fury and terror as he watched, as he struggled and battled and realized his own helplessness. Finally he was forced to give up from sheer exhaustion, stood sweating and cursing and staring in his shackles as Kaylor got swiftly to work with his keen-bladed scalpel. The vicious blade sliced cleanly into the body in front of him, sliced through the outer skin and drove deep inwards, severing arteries and veins that were promptly sutured. By degrees the ghastly truth ate into Rowland's spinning brain. Kaylor was keeping his word! He was making Helen Vane like that other unhappy girl; was cutting her body into two sections just above the abdomen, making swift and complex nerve connections, changing the entire circulatory movement, performing feats of manipulation that clearly showed he was indeed a surgeon of surpassing skill.

Kaylor finished at last and reverently surveyed the upper half of the body he had divided. The lower half he removed



and carried to a place unknown. Then he returned quickly, unfastened the upper half and carried it from the surgery, leaving behind him a trail of newly spilt blood that made Rowland shrink in nauseated horror.

It seemed hours before Kaylor returned, and when he did he was grinning in cruel satisfaction, stripping off his rubber gloves. Then he tugged out his revolver and held it in a rock-steady grip.

With his free hand he snapped Rowland's manacles loose and held him at arm's length as the prisoner tensed to attack him.

"Better not!" Kaylor advised in a level voice. "It won't get you any place. Get moving into the conservatory—and don't try any tricks!"

Hot with fury Jeff Rowland obeyed and finally entered that warm expanse of light. His eyes turned instantly to the body of the unhappy girl, sunken to her breast as her now vanished predecessor had been in the self-same green pit. She was still alive; the slow but weakened movements of her chest showed that, but her head hung with the heaviness of total unconsciousness.

Kaylor approached the girl. "Anaesthetic not yet passed off," he murmured, brooding over her thoughtfully. "I have connected her arteries and nerves to the corresponding ones in the plant. This plant has a circulation of its own and needs her heart to keep it going. Once her body becomes adjusted, she will rapidly change and start to grow, blossom into something rare and beautiful—a plant woman!"

"In heaven's name let's get out of here," Rowland groaned, turning his face away. "It's more than I can stand."

Kaylor chuckled. "Weakling!" he sneered.

They returned to the corridor, and the next thing Rowland realized clearly was of being flung into an empty, dusty room, and being shackled by long lengths of chain to an immense stake driven deep in the floor.

"Don't worry—I'll look after you," Kaylor remarked cynically, his face painted into hideous shadows by the electric torch he held in his hand.

"You don't think you can get away with this, do you?" his prisoner demanded, glaring up at him. "They'll come looking for that girl, and for me, Kaylor. My car's not far away. If anybody finds it—"

"Thanks for telling me," the scientist remarked. "I'll move it into my garage. This house is safe enough, don't you worry. Anybody nosing in here will get plenty for his trouble—Well, I'll see you later—tomorrow morning, in fact," he sneered.

With that he was gone, leaving Rowland utterly alone. Not very long afterward he heard the noise of his car being driven up the drive, then a silence fell on the terrible house...

Rowland awoke from a stiff and drafty slumber on the following morning to discover Kaylor, standing beside him in the drab light filtering through the barred window. Amazingly enough the surgeon was holding quite a respectable-looking breakfast tray in his hands.

"Better eat it," he advised curtly, setting it down on the floor. "I'm not doing it for love, but because I want my next subject to be as healthy and well fed as Helen Vane."

Rowland winced at thought of the outraged girl, but he ate ravenously. He had to keep his strength up in preparation for attacking this fiend when the chance came. When he had finally finished he was released from the shackles, but held once more under the revolver threat, forced to visit that abominable hothouse again. To his surprise green blinds were drawn over the glass windows, plunging the place into deep emerald twilight.

"Light hurts her," Kaylor muttered almost sympathetically. "She has changed amazingly in the night, performed a rapid metabolism. When I came in this morning she had her arms over her face to shut out the glare. Once I drew the shades she lowered them, and I could study her carefully. She's turned out a perfect specimen. Look for yourself!"

Rowland didn't need any command, aided as it was by a prod from the revolver. His eyes were already fastened on the incredible sight of that girl, oddly changed in appearance now by reason of her skin having become shiny green, her golden hair deep jet black. Her soft arms were waving gently to and fro in a fashion that was somehow sinuously repulsive—a reptilian tendency following closely the sinuous formation of the ghastly plant of which she was now a part.

Nor did the girl appear to be suffering any.

"It's ghastly," Rowland groaned, thinking of the Helen Vane he had known and comparing her to this incredible creature writhing in the soil.

"Horrible, nothing! You're just squeamish," Kaylor growled. "I guess you've seen enough for now. Back to your room!"

Bitter-faced, Rowland obeyed.

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*by John Russell Fearn*

In the room once more the chains and manacles went back on his wrists and ankles.

"I'll be back later," Kaylor said coldly as he went out and locked the door with a bang.

For a time Rowland sat on the dirty floor trying futilely to conceive some method of escape.

Finally he shook his head wearily and stared helplessly toward the bars of the window.

III

*The Woman Grows!*

DURING THE DAY Kaylor came into the room twice to bring food. His final visit was at nine o'clock at night, bringing supper and a camp bed.

"The better you are in health, the better I'll like it," was his cold comment, as he fixed the cot in position. "I'll see you tomorrow morning. Sleep well, and don't try anything funny."

With that the door closed and locked behind him. Rowland ate in silence, surprised to find how hungry he was. Once he had finished he threw himself on the bed, cast the chains as far from him as possible and gave himself up to thought. Finally he slept...

About midnight he awoke abruptly at a sudden peculiar sound. The noise was like soft, panther like footfalls—certainly not the brisk steps of Dr. Kaylor. Rowland heard the sound glide past the door of his prison, soft and indefinable.

"Hey, who's there?" he shouted, sitting up. "Who's there? Let me out of here, whoever you are!"

There was no response to his request. The soft footsteps gradually receded into silence. But only for a while; then minutes later they came again, and again they receded. Quiet returned and saturated the house. Jeff Rowland found himself sweating in sudden fear, fear of the thought that perhaps the plant woman was responsible for the sounds. But that simply could not be! Why, she was rooted breast deep in soil, her entrails joined to the plant itself.

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by John Russell Fearn

He clenched moist palms tightly, then again he sat up with a jerk as the cloying odor of a peculiar perfume began to waft through his nostrils. In some way it was like acacia and hyacinth mixed together, heavy and exotic, almost indecent in its seductive aroma. Could it be possible that *she* was giving off this heavy mesmeric odor?

Four doors away in his library adjoining the surgery, Kaylor too became aware of the perfume and looked up sharply from the botanical treatise he was studying. Like Rowland, his mind went instantly to the woman he had turned into a plant. And with that thought the first naked crawlings of fear became deeply rooted in the depths of his mind.

He knew already that he had outraged all the laws of nature in trying to bridge the gap between human and plant life. Suppose that this new life happened to be charged with immeasurable differences, possessed of inflexible cruelty beyond human understanding? He shuddered. Finally he went to the door and opened it, to find that the corridor reeked with the weirdly seductive odor.

For an instant Kaylor paused; then picking up his revolver he walked swiftly along to the conservatory and entered, switching on the single green-shaded bulb. His heart missed a beat as he saw his strange creation had visibly grown nearly a foot higher out of the soil!

Kaylor stared at her, then suddenly there came from between her greenly lighted teeth a low wailing—the most ghastly blood-freezing wail he had ever heard! It strained his nerves to the breaking point as it sighed and sobbed through

the conservatory like an unearthly moaning from the very depths of hell.

In response to the eerie wail something stirred the tree. Its branches visibly moved with horrible, mysterious life. Again the cry issued from the plant woman's parted lips, and again the tree responded with a life that was terrifyingly all its own.

"What have you done?" Kaylor demanded hoarsely, at last of the living statue. "Speak, if you can! What have you done to my plant? It didn't live and move like this before *you* became a part of it! Oh God, this perfume!" He clenched his fists and tried to choke down the power of that seductive perfume.

The woman's teeth showed again in an unholy smile.

"You made me into a plant and destroyed in me all that was human," she whispered softly. "I am glad now. I know things that are not known to mortals. You have given life to formerly immovable plants, Doctor Kaylor. For that I love you—love you deeply!"

Perspiration dewed the surgeon's brow with the intensity of his self-mastery.

"You—you can't talk of things like love," he muttered hoarsely. "You're just a plant—"

He broke off and stared as her mouth formed again into a round 'O' and emitted once more that horrible wail. With that his nerve deserted him. He hurtled from that dankly perfumed glass house, with the vision of sinuous, coiling tree branches rooted in his aching brain.

Liquid Death And Other Stories  
*by John Russell Fearn*

Kaylor gained his library in double-quick time and slammed the door, stood trying to calm his pounding heart. In his own room Jeff Rowland heard Kaylor's hasty retreat, and fell to wondering, not knowing what had happened.

Then he set to work again on his chains, until fatigue and cramping pain got the better of him. In the chill and heavily odorous early hours he fell asleep, and dreamed of the horror that was slowly biting into his every nerve fiber.

The following day was drear and forlorn. Gray clouds scudded over the heavens; sweeping blankets of misty rain poured across the fields and seemed to gather in solitary menace about the lone house.

Dr. Kaylor was obviously shaken by the events of the night. Rowland could see it in his black eyes. When he brought the food in during the day, his hands were trembling.

"Jitters?" Rowland asked, as he watched them.

"No," came the angry retort. Then the surgeon straightened up and fell to thinking. "Did you smell anything in the night?" he asked finally.

"Only perfume," Jeff Rowland replied, munching steadily. "It seems to have gone now."

Kaylor drew the back of his hand over his brow. "Yes, it's gone now," he agreed tonelessly. "But tonight it may come back—"

He said no more then, but went out with his head bowed in thought. He looked only once into the conservatory from the safety of the door and beheld his plant woman even taller, now nearly five feet high from the ground, sinuous arms still



twining, mouth ready to form into that ghastly moaning wail—Kaylor beat a hasty retreat.

Ever and again throughout that drear day the surgeon heard that ghastly cry from the conservatory. It penetrated the walls and filled the air with its strange meaning. Once Rowland heard its muffled echo, and the sound struck an odd chord in his memory. Weird and ghastly though it was, he was convinced it was not altogether an alien sound to him. But he had no time to dwell on it; his desperate efforts with the manacles seemed to be getting somewhere at last.

By the time five o'clock had arrived he had worked his right hand free; withdrawn it, raw and bleeding, from the steely clutch that had held it.

Nevertheless, he kept the hand out of sight as Kaylor entered with his supper. It was no use starting anything until he had the left one free, too, and that would take some hours yet. After that, he had only to snap back the ankle fetters and go to work on the surgeon when the opportunity offered. He was thankful when Kaylor left him again to his own devices.

As darkness began to fall, Kaylor's courage waned in proportion. The horrible wailing from the greenery was increasing; probably "she" needed food. Then as the twilight gave slow place to black night, the perfume returned to roll in reeking waves from the conservatory itself.

Kaylor spent most of the evening in the security of his study, with all the lights blazing behind drawn curtains. He could feel his courage slipping—so much so that he finally jumped to his feet and grabbed his ever-handy revolver. Either he had to shoot that damned woman and ruin the

experiment, or else lose his very reason! This haunting dread of something ghastly about to happen, 'her' very presence in the conservatory, were things he could no longer bear.

With tight lips he flung open the door and strode into the perfumed corridor, went swiftly along its drafty darkness and entered the hothouse, switching on the green-shaded light. His nerve began to fail him again, his revolver hand drooped.

The woman was still there, of course, relaxed now for a change. Her hypnotic eyes fixed upon the surgeon from the shadows. Her lissome arms hung down at her sides, fingers nearly touching the soil. Then after a while she began that swaying motion once more, sinuous and seductive. The perfume radiated from her once again in sickening, overpowering waves. And presently that low wailing sob rolled from her heavy scarlet lips.

"In heaven's name, stop that screaming!" Kaylor cried, as the twisted green branches of the devil plant writhed in rhythmic response. "Stop it, I tell you!" He stood breathing hard, revolver leveled. "I came here to kill you," he went on thickly. "Yes, destroy you—He broke off as peal after peal of hideous laughter spewed from her sensuous mouth.

"Kill *me!*" she cried at last in derision. "First you destroy all within me that is human—change me into a hybrid, half woman and half plant, then you decide to kill me. You ignorant, stupid fool! Don't you realize that it is too late to do that? Hundreds of seeds of me are now in this plant—will blossom in the future, giving hundreds of reproductions of *me!* If you kill me it will make not the slightest difference—

there will be perpetual reminders of me, haunting you to the end of your days!"

Kaylor's face blanched. "You're lying!" he shouted abruptly, voice harsh with fear. "You've *got* to be lying! What you say is unthinkable! Damn you, for your beauty, your perfume, your unworldly seductiveness! If you don't die I shall lose my reason—"

He stopped suddenly and whirled about at the sound of a thunderous crash in the corridor outside. Even as he stood bewildered, it was followed by another. Quickly he made for the prison door, but at that identical second Rowland catapulted through it, face frozen with fury, bleeding fists clenched for action.

Without a pause his right fist came up and smashed Kaylor under the chin, sent him flying backward. Kaylor's revolver exploded into the air but his grip on it remained unshaken.

"Now you'll get what's coming to you!" Rowland panted, lunging forward. "Get up, damn you! I'm going to beat you to a pulp, you—"

He broke off short as Kaylor suddenly vaulted to his feet, gun ready for action. He fired—and missed, followed it up with a swinging left haymaker. Rowland sidestepped and brought up a terrific uppercut, hurtling forward to follow up his advantage. But Kaylor's bunched knuckles struck him with blinding force between the eyes. He went reeling backward, felt the sharp stab of a bullet as it tore like white-hot wire across his shoulder. Weakly he dropped down near the now relaxed and brooding plant woman.

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He could not be sure, but it seemed to him that she aided him to rise. He felt his injured shoulder and stood swaying, staring groggily at Kaylor's leveled gun. The surgeon was smiling viciously.

"Fine spirit," he said softly. "I don't want to kill you—you will be too useful alive. Come over here—"

## IV

### *Horrible Revenge*

WINCING WITH PAIN, eyes narrowed for the slightest sign of a loophole, Jeff Rowland obeyed the command, and this time Kaylor was relentlessly on his guard. He backed around menacingly as Rowland moved, so intent on his task that he failed to notice how close he was coming to the weirdly waving plant woman. The perfume from her body increased by the moment as he stepped further backward in a half circle.

"Sit down there and don't try any tricks!" Kaylor snapped out at last, pointing the gun toward an upturned flower tub. "I'll deal with you later!"

He paused, half in surprise, as he suddenly became aware of a slim but amazingly firm green hand gripping his revolver wrist.

'*You!*' Kaylor gasped almost foolishly, staring up into the lustrous eyes of his creation and feeling the warmth and perfume that seemed to ooze from her. "I—Let go!" He snapped out the last words savagely, suddenly realizing what was taking place.

Rowland leaped up from the tub, intent on finishing the work he had started, but to his vast surprise—and Kaylor's—the voice of the woman warned him back!

"Stand exactly where you are! Kaylor belongs to me! Obey, or it will be the worse for you!"

Sudden fear wrenched at Kaylor's heart. The plant woman's left hand had come now to join the right. It closed fondly about his throat. The heavy scarlet lips came toward him; fragrant breath blew on his heated face.

Then his horrified gaze became fixed as in response to her suddenly resumed wails the tree became abruptly alive. Some of its sinuous branches began to twirl horribly, writhing and twitching in a revolting fashion like a giant octopus. From the midst of the tangle there presently rose one vicious head, swaying with indescribable menace. Jeff Rowland gulped and stared—why, the thing was a viper! A viper in *this* plant? It moved sinuously downward to coil about the woman's smooth shoulders, rearing its wicked little head in the perfumed air.

Kaylor's agonized eyes stared at it unbelievably, then he renewed his frantic efforts to escape. God—a serpent, spawned of this plant, was not even attempting to hurt the woman! True, Helen Vine had once trained and befriended snakes. Was it possible that she was now actually spawning them as plant branches? Incredible!

Calvin Kaylor, traitor to medicine, felt he was going mad. And as he struggled frantically in the woman's immovable grip, he saw heads of other snakes wriggling and twisting in the green gloom, realized that most of the plant branches *were* snakes of all descriptions—puff-adders, cobras, even the deadly fer-de-lance!

Then indeed his heart went sick with horror as he caught a glimpse of a massive main stem twitching and sliding toward him with an immutable inevitability. He screamed wildly, tore and struggled with insane ferocity, but there was something

about those slender hands on his wrist and neck pulse that held him in a vise of agony. The slightest movement sent sheer torture pounding through him. With bulging eyes, her face staring down into his, he listened to the screaming wail from those lips, and saw reptilian death squirming toward him!

Jeff Rowland jerked his eyes away from the snakes coiling about the woman to the thing Kaylor was staring at—and his heart missed a beat. What had been the trunk of the plant woman was actually a reawakened boa constrictor! Aroused now by the woman's cries, it slid along with easy swiftness, a full eight feet in length, and presently coiled itself gently but irresistibly about Kaylor's threshing feet, binding them immovably together.

Only then did the woman release the surgeon and stand there, watching implacably. Kaylor screamed in mad pain and horror as that slimy length slid in cold filthy tautness about him. Tighter drew the coils, and far tighter, encircling his waist, his chest, his neck. Breath ceased to enter his lungs. His face turned purple with the constriction.

"Remember Helen Vane," muttered the plant woman, implacable in her hatred.

Rowland turned away, sickened, and listened in silent horror to the cracking rend of bones under the snake's frightful power. Kaylor died horribly, mangled by a pitiless foe.

Only when he was a crushed, dying pulp on the floor did the plant woman wail again, this time with a different note. In response the constrictor slid reluctantly from its victim and

crawled back to its former position One by one the remaining serpents uncoiled and slid back to the branches.

Rowland twisted around and watched blankly, unbelievably, as he saw the woman make a sudden effort and rise from the pit! She stood revealed for a moment as a perfect figure in an amazingly tight but elastic substance that covered her to the ankles. Beneath them were incongruous rubber shoes!

With a faint but bitter smile she hobbled from the plant bed and reached up to the electric light bulb, sliding off the green shade. In the return of white light Rowland stared at her incredulously. She was smothered in green grease paint; her black hair was drawn over her breast in sudden modesty. Her eyes were mascaraed into big circles, her lips were laden with lipstick—even perfume still radiated from her. But of one fact there was no possible shadow of doubt—*she was Helen Vane!*

She smiled at him rather wearily as he stood gaping, unable to credit his senses.

"I don't know your name, but your face is familiar," she said quietly. "You are the one who watched my act at the circus every night from the front row, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, but—I'm Jeff Rowland," he stammered. "But look here! I saw you cut in half by this butcher here—"

"Not me—my sister Marjorie," she interrupted in a low voice. "She was my twin, and resembled me. But there were certain differences at close range. That was why I pretended I didn't like white light and had this place made subdued. White light would have given things away."



She broke off and turned aside, calling loudly. In response the main skylight of the roof rose up and a group of men's faces appeared.

"All over," she said curtly. "Take him away. I'm through with this fiend. He's dead."

The men nodded, and Rowland wonderingly watched as they tossed down a rope ladder and entered the conservatory, bringing with them various boxes and commencing to coax the snakes into them.

"My snakes, of course," the girl murmured, turning back again. "You know that I train them because of my circus act. The fangs are drawn on all of them. You see, in my display of magic, which comes before my snake act, my sister helps me—or rather she did. She resembled me closely, especially with make-up, so of course it made many disappearing acts very baffling. This devil here captured her in the circus grounds from outside our caravan. Why, I don't know."

"He mistook her for you," Rowland answered grimly. "Kaylor was a biological and botanical fiend with a mad obsession—maybe brought on by the constant derision of his contemporaries."

The girl's eyes were thoughtful. "Evidently he mistook Marjorie for me because he'd only seen me from the distance of the circus ring," she said. "Anyhow, some of the boys saw him carrying her off in his car. They called me right away and we followed the tracks to this place. That wasn't very difficult, with the cross-diamond tire tread he used. For some reason the conservatory roof was open—"

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"For me," Rowland nodded, and briefly explained. "He must have forgotten to close it again in his excitement."

"Well, anyhow, I climbed up on the roof and was just in time to see this fiend planting my poor sister in the soil, I heard his words to her, of course—all that he expected she was going to do. When things finally calmed down—after you'd been in to see her, too—I climbed inside and found she was stone dead, horribly, brutally murdered."

The girl paused and shuddered at the recollection. Then she went on again slowly.

'The very fiendishness of her death did something to me. I went outside again and told the boys; they were all for rushing this place and tearing Kaylor limb from limb, but I wanted to make him suffer as my poor sister had done. I would give up everything to do that. So I developed my idea.

"We returned to the circus and collected my snakes, together with other odds and ends—a rope ladder, make-up box, and so forth. In the night all was quiet. We got into this conservatory again and removed poor Marjorie's remains for decent burial. The snakes we fixed up in this plant. Then I stripped myself to the waist and put on this elastic sheathing, used in my professional work. Green grease paint did the rest. My own make-up was easy, especially with this black wig. The boys took the tackle outside and one or other of them was always around on guard, in case things got too hot."

Helen Vane smiled bitterly. "Since Kaylor wanted a plant woman, he should have one. I stood in this pit with galoshes on my feet and mackintosh wrapped around my legs—

standing a little higher every time, to convey the idea of growth. In the intervening times I simply sat down and waited for my chance to come. I nearly managed it the first time. You see, I wanted him to come close enough to enable me to get a ju-jitsu grip on him. But at first he was too wary. Once I had him in my grip, the boa would finish the job; I knew that. When he threatened to shoot me tonight, I was in a tight corner, but fortunately you blundered in and saved everything."

"But the perfume? The wailings by day? The corridor noises?" Rowland asked, puzzled.

"The perfume was nothing much—only a gag to heighten the illusion. I had two full bottles of cheap essence of acacia in my make-up box. A little goes a long way. Last night I emptied a whole bottleful in the corridor. I heard you call, but I did not release you because my vengeance had still to be gained. Of course, I soaked myself in perfume as well. A sweetish odor of that sort can be very suggestive to a man in Kaylor's state of mind—especially if it comes from a supposed plant woman. As to the wailings, they were merely to keep the snakes awake. They know my particular call, of course."

Jeff Rowland looked at her thoughtfully. "Now I know where I heard those sounds—at the circus," he muttered. "But they were less horrible there, perhaps because the area was bigger. You took a long chance."

Her shoulders shrugged. "I was prepared to risk anything, even my life, to avenge Marjorie. The law could only give that fiend the chair—I wanted something more potent. Nobody will

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ever know what killed him ... As to my professional act, it's ruined."

Rowland remained silent for a moment. Then he patted her arm.

"Maybe it'll work out all right," he said gently. "I wanted to meet you, you know—but not like this. Let's get out of this damned place. My car's somewhere around outside. Maybe we'll think up something together."

They did think up something. Bereft of her sister and finding her snakes always gave her poignant memories of that hideous night in the conservatory, Helen Vane became Mrs. Jeff Rowland in the course of healing time.

## BOOMERANG

IF THIS CONFESSION should ever get out of my prison cell I hope it may serve as a warning to those who think they can cheat Fate. It just cannot be done—and I am the proof of it.

The trouble started when I boarded the train at Edinburgh one icy January evening. I was feeling bitter, depressed, and generally sick of everything. My husband had deserted me when we had seemed to be so happy together; money had almost come to an end—so there was apparently nothing else for it but for me to return to my native heath of London and try to find employment. Anything for a fresh start.

I had been seated in a corner of the compartment for about ten minutes, drowsy after the walk through the cutting Scottish air, when my rather vain hope of a corner to myself was shattered by the arrival of a young woman of about my own age from the corridor outside. Noisily she flung her traveling case up beside mine on the rack, then she settled down in the opposite corner.

I watched her lazily through my eyelashes, too comfortable to essay much movement. She was dark, like myself—and, unlike myself, very well dressed. Of similar build, too; I daresay we would have passed as sisters anywhere.

Presently the train got on the move and the gradual crescendo of clicking joints in the rails, the gentle swaying of the carriage, and the night outside the windows opposite the

corridor lulled me completely. I would have dropped asleep had not a sudden thud awakened me.

My half opened eyes settled on my traveling companion's handbag. It had slipped to the floor with the movement of the train, spewing forth all its contents. Before the girl's hands could retrieve it I noticed a wad of five and ten pound notes—there must have been several hundred pounds worth—a small automatic, a powder compact, a bunch of keys, and a scattering of about half a dozen visiting cards upon which was the name of Dorothy Eaton. The address I could not quite make out...

But there was something else—the most amazing thing. A snapshot of my husband, David! David, who had deserted me for no apparent reason!

No apparent reason indeed! Now it was clear. He had deserted me for this overpainted, overdressed female by the name of Dorothy Eaton! For *this* I had been flung to the wall!

The clicking of the wheels drummed in my brain. My eyes jerked from the snapshot to an automatic lying amidst the fallen conglomeration ... an automatic?

Faster clicked the wheels, with ever increasing rhythm. Two bridges sighed past and were gone. We two women were in a world of our own.

Then, much to Dorothy Eaton's surprise—and to a certain extent my own—I was helping her to pick the articles up. I helped her scoop back everything into the handbag—except the automatic. This I retained in my hand. Slowly she put the handbag on the seat beside her and gazed at me fixedly.

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The wheels blurred into a crescendo of rattle as we swung over points. Lurching from side to side, we two women gazed at each other. The roof light glinted on the gun.

"I'd like my automatic, please." Dorothy Eaton's voice was just a little nervous.

For answer I pulled the blinds down against the corridor side. A plan had formed in my brain in those few seconds of appraisal—a cold, ruthless plan.

"This is your gun?" I asked in a low voice, and my heart was thudding along with the wheels.

"Yes, of course. I have a license for it. I'm alone a good deal, and—"

"Except when you're with my husband!" I interrupted, and it was a sheer joy to see the color fade and betray the rouge on her cheeks.

"You're Sheila Lacy!" she said hoarsely, staring at me "*Sheila Lacy!* How did you get in here with me?"

"Pure chance—Heaven sent! So, *you* are the one who got me into this mess! You sit there in your fancy clothes and with a roll of notes, while I don't know which way to turn! But *I've* got the gun ... See! Here! In my hand!"

"Don't be a fool," she whispered, her breast heaving up and down as her heart obviously raced. "I couldn't help Dave liking me, could I? Besides, I've left him now! That's why I am on this train. I'm returning to London. We had an awful row, and—" Her voice was drowned out for a while as the train rushed onwards over a water-trough.

"I'm not interested in you, or Dave!" I snapped. "All I *am* interested in is in paying you back—with interest! Like this!"

And before I realized it I had pulled the trigger of the automatic. Above the roar of the train as she took up water, the report was muffled somewhat. I saw a red patch defile the white of Dorothy Eaton's blouse just above the heart—and it began to spread. She just sat, staring at me unblinkingly.

My pulses were going like trip hammers now in sympathy with the wheels on the rails. Gradually I began to realize what I had done. Leaning across, I gripped her wrist and felt for a pulse. She was dead. My one shot must have gone right through her heart.

'Tickets! Tickets please!'

Great God, now what? The inspector was only two compartments away. Somehow I kept myself calm, for I had a plan—but it would demand plenty of nerve...

At top speed I searched the dead girl's handbag and found her ticket. Then, heaving her into her corner seat, I pulled her costume coat well over her bloodstained blouse and left her in a sleeping position with her head drooping forward. When the inspector locked inside in the dim light I sat on the automatic and handed him two tickets.

As he handed the tickets back he looked at me keenly.

"Everything all right in here, miss?"

I felt myself becoming suddenly hot. "All—all right?" I repeated, trying to sound casual. "Why surely. Why not?"

"Oh, nothing; I'm asking them all the same thing in this part of the train. I thought I heard a sort of crack from somewhere about here. Maybe a stone against one of the windows as we took up water."



"I expect that would be it," I agreed, and with that he went out and slammed the door on me.

Now for my plan! I picked up Dorothy Eaton's handbag from the seat opposite and searched through it, pulled out one of the visiting cards and studied it. Dorothy Eaton. So far so good. My next move was simple. I exchanged her bag for my own, except that I retained the money. In my old bag were two visiting cards with my own name on them. To them I added a brief suicide note and signed it with my own name—Sheila Lacy. Then, into Dorothy Eaton's stiffening fingers I fitted the automatic, concealing it by drawing her arm up a little inside her coat. To the casual observer she would seem to be asleep. By the time the truth was found out I would be far away.

The police, I reasoned, would assume it to be real suicide, and since I had been—and still was—wearing gloves only Dorothy's fingerprints would be on the gun. So few people had known me in Edinburgh that they would probably swear Dorothy *was* me if it came to it. Dave himself would know different, of course, but since enquiry would involve him, I reasoned he would be careful how much he said.

I was still vaguely uneasy, though. Finally I dislodged the automatic again from Dorothy's tight hold and examined it—broke it open. Surprisingly, two bullets had been fired. Either I had fired two in my excitement, or else—Well, it didn't signify, anyway. Everything was perfect. So I put the gun back again in that tightening clutch.

And the inspector who thought that he had heard a shot? Well, if anything, that would verify the suicide. The police

would be told that I had handed up her ticket as though I were a friend of hers. Quite right—but they would have to find me first to make me a witness. Besides, I would say then that she must have shot herself while I had left the compartment to get some air.

I was Dorothy Eaton now. I possessed nearly five hundred pounds as a basis on which to start anew. I had justifiably killed the woman who had started my troubles—killed her in absolute safety. My scheme was foolproof.

When we got to Euston Station I took down her traveling case and escaped on to the busy platform. I had no trouble at the barrier—but I ran into trouble just beyond it. Two men suddenly came out of nowhere and blocked my path!

“Your name, madam?” the taller one enquired respectfully, and showed me his official card.

Scotland Yard! So they had found out already! Well, I was safe enough.

“Dorothy Eaton,” I answered calmly.

“You are sure of that?”

“Why, certainly. I have one of my cards here—”

I rummaged in Dorothy's bag and handed out one of her visiting cards. The Yard man studied it and then nodded.

“Very good ... Did you ever know a man by the name of David Lacy?”

For the first time I felt a horrible qualm. What on Earth had Dave got to do with things?

“Why—yes,” I assented slowly. “I know him...”

“You are under arrest, Miss Eaton, for his murder! He was shot and killed by you in a violent quarrel before you left to

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catch the London train this evening. Three witnesses can prove it. If you will come this way, please..."

I could not speak, or even think. Now I knew where the second bullet had gone! If I denied my identity I would be accused of the murder of Dorothy Eaton—and rightly. Yet if I didn't—?

Boomerang!

## LAST EXTRA

*by John Russell Fearn and Sydney J. Bounds*

AT FIVE THIRTY on a drizzling November Saturday afternoon, a police car sped out of Scotland Yard. At the wheel, skimming through the traffic with his usual nonchalance, sat Sergeant Jim Brown.

Beside him, hat tilted forward over pale blue eyes, Chief Inspector Duxbury chewed on a dead match. Known as 'Old Ironsides' to his intimates because he pursued criminals with iron resolution, he picked up used matches and kept them in an empty box.

"Whoever dialed nine-nine-nine will have vanished into the woodwork," Duxbury said: "You can bet on it."

"We'll find him if we have to, sir."

"Some hope! Tracing a call from a public box is damned near impossible."

He became silent, watching the traffic and the wet roads as the car hurtled forward. Brown turned into a narrow back street named Garden Terrace. In the light from street lamps and shop windows, the curious had gathered around the doorway of a pawnshop. The blinds were drawn and a constable stood on duty.

As Duxbury and the sergeant arrived, the constable saluted.

"Get these people moving on," the Chief Inspector said curtly. "This isn't an exhibition. And show in the doctor and the crime squad when they get here."

"Right, sir."

Duxbury walked into the shop and Brown closed the door.

Silent, peering from under the brim of his hat, Old Ironsides summed up the shop. It was identical to any other pawnbroker's in London—a sales counter, a pledge counter with a steel grille, glass cases filled with watches and jewelry. There were shelves of clothing and blankets—and on the counter, a solitary ox-hide suitcase.

"Ten to one that suitcase isn't part of the stock," Duxbury said.

Still nibbling on a dead match, he moved behind the counter and looked down at the sprawled body of a middle-aged man. Blood seeped from a crushing blow at the back of the head. Beside him lay a heavy copper candlestick with a blood-spattered newspaper wrapped around the top.

"The body our unknown telephone informant saw," Duxbury said. "But he used a public call box."

"Looks like robbery with violence, sir."

The Chief Inspector looked at the till. The drawer had been opened and only the coins left. On a shelf below, a metal cash-box had been forced. That was empty, and a heavy poker lay beside it

"Take a look around," Duxbury instructed Brown. "Keep your fingers off everything until the experts have finished. We might say the chap who telephoned did this—but I don't go for the idea that a murderer rings up the Yard. He gets out quickly, and silently."

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He began a careful examination of the shop and had got half way through when the doorbell rang and the Divisional surgeon and the crime squad came in.

Old Ironsides nodded to them and continued his search. Photographers' flash-bulbs blazed; fingerprint men dusted. Duxbury contemplated the oxbide suitcase on the counter, chewing on a match.

He motioned to one of the experts. "Give this a dusting. I want to take a look at it, and I don't want my dabs on it. While you're going over it, I'll be outside."

He strolled out into the drizzle, hands in the pockets of his raincoat, and stood beside the caped policeman. Men and women passed, glancing curiously at the shop. A car drove past with a swish of tires on wet tarmac. At the end of the street, beneath a lamp post, a newspaper seller shouted:

"Extra, extra! All the football results. Extra!"

Old Ironsides threw away his chewed match and stepped out to look at the pawnbroker's window. In gilt letters under three brass balls, a sign read:

DAVID RUBENSTONE

JEWELERS AND LICENSED PAWNBROKER

Duxbury gestured at the constable.

"Find out Rubenstone's address. If he has relatives, tell them to go to the East Aldgate mortuary. By that time the body will be there."

He turned away and strolled down the street to where the newspaperman was still shouting.

"Paper, sir?"

"No, thanks. Just a few words..."

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Duxbury showed his warrant card in the light of the gas lamp, and the newspaper seller shrugged.

"Ain't much of a surprise, Inspector. I saw the police car come—some bloke do for Ruby?"

Old Ironsides put his card back in his wallet and sized up the newspaperman. He was tall and wiry, with a cap pulled low over a thin face; he wore a sodden overcoat with baggy flannel trousers.

"By Ruby I suppose you mean Rubenstone. So you knew him?"

"'Course I knew 'im. I know everybody in this street. 'Ad many a yarn with the old twister. Why?"

Pale unblinking eyes gave nothing away. "I'll ask the questions. What's your name?"

"Billy. Billy Horsfall."

Old Ironsides looked thoughtfully along the street. The door of the pawnbroker's shop was plainly visible.

"Where's the nearest public telephone box?"

"Other end of the street. Someone tipped you off, did they?"

"I'm interested in a suitcase. A man taking a suitcase into Rubenstone's. Did you see anyone like that?"

"'Course I did. I ain't blind, you know."

"Describe him."

"A little man in a threadbare overcoat and greasy bowler 'at. I noticed him particular like 'cause he had this expensive-looking suitcase."

"Interesting. Now I want you to come back to the shop and look at something."

"What, now? I've got me job to do."

"Now," Duxbury said flatly. "This is a murder case."

Grumbling, Horsfall collected his unsold newspapers from under a tarpaulin and tucked them under his arm.

"Can't trust nobody these days. Won't take long, will it?"

"No time at all."

Back at the shop, Duxbury nodded towards the suitcase on the counter. "Is this the case you saw?"

"That's it, Inspector. No mistake about it."

Duxbury opened it and studied the inside. It was empty and obviously brand new. He called the constable.

"From the description, and this suitcase, it sounds like the Ferret. Check with C.R.O at the Yard and get his address. Then bring him here."

The constable saluted and went out in a flurry of raindrops.

"All right, you can go, Horsfall—after you've given the sergeant your address."

When the newspaperman had left, Old Ironsides went behind the counter and looked down at the body. He stooped and slowly unwrapped the blood-speckled paper from around the top of the candlestick. Putting the newspaper on the counter, he flattened it out.

"Last extra edition of the *Evening News*, sir," Sergeant Brown commented. "Today's date, too."

"The idea being, of course, to prevent fingerprints getting on the weapon."

"And this poor devil's been dead for an hour—"

"About an hour," Duxbury corrected. "You can't tell to a minute."



"Anyway, sir, it's not unlikely that the bloke who phoned us did the murder."

Duxbury raised an eyebrow. "Go on. Let's have your theory."

"Take this suitcase," Brown said. "I suggest he came to steal stuff and put it in the case. He probably intended to pinch jewelry—then changed his mind and took money instead. So he didn't need the case. Maybe he got scared after killing the old man and didn't want to hang around. So he grabbed the cash and ran."

"Stopping to ring the Yard and say there was a dead body here?" Duxbury asked dryly. "Well, it has possibilities, but if the man we want is the Ferret, it doesn't fit. He never murdered anybody in his life—he isn't the type."

He turned to consider the newspaper again, then folded it carefully in a cellophane bag. He indicated the poker and the candlestick.

"Wrap those up, Jim. We'll need them as evidence after the lab's had them."

Old Ironsides went back to studying the cash register and the tin box.

"Only money taken apparently," he murmured. "That suggests there was enough money to make it worth while. Easier to carry than jewelry, too..."

He watched two ambulance men carry the body out on a stretcher.

To Brown, he said: "Be with you in a moment."

He went outside and strolled down the street towards the newspaper stand. There were more people about now—some of them taking a short cut to the cinema in the High Street.

"Something happened?" Billy Horsfall asked.

"I've been thinking," Duxbury said. "You saw the man with the suitcase—did you see anyone else?"

"Depends about what time?"

"Say four-thirty to five."

"Four thirty to five? That's about the time the van left my last extras. Yeah, I remember now. Course, quite a few people been in and out of Ruby's today—but this one bloke. He bought an *Evening News* about four o'clock—said he wanted the half-time football results. About an hour later he came back and went into Ruby's."

"What did he look like?"

"Bit of a toff for this part of town. Tall, well dressed, with fair hair. About thirty-five, I'd say."

"And you didn't see anyone else go in?"

"Not between him and the bloke with the suitcase."

Duxbury considered the pile of newspapers under the tarpaulin. "Okay—thanks."

He returned to the pawnbroker's and went to the counter to examine the records. He ran a finger along the last entry in the ledger. It read:

*November 2.*

Kenneth Clive, 27 Hilton Street, W.C.7

*Cigarette case. Price paid: 20 pounds sterling. Time: 4.58 p.m.*

"Today's date," Brown observed. "He could be the Johnny we want."

Duxbury made a note of the address.

"Except that I wonder why he permitted his name to be recorded before he committed murder. You'd think he'd have killed Rubenstone first. Anyway, we'd better see what he has to say ... you got the address of Horsfall?"

"Yes sir."

"We'll have someone keep an eye on him. He's proving useful in this business—and we can't afford to lose a witness. Let's get along and hear what Mr.Clive can tell us."

As they moved towards the door, it opened and a constable pushed a small man inside. He wore a threadbare overcoat and a greasy bowler hat; he had a fox-like face and blue eyes.

Duxbury gave a slow, cold smile. "Well, here's the Ferret!"

"He's admitted it, sir," the constable said. "That he telephoned the Yard, I mean. C.R.O. had his address and I picked him up."

"Which I greatly resent," the little man objected, his face taking on an expression of superiority. "I helped you, didn't I, by tipping you off to this murder?"

"Where did the suitcase come from?" Duxbury demanded.

The Ferret shrugged. "If I thought you were going to pick me up, I'd never have tipped you off. Only I can't stand murder—that's why I did it. And what do you do? Insult me by asking about a suitcase..."

He drew himself erect. "I stole it, of course. Nothing easier. It was on show downtown—you know I can't keep my

fingers off the leather stuff. So when the bloke's back was turned, I walked off with it. You know my technique."

"After twenty-seven convictions, I ought to," Old Ironsides answered. "And you came here to sell it; I suppose?"

"Naturally. "When I couldn't get service, I looked behind the counter, saw the body, and panicked. Murder upsets me. Besides, I thought I might get the blame. So I got out fast—forgetting the case—and got to thinking. Was he dead? I'd only seen him lying there with his head battered. Help might save his life, that's why I rang up the Yard. And this is what I get!"

"Did you see anything? Hear anyone?" Duxbury asked.

"No, and that's the truth, Inspector.

Old Ironsides gave a slow nod. "Yes, Ferret, I'm inclined to believe you. What can you tell me about Rubenstone? Was he a fence?"

"Er—yes," the Ferret admitted.

"I guessed as much, or else you wouldn't have risked dealing with him. Been dealing with him long?"

"For years—on and off. He was a good man." The Ferret looked mournful. "Pity someone wiped him out. Always cash on the nail. Did you know he carried a float of two thousand pounds for hot stuff? He told me about it once. Course, he knew he was safe telling me—I only take leather. Leather! That's what I can't resist. Just can't help it."

"A two thousand cash float for hot stuff," Duxbury murmured. "Jewels, I suppose ... that's interesting. Looks like he told a wrong 'un."

The Chief Inspector reflected for a moment, then turned to the constable.

"All right, lock him up. That'll make the twenty-eighth conviction for leather theft."

He watched as, with serio-comic dignity, the little man was ushered out. The door closed behind the constable's swishing cape.

"You believe him?" Sergeant Brown asked doubtfully.

"I do, Jim. I'd trust the Ferret with my life. He doesn't lie or kill or touch drugs—doesn't even steal jewels. He has this strange urge to steal leather. The psychiatrists get gray hairs trying to figure him out. Yes, I think he told the truth—and if he didn't, he'll be in custody if we want him."

"You're convinced he didn't kill Rubenstone?"

"Use your head, man. Why should he? The fence was the goose that lays the golden eggs as far as the Ferret's concerned. Why should he want to cut off his source of income? What interests me is that Rubenstone kept a two thousand pound float, almost certainly in notes—fives, tens and twenties perhaps. Wouldn't be difficult to hide that. And someone knew he had that float..."

There was silence for a moment, then Sergeant Brown cleared his throat.

"We might find out how much this Kenneth Clive knows about it, sir."

Old Ironsides nodded and looked at the clock on the wall above the door. He checked it against his watch.

"Only a minute or two out," he murmured, as they left the pawnbroker's shop.

It was nearly seven o'clock when they reached Kenneth Clive's address. It was a classy street—a bit too classy for a man who had sold a cigarette case for twenty pounds. The mystery was partly explained when they learnt that Clive had only one room in the house.

He ushered the Chief Inspector and Sergeant into his bed-sitter with a troubled solemnity. As the newspaper seller had said, Clive was tall with fair hair, and good-looking with a nervous manner.

"I don't know what this is about, gentlemen," he said, motioning them to chairs, "and I'm not sure that I like it either."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Clive, the law is not concerned whether you like it or not," Duxbury said dryly. "I want to know if you visited Rubenstone's, a pawnbroker in Garden Terrace, this evening around five o'clock."

Surprise showed in Clive's face. "Why ... yes, I did as a matter of fact. But what on earth has that to do with you?"

"And you sold a silver cigarette case for twenty pounds?"

The young man colored slightly. "Suppose I did? It was my own property. Are you suggesting it was stolen?"

"I'm suggesting, Mr. Clive, that you be careful how you answer my questions," Duxbury said, pale eyes unblinking. "For your information, Rubenstone was murdered tonight at approximately five o'clock and, naturally, we're checking up. We got your name from the ledger—you were his last customer."

"Murdered!" Kenneth Clive gave a little gasp and sat down heavily. He stared blankly at the detectives. "But—but surely you don't think that I—"

"Why did you choose a pawnbroker so far from your room?"

"So I wouldn't be recognized, of course." From looking angry, Clive had become uncomfortable. He gestured at the barely furnished room. "As you can see, I'm down on my luck. I lost my job, and I'm in debt. I need that twenty pounds to help buy necessities."

"Before you entered Rubenstone's, you bought a newspaper."

"That's not a crime, is it?"

"What did you do with it?"

"I gave it away."

"Really?"

"Do you doubt my word?" Clive snapped.

"I didn't say that. Bit generous of you, in the circumstances."

"I suppose it's your job which makes you suspicious of the simplest action," Clive said bitterly. "I knew when I saw the half-time scores that the teams I'd bet on couldn't possibly win. The paper was no use to me after that. I gave it to a chap at the end of the street who asked me what had won the two-thirty race."

"What sort of chap? Did he wear a bowler hat?"

"I don't think so. Some sort of flat cap. He looked down and out."

"I see. You gave the paper away at the end of the street. Which end? Where the newspaper man has his stand?"

"No. The other end."

"And you're certain," Duxbury asked, "that you hadn't turned the corner into the main road?"

"Quite sure—if it matters."

"Did you notice anyone else about? Hear anything suspicious?"

"No."

"When Rubenstone filled in the ledger, did he refer to a watch for the time?"

"No, he looked at the clock on the wall. It was two minutes fast by my watch."

"All right Mr. Clive, that'll be all for now. I may want to see you again."

Old Ironsides and Sergeant Brown left the house and sat in the car.

"So what's your theory, sergeant?"

"He looks good to me. He admits he's broke and needs money. He had a newspaper—that story about him giving it away to a down and out wouldn't deceive a two year old. And he must have been in the shop, otherwise he wouldn't know about the clock on the wall. You can't see that from the doorway, or outside."

"But he left his name and address when he could easily have torn that page out of the ledger. Drive back to Garden Terrace—I've one or two things to check."

Brown only nodded, disgruntled by his superior's lack of enthusiasm for his theory.



The return journey took only fifteen minutes. The narrow back street seemed unchanged, if a little more populated. The lights on the shops opposite had gone out. At the end of the street, Billy Horsfall still shouted, "Last Extra!"

Duxbury climbed stiffly out of the car and said, "Fetch Horsfall here."

As Brown went off, Duxbury entered the pawnbroker's shop and looked around. He waited till Brown returned with the newspaper seller.

Duxbury took a dead match from the box in his pocket and began to chew on it. His pale eyes fixed their gaze on the bundle of newspapers tucked under Horsfall's arm.

"Still afraid of someone pinching your papers?"

"I've a right to be afraid, ain't I? It's my living, remember."

Duxbury reversed a chair and sat with his arms folded on the back rest. He considered the newspaperman with brooding intensity.

"Ever hear of a generous policeman, Horsfall?" he asked.

"Generous? Don't make me laugh! I never heard of a generous copper in me life."

"Clive was feeling generous when he gave his paper to a down and out. Maybe it's catching. I'm feeling generous," Duxbury said calmly. "How many papers have you got left?"

Horsfall glanced at the bundle under his arm. "About twenty."

"Twenty at thirty pence each." Duxbury took a five-pound note from his wallet, and placed it carefully on the wooden counter. Then he took a pound coin from a pocket and spun it

in the air. It landed with a sharp sound on the counter. There was silence for a moment

"Sold to the gentleman with the matchstick," Duxbury said, and threw away the chewed match.

"I don't do business that way," Horsfall protested.

"It's a cold wet night. I'm buying the rest of your papers. Now get off home."

Horsfall looked about him, his expression desperate. Duxbury nodded. Sergeant Brown grabbed the bundle of newspapers and placed them on the counter.

"Clive was in this shop a few minutes before five, and Rubenstone was alive then. He left his name and address. The Ferret was here about fifteen minutes after five, and found a dead body. Not much time for a murderer to slip in and out. It had to be someone who knew the street well. Someone on the spot with his eyes open. I fancy you for the job, Horsfall."

"It's a dirty lie!" Billy Horsfall shouted.

"When you brought Clive into it, you slipped up. He bought a paper with the halftime scores. Another edition arrived after that—the Last Extra. You told me that yourself—and the paper wrapped around the candlestick was the last edition."

"That doesn't prove anything," Horsfall said sullenly.

"But this does."

Chief Inspector Duxbury picked up the bundle of newspapers from the counter and shook them vigorously. Five, ten and twenty pound notes cascaded to the floor.

As Brown snapped the handcuffs on, Old Ironsides selected a dead matchstick and chewed contentedly.

## THE STAIN THAT GREW

IT WAS NEARING twilight when Calver Mason reached the outskirts of the little Middle West village of Craven Town. In ten minutes he was through the village—a gaunt, somber figure of a man, cadaverous face set into harshly cut lines, cheeks coated with a three days' stubble. Dust stirred round boots that were deeply down at heel.

Three days and nights he had been walking, motivated by only one desire—vengeance. All sparks of sentiment and manliness had been purged from him when he had at last known the terrible truth. His daughter had been murdered by a fiend. There could no longer be any doubt about it. Viciously, cleverly murdered, so that the police could do little about it. But Calver Mason could—and meant to!

At last he beheld that which he sought. Before him stretched a rugged expanse of mountainous terrain; behind it all lay the blood-red gash of the dying sunset. Silhouetted against this reposed the only two habitations for miles—the one, a tiny cliff-edge shack, and the other an isolated factory closed for the night. Only for an instant did Mason take in the lofty chimney of the factory, survey its silent, darkened windows, then his lips shut as his gaze fell to the solitary shack. So he had tracked Melvin Gorne down at last.

Tireless, waxen of face, he strode up to the place and hammered grimly on the door. For a long time there was no response, then there came a shuffling and the door opened. A bleak, cruel face looked out upon him.

"Mason!" Gorne gasped hoarsely, and made to shut the door. But with one shove of a massive shoulder Mason flung it back on its hinges and strode into the dingy interior.

A small oil lamp was burning, casting a fitful yellow glow upon a scene of chaos. Dirt was in every corner; the floor itself was filthy. A tablecloth, fallen into holes, adorned the battered table. And in the midst of it all Gorne crouched now like a frightened beast, deep-set eyes glowing with the light of madness.

Then, little by little, he seemed to recover himself.

"So this is where you got to, Gorne!" Mason breathed, fixing him with a deadly stare. "This is the hell-hole to which you dragged my daughter! Through weeks and months I've searched for you—then, a chance clue in New Orleans, an interview with the police—and now I've tracked you down. You murdered my daughter—slew her. And as sure as there is a God you're going to go the same way!"

"Think so?" Gorne sneered, and chuckled harshly. "I killed your daughter, yes—because she tried to kill me. She hated me, poor dear—didn't like my methods. So I brought her here. She died horribly, Mason—horribly. Slowly strangled to death ... I buried her corpse just at the cliff edge there. I knew the police would never get me here, even though they had their suspicions. As for you, you can't come here and get away again, Mason!"

"I came to kill you, Gorne, and I mean to do it," Mason answered tonelessly, and with that drew out a revolver from his pocket.

But he was not quite quick enough. Days and nights of tramping, of consuming hatred, had drained upon his alertness. He was unprepared for Gorne's sudden tremendous forward leap. It was the leap of a madman. In one sweep he had knocked the revolver from Mason's hand, brought up a skinny fist and planted it straight in his enemy's face. Gasping with the suddenness and pain Mason went flying over backwards.

Gorne laughed shortly, whirled round, and snatched up the heavy iron poker from the ancient log fireplace. Savagely, fiendishly, he whirled it through the air and brought it down with smashing force on Mason's head.

Mason groaned, but for a moment consciousness clung to him.

"May hell curse you, Gorne!" he panted thickly. "One murder—now another! But I'll return! My blood and soul will return to crush you to perdition!"

Gorne did not wait to hear more. Again and again he smashed the poker down with maniacal power, did not cease until the body of Mason lay limp and inert on the floor, blood flowing steadily from his crushed head. The poker dropped from Gorne's hand with a clatter. For a space he stared wide-eyed at the corpse, stricken for an instant with momentary sanity.

Then again the madness that was within him returned. He laughed raucously, cast a look round the dingy filthiness of the hovel in which he existed, had existed ever since he had brought his young wife here and murdered her in a fit of insane passion.

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For a space he considered, then looked through the open door toward the deserted expanse outside, reaching right to the cliff edge. There in the murky silence of the approaching night lay the crude grave of Mason's daughter. Here was another body to be disposed of. He turned swiftly, picked up a heavy shovel from by the wall, and strode out into the darkness.

Throughout the night, in the complete darkness, whilst the mountain winds wailed about his skinny form, until his back was cracking with the effort, he dug a second grave not twenty feet from the first one. Before the dawn came he seized Mason's stiffened corpse, dragged it along the ground, and dropped it into the cavity he had made. He chuckled to himself at each hollow reverberation of falling earth.

Then at last the hole was refilled and he returned to the shack, slammed the door, bolted it, and from sheer exhaustion fell asleep.

Toward the following evening Melvin Gorne awoke again, ate ravenously from his sparse supplies, and listened as he munched to the sound of the rising gale as it boomed round the old shack. A sense of intense uneasiness, for which he could not account, was upon him. It was the first time he had experienced a gale in these quarters. Usually the climate was fairly quiet and reliable.

Memories of the night before, of the brutal killing of Mason floated into his warped mind. He laughed again, hollowly, and the wind muttered in the rotting gables of the old place.

"My blood and soul will return to crush you into perdition!" That was what it seemed to say, reiterated endlessly,

monotonously, like the joints in a railway line. Gorne crushed the liquor glass in his fingers until it collapsed into splinters and he sat like a wounded animal staring at the blood streaming from minor glass cuts.

"No!" he shouted suddenly. "No! You can't return, Mason! Any more than your daughter can! The dead are forever dead!"

He ceased speaking suddenly, wrenched open the door, and strode out into the night. The wind smote him like something solid, hurtling up the gorge with the roar of a thousand demons. At the same time he was aware of something else—a foul and overpowering stench that had within it all the vileness, the filthy moldering odor of the grave. It was the first time he had ever noticed it, but there was no denying the dankness of the atmosphere. The gale crept with the portent of funereal disaster.

Trembling he gained the recently made grave and looked at it in the dim light. He tried to strike a match but the wind whipped the flame into extinguishment. Then suddenly the moon shot into view from behind the scurrying clouds and flooded the scene with ghastly, pallid radiance.

Gorne stiffened. Now he could distinctly see a round carmine patch on the yellow soil atop the grave. Blood-red; the size of a melon, perhaps. He bent down to touch it, then something held him back.

"Blood!" he muttered. "Blood! He said his blood and soul would return—No! Not that! Melvin Gorne, you are a fool! There's nothing at all. And yet—"

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His breath caught and he stared again. Behind him in the distance the yellow lights of the isolated factory were dancing through the approaching storm. Tonight they were evidently working overtime in the place.

Stupidly Gorne turned and went back to the shack, the memory of the red stain biting ever deeper into his merciless, half-crazy mind. Every whistle of the wind, every creak of the ancient timbers seemed to reiterate the words of the dying Mason. Time and time again he peered furtively through the window, drew aside the brittle, faded curtains, and every time he pictured in his mind's eyes that stain, blood-red and horribly fresh. The thought of it made him wild.

"It can't be blood!" he shouted into the shadows. "Blood ceases to flow when a body dies! Calver Mason, you're dead—dead as your daughter!"

He gloated over that. "You just died a little faster, that's all. She died slowly, just as she deserved."

He broke off with a sudden start. The wind; a solid, mounting wall of fury suddenly buffeted against the shack wall and flung down an ancient picture from its hook. Gorne sat in silence, licking his dry lips, fingers in his unkempt gray hair, staring at the glass splinters and dust-caked print. Somewhere, he remembered, that that meant a death.

He stood up again, indecisive, then trembling in spite of himself tried to sleep again. Sleep, however, would not come to his overburdened mind. He lay there in the darkness, the lamp extinguished, and thought of the endless miles of storm-swept country that surrounded him. He was alone, save for people in the busily working factory. For a fleeting instant he



thought of going there, then remembering that that would probably entail an inquiry he refrained from pursuing the idea.

And, little by little as he lay there trembling, the dirty blanket clutched in his gnarled hands, that same horrible odor he had detected outside floated into the grimy fastness of his retreat. Yes, it *was* from the grave! He was sure of it now. It penetrated into every nook and cranny, a stench that reminded him vaguely of rotting chrysanthemums, filled, too, with an unutterable coldness, unless that was the chill produced by the terrific fear that was governing him.

Somewhere abroad in this clammy dark must be the avenging soul of Calver Mason, waiting, waiting, through the timeless minutes to strike—to crush him into the perdition he deserved.

With a half scream Gorne sat up again and stared with dilated eyes into the blackness. He fully expected to behold the spectral presence of Mason himself, but the darkness remained unrelieved.

For a long time Gorne sat there, then he climbed out of the bed and relit the lamp. His knees were shaking, and they continued to do so even though he cursed himself huskily for a weak and imaginative fool.

Time and time again, furiously though he fought against it, the remembrance of that stain came back to him. Blood—upward, from a dead man! The thing was impossible! Nevertheless the recollection was too strong to permit of only conjecture. He wrenched the door open once more and stumbled out into the blackness. A loose stone caught his foot

and sent him sprawling with his face within five inches of the grave itself.

Shuddering horror surged through him. The stain was there, but it was infinitely larger! The soil was saturated with it! Roughly it had formed into the shape of a man, a blood-red, sodden reincarnation of a man.

With a scream Gorne jumped upright, shouted desperately to the howling wind that flapped his worn garments about his emaciated frame.

"You're coming back, Mason!" he shouted desperately. "You're coming back! Stop, I tell you! *Stop!*"

His excess of emotion and fright suddenly vanished at his outburst. He became cooler. Momentary sane reasoning plainly indicated that this was absurd. Blood from a dead man? That thought stuck in his mind.

With an obstinate shake of his head he returned to the shack for the shovel. Grimly, resolutely, he drove it down into the red, glutinous mass. A deep shudder shook him at the soggy, ghastly sucking noise the soil made as he lifted a shovelful into the air. Immediately the red stain refilled into position. The crimson drops fell slowly from Gorne's shovel as he stood staring.

Then it was blood! Flowing from a source unknown! Or was it unknown? Deep down in that spot lay Mason's corpse. If it was his blood then his soul must be abroad, too.

It was too much for Gorne. He dropped the shovel with a crash and raced back screaming to the shack, slammed and bolted the door, then sat in sweating horror until the dawn crept through the angry clouds.

Throughout that boisterous day Gorne did not attempt to leave his retreat. He was too frightened. He did take furtive peeps through the window and, every time his eyes were met by that distant carmine stain. It had grown again since the night and covered now the entire area of the grave, its irregular edges steadily spreading towards the older grave of the girl herself.

Still there hung on the air that horrible smell, and it remained with the gale, which showed no signs of abating. Night fell again finally and Game was in a pitiable state, His naturally lean face was shrunken almost to that of a skeleton. Eyes filled with the light of insanity stared horribly into the dark.

Still the wind seemed to mutter: "My soul and blood shall return!"

He did not know how long he sat there in the darkness, but at last he got to his feet, taking a sudden grip on himself. This mystery had to be solved or he would entirely lose his reason. Stubbornly, resolutely, he opened the door and noted how much stronger was the gale.

Pressing against it, head down, he gained the grave again and stared mutely at the expanse of redness. With every breath he took the musty dank odor filled his nostrils.

"You can't come back!" he shouted fiercely. "I'll dig you out first!"

He turned to pick up the shovel, but at the identical moment a stronger gust of the wind caught his skinny frame and sent him sprawling backwards. His heels caught in the

soggy red mass as he overbalanced. Hoarsely, madly, he screamed, but it was too late.

He lost his balance completely and with a terrible cry fell over the edge of the cliff and dropped a sheer thousand feet into the gale-ridden canyon below.

And above, the stain steadily spread...

Danvers, City Editor of the New Orleans *Observer*, surveyed Wilson, his cub reporter, in some disgust.

"So that's all you got out of the Mason business?" he asked shortly. "I thought there would be more to his disappearance than that!"

Wilson shrugged. "Don't blame me, boss, I did all I could. I tracked Mason from here to a dump called Craven Town, and after that to a shack—a filthy old hole. And did the place hum! There's a chemical dyeworks near there and the reek from that chimney of theirs is worse than glue. Smells like a grave or sump'n. It only stopped when the wind changed round."

"Never mind that," the editor returned coldly. "What's all this about a red stain? Did you find that devil Come?"

"Sure—in the gorge below, with the living lights knocked out of him. There were two corpses buried near his shack, but it seems that in one of the graves he had unknowingly punctured a dye-pipe leading to the works and the darned stuff leaked out and colored the ground crimson. There was a party of dyeworks men there when I arrived. I got the story from them. That's all there is to it."

Danvers shrugged. "Okay, then, but I expected something more interesting. At least we have it fairly clear that Mason

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and his daughter were murdered by this old lunatic Gorne.  
We'll print it. Hey, copy boy!"

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