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Doctor Zero and Other Stories

by

Paul Chadwick

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DOCTOR ZERO

The night glowed purple! From the black vault of the heavens came a hissing ball of purple light. As if possessing uncanny human intelligence, it rocketed straight for the victim it had marked. The police were helpless before that sinister sphere of Doctor Zero's. And now, Wade Hammond, explorer and criminal investigator, had stepped into the eerie glow of the Purple Peril.

CHAPTER I - DEATH'S MESSENGER

"WHAT'S that?" Detective O'Conner's voice was a nasal bleat. His eyes bulged under the brim of his soft felt hat. His dank cigarette slipped from trembling fingers. He stared off into the darkness across the

wide lawn of Gordon Munn's suburban house.

A fellow dick, one of a cordon thrown around the place to protect its owner from the mysterious menace of "Doctor Zero," shook his head. He also was staring in amazement.

"It looks like a rocket," O'Conner went on. "No--it's coming nearer. Hell, we ought to warn Munn."

He started off across the lawn at a lumbering gallop. The sky behind him had turned into a vivid violet. There was a strange, hissing sound in the air. A fantastic ball of eerie purple light was descending toward the house. It moved as though some unseen power were directing it--moved with horrible certainty toward the window of Munn's study.

O'Conner waved his arms and shouted. At that instant the ball of purple fire touched the window panes. There came a noise like the crack of a giant whip, then a deafening concussion that shattered every piece of glass in the sash, sending gleaming slivers inward and outward and searing the boards along the side of the house.

A stinging needle of glass struck the detective. He bawled loudly and clutched at his face. Men were shouting to each other out on the lawn now. A half-score of plainclothes men came running up, converging on the house from three sides. A babble of voices sounded.

"It's a bomb--who threw it?"

"See if Munn's hurt!"

"Turn in an alarm!"

Questions, orders and explanations tumbled over each other. Then O'Conner spoke again. "There's another one coming--look out!"

The ball this time seemed to swoop out of the black night sky like a sinister will-o'-the-wisp. It appeared first as a pinpoint of light, hardly distinguishable from the stars. It might have been a shooting star as it flashed across the sky.

But as it came nearer its speed diminished. Again there was that uncanny effect of diabolical intelligence. The hissing, whirling ball of purple fire followed its predecessor. The first one had cleared the way. The second plunged through the gaping hole of the shattered window while detectives screamed a warning.

They heard a muffled explosion this time. Lurid tongues of light speared from the window, dancing like an aurora borealis. The room inside looked for a moment to those staring from the darkness like the mouth of some fantastic inferno such as the hand of a Doré might have depicted.

Above the noise of the concussion they heard a single, horrible cry. Then blackness descended and the night seemed to close in, bringing silence with it. The voices of the detectives grew hushed with amazement and the awe of the unknown.

O'Conner entered the house with his men behind him. They found the servants huddled into a frightened, whispering group near the hall stairway. Then they climbed to the floor above, entered Munn's study and swore harshly at the thing they saw.

Gordon Munn, director in a great and powerful bank, and shareholder in a dozen corporations, was lying face downward on the rug, his clothing in singed tatters, his body twisted and blackened into an unsightly caricature of a man.

THREE miles away in Wade Hammond's apartment the French-type telephone jangled into life. The curio-lined walls of the living room threw the sound back harshly. The stuffed heads of big game, collected in a dozen far corners of the world, stared down with unblinking eyes as though listening.

Hammond, sprawled in a big armchair, dropped his cigarette into an ashtray, untangled his legs and got up. He crossed the room in four quick strides. Ten years of newspaper and police work had taught him to answer phone calls promptly. But his deeply tanned face was impassive as he picked the instrument up. People were always giving him a buzz for one thing or another. His lips below their thin mustache line barely moved in the mouthpiece.

"Hello! Hammond speaking."

Words came from the other end of the wire in an excited quaver.

"Listen, Hammond--this is Sergeant O'Conner. All hell's popping. Gordon Munn's been knocked off in spite of us."

"Gordon Munn?"

"Yeah--the bank man. You know who he is. Can you come out? The chief wants you. Follow Parkway Boulevard and make the first turn to your right. It's the big yellow house with the iron fence in front of it. Step on it!"

"O.K." Again Wade's lips moved. No use asking questions now. The dope would come later after he got to the scene of the killing. When Inspector Thompson called, it meant there was a tough nut to be cracked.

Wade's movements in the next few seconds were like those of a well-oiled machine--a machine taut with blued steel springs and rapidaction mechanism. But the springs were his muscles and the motivating mechanism was the flashing power of his quick-fire brain.

He threw off his dressing gown, pulled on a coat, stuck his feet into shoes, shoved a flat, wicked-looking automatic into his pocket and grabbed a hat. Three minutes later wind was whistling past the radiator cap on the battleship nose of his sport roadster.

He held the button on the steering column down at every intersection, defying traffic lights and making the night raucous. Twice he lifted a gloved hand at red-faced cops who stared belligerently. The fighting expressions left their faces when they saw who it was.

It was known that Wade Hammond carried a special investigator's card bearing the signature of the commissioner himself. It was also known that it didn't pay to interfere with him.

He swung into the driveway of the Munn estate. Gravel snapped under fat balloon tires as he roared up to the front steps. The headlights of his car goggled into the shrubbery. Almost before the motor stopped ticking over he was up the steps and inside the house.

Inspector Thompson, the grizzled chief of the City Homicide Bureau, was coming forward through the hallway to meet him, his expression owlish as always.

"Sorry to dig you out of bed, Hammond. They caught me at a banquet--right in the middle of a steak, smothered with onions. It's tough when a fellah can't enjoy his grub."

"Tough is right. What's going on here, chief? O'Conner sounded fussed when he called."

"Why wouldn't he? Didn't he tell you Munn had got his?"

Wade nodded grimly. Thompson's features suddenly reddened. His voice was thick with anger.

"I'm going to burn up somebody for this. Munn asked for protection. I sent enough men out here to guard the sub-treasury--and they let that devil rub him out anyway."

"Who?"

"Doctor Zero."

Wade shook his head.

"You'll have to start from scratch, chief. You've been holding out on me. Who's Doctor Zero?"

"I wish I knew. That's what he calls himself. He tried to get cash out of Munn--sent him a scare letter--and a bundle."

"A bundle? What was in it?"

"Come here, I'll show you."

THOMPSON turned and Wade followed him. They climbed to the second floor, to the room where Munn had been killed. The place was filled with headquarters' men; detectives, the medical examiner and his assistant, and experts from the bomb squad. Munn was still sprawled on the rug near a table, pieces of glass all around him from the shattered window. Thompson spoke in Wade's ear.

"Look here."

The inspector was lifting an odd-looking contraption from a pasteboard box. There was a handful of thin, collapsed rubber; a small metal ball attached to it, and a long brass cylinder with a tube at its end stoppered by a brass valve.

"What is it--a bomb?" Wade spoke grimly.

"No, a balloon, Hammond--with a tank of compressed gas to fill it, and a place to put the cash."

"A present from Doctor Zero, eh?"

"Yeah. Munn was supposed to put fifty thousand dollars into that tea-ball gadget and send the balloon up when it got dark. I don't know how the hell Zero expected to get it back. It might land any place within a thousand miles. He must be a nut."

Wade did not answer. He was looking interested, staring at the balloon keenly, and fingering the small round cash box. It was made of some lightweight metal. There was a coating on it. Some sort of waterproof paint apparently.

"Munn would have done better to have followed instructions," he said. Thompson swore under his breath and nodded.

"He had plenty of dough, but he didn't want to send fifty thousand of it sky-hooting all over the landscape--you can't blame him. He sat tight and called on us. Now it'll get out that the department fell down on the job. It's going to raise a stink."

Wade fired a sudden question. "What sort of a bomb did Doctor Zero use and where did it come from?"

Thompson shrugged. "Nobody knows yet. Carmichael and Parks are working on it now. The fellahs who saw it say it wasn't a bomb at all. It floated through the air, they say. It seemed to come from the sky--sort of purple fire."

Wade spoke quickly, his voice hard.

"This Doctor Zero is no nut, chief. You can bet on that. He must have known what he was doing when he sent that balloon. We've both heard of scientific criminals, and read yarns about them. Now we're up against one. It's the smartest extortion racket I've ever bumped into, with murder as a side line. Some guy who's half genius and half devil is behind this--and he must want the money bad."

Thompson grunted and Wade spoke again.

"We won't learn much here. That's a cinch. Mind if I go off with that balloon?"

"I can't let you, Hammond." Thompson spoke regretfully. "My men have got to have it to trace the material--see where it was bought."

Wade made an impatient gesture.

"They'll have a good time doing it. Let me have a few scrapings then. I think there's something queer here--and deep, too."

Inspector Thompson stared uncomprehendingly while Wade took a penknife from his pocket and scraped some of the paint and metal off the balllike cash receptacle onto a paper. He stuffed this into his pocket and spoke slowly.

"That's the angle I'm going to work on first, chief. I got a hunch about something. I think--"

He stopped suddenly. A girl was standing in the door of the room; a girl with blonde hair, frightened eyes, and bloodless lips. She made a little whimpering sound in her throat, and moved forward; but a detective held her back.

"Better not look at him, miss. It won't do any good."

The girl burst into a spasm of crying, her slim shoulders shaking.

"That's Munn's daughter, Arlene," Thompson whispered. "She must have just come. We'll have to get her out."

Wade followed the inspector, and as they neared the doorway he saw a man standing behind the girl. Thompson was speaking in a kindly voice.

"We'd better go downstairs, Miss Munn. There was an explosion--you'd better remember your father the way he was."

E led the girl gently out into the hall while Wade sized up her escort. The man was thin and aristocratic looking with features so clean-cut as to be almost harsh. He was dressed elegantly, and wore an aloof expression. Wade had seen the face somewhere before.

Arlene Munn recovered enough to introduce him when they got downstairs. The formalities had been bred into her.

"Professor Ornstein," she said. "We were dancing at the Belmont when they paged us--and told me about father." She choked again.

"I came here as fast as I could," Ornstein said. "It's a terrible thing. I'm awfully sorry." His words were sympathetic, but his tone sounded casual. Wade's thoughts were active, building up impressions, remembering scraps of information.

He had Professor Harold Ornstein checked now. The man was connected with the Technological Institute--a brilliant scientist specializing in physics; a dapper society light when he cared to be, and a person of independent means. It was an odd combination. Wade recalled Ornstein's name in connection with a recent breach-of-promise suit. The man, who was at least twenty years older than Arlene Munn, had a bad reputation with women. Science was his life work; philandering his recreation. He had won the Nobel Prize for his researches into the nature of matter, and the "ignoble" prize in his dealings with the ladies. Wade smiled grimly at the bad pun.

But he didn't like Ornstein, and sensed a certain hostility in the man. Still, the professor was a genius in his line. He might even be able to help in this strange case. Wade started to speak, but Arlene Munn interrupted, weeping again.

"I can't stand it!" she said. "I can't! Take me away from here, Harry."

"That's a good idea," said Inspector Thompson. "We can talk to you later, Miss Munn."

"I'll take her to her aunt's," said Ornstein smoothly. "She'll feel better when she's had a drink and quieted down a bit. If I can be of any service let me know."

The two of them moved toward the front door; Arlene slender and wilting, Ornstein tall and bland, looking somehow like a suave Satan.

"A pretty slick bird," said Thompson. "If there's science mixed up in this as you say, Hammond, we'd better check up on him. I wonder if he was at the Belmont with Miss Munn all evening?"

Thompson called one of his men and had a lowvoiced conversation with him. Then he whirled, facing Wade and listening.

Shouts had suddenly come from outside, then the sound of two pistol shots in quick succession. Wade was already headed for the door.

"Come on, chief," he said. "This seems to be our busy night!"

CHAPTER II - A SPY IN THE DARK

WHEN Wade Hammond reached the broad side veranda of Munn's house he saw three figures coming up the steps. Two of them were detectives. The man in the middle seemed to be their prisoner. They had him by the arms and were pushing him forcibly forward.

One of the detectives, a man with a red, perspiring face, turned to Inspector Thompson and spoke.

"We found this bird snooping around outside, chief. He started to run and Bill had to pull a gun on him. He's lucky he didn't get bumped off. He would have if I'd done the shooting."

"Bring him in the house," said Thompson. "Who is he?"

"You've got me, chief; but he looks like a bad actor."

The two plainclothes men shoved their prisoner into the lighted hallway. Wade stared at the man sharply. He was young, somewhere in his early twenties apparently, and he had the gangling look of a student

with bookish tendencies. This was accentuated by the heavy shell-rimmed spectacles he wore. His face had a sullen expression as he stood blinking his eyes in the light.

"What's your name?" asked Thompson harshly. "What were you doing out there on the lawn?"

The young man continued to blink. Then he spoke in a surly monotone.

"I was just looking around. I'm Zadok Smith."

"Looking around!" The inspector's voice was sarcastic. "What were you looking for--did you lose a nickel or something?"

Smith's face reddened. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. Thompson flared up.

"You won't talk, eh? You're one of those tightlipped guys! Frisk him, Ed, and see if he's heeled."

The red-faced detective began going through Zadok Smith's pockets with professional thoroughness. He gave an excited exclamation as he drew something from the young man's coat where a conspicuous bulge had showed. It was an oblong leatherette case with two button fasteners. Thompson took it out of his hand and opened it while Wade stared over his shoulder.

Inside the case were two round glass dials with a knurled screw head in the center. Needle-shaped indicators behind the glass of the dials were quivering. Wade spoke tensely.

"That's a galvanometer, I think. The other's a compass. They seem to be hitched together. It's a funny-looking gadget."

"What's a galvanometer?" asked Thompson peevishly.

"It shows when there's an electric current," said Wade. "What were you doing with this thing, Smith?"

Smith stared at Wade as sullenly as he had at the inspector. "It's my business," he said. "I wasn't hurting anybody, was I?"

The cords in Inspector Thompson's neck swelled. "No?" he shouted. "Well--somebody hurt Gordon Munn here tonight--killed him! You've got a lot of explaining to do, Smith. You'd better answer our questions."

Wade nodded. "It'll save you trouble," he said. "Tell us what you know, Smith. You wouldn't be carrying that thing around if you weren't in on something. There's been a murder in this house---and murder can't be laughed off."

Smith's sullen face turned pale, but he maintained a stony silence. Wade shrugged. "Have it your own way. You'll talk later if you don't now."

"You bet he will," said Thompson angrily. "Take him down to headquarters, Ed. We can find a way to unbutton his lip down there."

Thompson, Wade saw, was still smarting under the knowledge that the police department had fallen down in its attempt to protect Munn. The inspector handed the leatherette case to one of the detectives.

"Give this to Carmichael and Parks. They're going down with that balloon contraption. They can take Smith along with them. Go out and see if anybody else is snooping around here."

The two detectives turned their prisoner over to Parks and Carmichael who were just coming down the

stairs with the cardboard box containing the balloon. Wade spoke.

"I think I'll follow after them, chief. There's not much I can do here--and I'm curious about that gadget of Smith's. He wasn't carrying it just for fun."

Wade left the house with the two headquarters men and their prisoner. He had no clear picture of the crime in his mind as yet. He'd taken an active part in many other strange homicide cases; but this murder gave indications of being the most sinister and fantastic he'd ever bumped into. His mind reverted to the sprawled and blackened form of Gordon Munn and to the weeping figure of Arlene as he had first seen her in the doorway of the room where her father had met death. What human fiend was behind this? Who was Doctor Zero, and what did Zadok Smith know about the case that he was not willing to tell?

WADE was still asking himself these questions as the police car containing Parks, Carmichael and their prisoner turned out of the driveway. He followed it in his own fast roadster. He wanted to be on hand when an expert in the criminal investigation bureau examined the instrument that Smith carried.

The tail-light of the police car stared unwinkingly out of the darkness ahead like the eye of some monster. They passed other rich men's estates; big houses set far back on well-kept lawns. An indefinable pall of horror seemed to blend with the shadows of the night.

The police car neared Parkway Boulevard with Wade's roadster a hundred feet behind. There were no other cars in sight. For a distance equaling two city blocks an embankment rose on either side of the road and the pole lights were spaced far apart.

Wade, occupied with his own thoughts, became aware suddenly of an unnatural glow on the distant horizon. Eerie reflections danced on the vibrating windshield of his roadster. His eyes, registering that glow and those faint reflections, telegraphed a warning to his subconscious mind. A sensation that was like the touch of chill fingers ran up his spine.

Then he cried out. The glow had deepened. It was concentrated in a pinpoint of light like a shooting star--a star that was coming nearer and which shed a lurid, uncanny radiance.

Wade heard a sudden squeal of brakes ahead. Then a scream of human terror sounded, followed by the noise of breaking glass. The police car swerved toward the side of the road, and, in the glare of his own car's headlights, Wade saw a gangling, bespectacled form jump from the auto in front of him.

He recognized it as Zadok Smith. He saw Smith stumble and drop to his knees. Pinpoints of orange flame speared the darkness over his head as one of the detectives fired at the escaping prisoner. Then with an awkward leap Smith vanished into the shadows of the shrub-clothed embankment. Behind him the night was made ghastly by another unearthly scream.

The cause of Smith's terror was plain now. It wasn't his fear of the detectives' bullets. It was that dancing, fantastic pinpoint of light which had now become a ball of purple fire headed straight toward the police car.

Wade heard one of the detectives shout a warning. They, too, had become aware of their peril. He saw the police car slew around and leap forward under the powerful thrust of a suddenly speeded motor.

Carmichael and Parks were trying to escape their doom.

Wade held his breath in horror. That lethal willo'--the-wisp of light had changed its course now.

Some hidden intelligence acting through unknown physical forces was guiding it. It curved down in a hawk-like swoop and followed the flying police car. For seconds that seemed to Wade like an eternity

the terrible purple death pursued the speeding vehicle. It gained foot by foot, hovered over the car for an instant, then dropped like a falling meteor.

CHAPTER III - THE HAND OF DOCTOR ZERO

WADE hadn't been on the scene when Munn was killed. But he heard a ripping, crackling burst of sound now. Then a terrible detonation blasted the air like an exploding bomb. He saw the top of the police car disintegrate in a pall of smoke and flame and zigzag streamers of light.

The swiftly-moving car swerved from the road and headed up the embankment. He got a blurred glimpse of churning wheels, flying grass and thrashing bushes. Then the car swerved again in its erratic course. It turned turtle and came rolling back down the bank, where it lay, a smoking, twisted ruin beside the ditch.

The darkness of the night closed in, and Wade, feeling momentarily sick and weak for all the violent deaths he had seen in his life, brought his own roadster to a halt. He got out and walked forward unsteadily.

A man was lying dead in the roadway. It was one of the detectives, blown clear of the car when the fireball had exploded, shattering the vehicle's top. Another man, whom Wade identified with a shudder, as Parks, was half-pinned under the battered wreckage. He, too, had been killed instantly.

Wade wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. The thing he had just seen was enough to shake any man's nerves. He remembered Zadok Smith then. Smith's frantic, terrified screams seemed still to ring in his ears. The young man had sensed his danger in time to jump from the car. His fear of the Purple Peril had driven him to risk the detectives' bullets.

Any evidence that the police car had contained had been destroyed.

Wade went back to his roadster and pulled a flashlight from under the front seat. He walked along the road to the spot where he'd seen Smith dive from the moving car. The dirt here was kicked up, showing the marks of Smith's knees. Up the embankment the branches of a number of bushes were broken, marking the trail of Smith's mad flight to escape death.

Then Wade caught his breath. His probing flashlight had revealed a gleam of metal in the shrubbery. He focused the beam and stooped down.

A small fraternity pin with some sort of cabalistic markings on it was lying at his feet. It had apparently been brushed from Zadok Smith's clothing. Wade picked it up and slipped it into his pocket.

There seemed to be little use in trying to follow Smith now. He should be a half-mile away by this time. Terror had lent speed to his feet and the darkness would act as an all-concealing curtain.

Wade had been the sole witness of this grisly double murder. He lifted the body of the slain detective from the road and laid it beside the ruins of the police car.

Then he got into his roadster. He wanted to reach the nearest telephone quickly and let Inspector Thompson know that the sinister hand of Doctor Zero had brought death again.

He came to a filling station a mile down the road and stopped. There was a telephone in it. Wade's own voice was hoarse as he talked to the inspector over the wire.

Images of the killing he had witnessed and echoes of Zadok Smith's terrified screams still seemed to pulsate through his brain.

He felt as though the whole thing were a mad nightmare--but he knew it wasn't. In brief sentences he gave the details of the double murder to Thompson. He wound up with his own conclusions.

"We're dealing with a murderer who kills as unemotionally as a machine. He had nothing against Parks and Carmichael personally. He killed them because they carried evidence which might be dangerous."

Thompson's voice came back with a tremor in it.

"I can't have my men knocked off like this. We've got to find Doctor Zero."

ADE knew that the inspector wasn't taking the deaths of his two assistants lightly. The old crime-hunter concealed human emotion under a bluff, hardboiled exterior. Parks and Carmichael had been with him for years.

"We'll find him," said Wade grimly. "There's a question mark after his name now--but it'll be a death sentence before we're through."

"What'll you do next, Hammond--try to trace Smith?"

"Yes. Then I want to have a talk with Professor Ornstein. Have you any more dope on him, chief?"

"He stayed at the Belmont all evening with Miss Munn, as he told us. He left her only once to make a short telephone call. The house detective helped us check up on him. His alibi is watertight."

"You and I've seen alibis break down before," Wade said. "Smith has an alibi, too, now. He was in the police car when the fireball came, But he hasn't explained yet what he was doing prowling around Munn's house at the exact time of the murder."

"No--and here's another angle I've just thought of," said Thompson with a snap in his voice. "It didn't take more than three minutes for those balls that killed Munn to drop out of the air and explode. Ornstein's call was made somewhere around the same time. We don't know what sort of thing we're dealing with."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that if there's science mixed up in this, as we think, we've got a tough job on our hands."

"Tough is right, chief." There was a humorless smile on Wade's face as he spoke.

It was after eleven when Wade drove to the campus of the Technological Institute and asked to be directed to Professor Ornstein's quarters. A night watchman stared at him, then pointed across the campus grounds to where lights were burning in the third story of a modernistic looking building.

"He's up there," the watchman said. "That's where he works. I saw his car go by ten minutes ago."

Wade examined the building that housed Ornstein's laboratory. It surprised him to find the man at work so late at night. Ornstein, he figured, must have left Arlene at her aunt's, then come back here. And he must be a man with stout nerves to go calmly back to work after being at the scene of Munn's murder such a short time before.

A fire escape snaked down the side of the building, passing Professor Ornstein's windows. Wade noticed this and also saw the light in the front vestibule was burning. An automatic elevator connected with the various floors.

Wade took the elevator to Ornstein's floor and knocked. Ornstein himself came to the door. He had

slipped a white coat over his evening clothes and looked trim and efficient. For a moment he stared at Wade blankly. Then he smiled in recognition.

"Hammond," he said. "I remember now. Come in."

"Sorry to interrupt your work, professor."

"Don't mind that. I'm always puttering around. I've got so I can't sleep if I don't amuse myself for a while before going to bed."

Wade studied the man for a second, then spoke.

"There was another murder after you left--a double one. Two detectives were killed. I want to ask you about a man named Zadok Smith. Ever hear of him?"

Ornstein whistled. Then an odd look came into his eyes. His sharp features had the satanic quality that Wade had noticed before.

"I know young Smith too well," Ornstein said. "He's a student here--one of Professor Hartz's, specializing in mineralogy and analytical chemistry. Frankly I don't like him. He's an impertinent young devil. He has a habit of coming in here uninvited and making a nuisance of himself. I think he imagines he's spying on my work. He's annoyed Arlene, too."

"So Miss Munn knows him then?"

"Yes, slightly. She's good-hearted enough to tolerate his mooning around."

Wade nodded.

"Smith was found prowling outside the Munn house just after the murder. He had a queer instrument in his pocket--a compass and a galvanometer hitched together apparently. Two men started back to headquarters with him. Then another of those fireballs dropped out of the sky. Smith jumped and escaped and the two detectives were killed. Have you any theory, professor, as to what Smith might have been doing?"

A veil of suspicion seemed to drop over Ornstein's face for a moment. He laughed uneasily.

"You're connected with the police, Hammond," he said. "I wouldn't want to commit myself. I'd advise you, though, to find out all you can about Smith. Talk to Professor Hartz tomorrow. Smith's actions have certainly been queer."

"What about those fireballs?" said Wade. "I've got a theory that they may be electrical. You're a physicist. You ought to know."

"You mean you think they're controlled charges of static, like lightning?"

"Something of the sort."

"Look here!" Ornstein walked across the room quickly and opened a door. Through it Wade saw the complex paraphernalia of a modern scientific laboratory. There were shelves of chemicals, various electrical apparatus, including static machines of the Whymshurst type, Geissler tubes, and delicate instruments to demonstrate the composition of matter.

ORNSTEIN threw a small knife switch which sent current into the terminals of a ten-inch spark coil. The pungent, pleasant smell of ozone filled the air as miniature lightning flared between the gaps. A battery of

foil-covered condensers were being charged. Close to them was an apparatus with adjustable electrodes. At the moment they were spaced four feet apart. The bottom one consisted of a copper plate two inches square.

"Watch," said Ornstein. "Here's lightning for you."

He reached into a box on a shelf and drew out a common walnut. He placed the nut on the copper electrode and stepped back.

"Call that nut a house," he said. "The electrode above is the sky. Now we have a thunderstorm. The electrode becomes a cloud."

He was speaking in his best classroom manner. Suddenly he turned off the overhead lights, then pressed another switch attached to a flexible cord.

There came a sharp, crackling report as a streak of violet light shot down from the top electrode. It struck the plate below in the millionth part of a second, passing through the walnut and sending shattered pieces of shell flying in all directions.

"In the General Electric Laboratories at Schenectady," said Ornstein, "they've made lightning that can shatter a block of hardwood. I use this little machine to give practical demonstrations to my students."

"There's more than one kind of lightning," said Wade. "This sort is known as chain, I believe. Could ball lightning be made in a laboratory, too, professor?"

Ornstein shot Wade a quick look, then smiled.

"Ball lightning is a rare phenomenon, Hammond. Its existence has been proven, but unusual atmospheric conditions cause it and it has never been reproduced artificially. Nothing is impossible, though, in the light of modern science. Lightning is the result of an electrical disturbance in the atoms of the air. The atoms in turn are made up of electrons. If a man found a way of controlling the electrons themselves he might do wonders. Professor Osterhout of Harvard estimates that there is enough potential electronic energy in a teaspoonful of water to drive a train across the continent."

Wade nodded, staring around him. There seemed to be other rooms connected with the main laboratory, but Ornstein didn't offer to show them. Wade sensed that the man was an adept at disguising his real thoughts. He was something of an enigma, always disarmingly pleasant.

Wade thanked the professor for his information and was preparing to go when the telephone in the outer room jangled. Ornstein picked the instrument up, then his face suddenly stiffened.

"My God--no!"

It was the first time Wade had seen any sign of emotion on Ornstein's part. The professor held the receiver to his ear for nearly a minute, then whirled around. He spoke tensely.

"Arlene--Miss Munn--has been kidnapped. I left her at her aunt's. She was going to spend the night there. A maid went to her room a few minutes ago and found her gone. The window was open and a ladder was leaning against it from the outside."

CHAPTER IV - THE SINISTER VISITOR

ORNSTEIN began slipping out of his white jacket. He put on his overcoat, and in a moment he and Wade were descending in the elevator together. Two minutes later they turned out of the campus

driveway in Wade's car and began speeding through the night toward the home of Arlene Munn's aunt.

When they reached it Wade saw more evidences of wealth, though the house wasn't quite as pretentious as Gordon Munn's. The dead man's sister, a large, florid woman of about forty, was in the drawing room with a bottle of smelling salts in her hand. She was close to hysteria, and the servants were running about panic stricken.

"Have you called the police?" asked Wade. The woman nodded. Her voice was a wail.

"This is terrible, terrible, terrible! Arlene came to me for protection--and now the poor girl is gone, and my poor dear brother, too!"

"She's not dead yet," said Wade. "We'll get her back."

With a flashlight in his hand he went outside. He saw that nothing had been touched. The window was still open in the room Arlene had been given for the night. The ladder still leaned against the house.

He walked carefully so as not to disturb any footprints before men from the bureau of identification came with their cameras and measuring instruments. He stooped over once, and a puzzled look flashed into his eyes. Two imprints of a girl's high-heeled slipper showed in a spot where the grass was thin. It looked to him as though Arlene Munn had walked calmly away from the house.

He waited till the police arrived, then left them to their methodical search for clues of the missing girl and drove Ornstein back to his quarters near the Technological Institute. Behind the professor's calm exterior Wade was aware of nervous tenseness. But Ornstein refused to admit that he was worried.

"Arlene has a lot of spirit," he said. "She can generally take care of herself."

THE next day Wade began systematically checking up on Zadok Smith. No trace of Smith had been found as yet. Arlene Munn hadn't been located, and the killing of Gordon Munn was still veiled in mystery.

The morning editions of the papers had run the stories of the Purple Peril and newsboys were still shouting in the streets. The whole city was agog with dread interest over the sinister series of murders which had taken place the previous night. The police department was coming in for a storm of criticism and Inspector Thompson was beside himself.

At a little after nine Wade Hammond drove into the campus grounds of the Technological Institute again. He went directly to the administration office and asked to see Professor Hartz.

"The police are anxious to check up on one of the students here named Zadok Smith," he told the girl at the desk. "Perhaps you've seen the morning papers. I believe Smith's name is mentioned."

The girl nodded. There was a scared look in her eyes.

"Professor Hartz has his laboratory in No. 14, Newton Hall," she said. "Follow the walk at the right as you go out."

Wade did as directed and found Hartz located in the top of one of the old brick buildings which had formed the nucleus of the institute before modern additions had been made. The Professor, with his woolly, white hair and his long, benign face, seemed as much a fixture as the building itself. He was dressed with comfortable simplicity in a baggy gray suit. The only touches of ornateness about him were the large diamond ring on his finger and the diamond scarf pin in his tie. These looked like heirlooms. A morning paper was carefully folded on the desk before him.

Wade introduced himself, displaying his special investigator's card.

"Sit down," said Hartz in a rumbling bass voice. "I suppose you've come about young Smith, one of my students. I see he's got his name in the papers." There was, thought Wade, a note of sadness in the professor's voice.

He nodded.

"Smith's wanted as a witness in connection with the murder of Gordon Munn and those two detectives. He's technically under arrest now. What's your opinion of his character?"

Hartz shook his white head slowly, and tapped the paper.

"They already have him branded as the murderer here," he said. "He was a brilliant student but an erratic one. I don't know what to say. It's hard to believe he'd do a thing like this."

"Where is he, then?" asked Wade. "What made him refuse to answer questions, and what was he doing on Munn's lawn?"

"I can't imagine where he is," said Hartz. "Curiosity might have led him to the scene of the murder; but none of it looks right."

"Professor Ornstein says that Smith is inclined to be impertinent," said Wade.

Hartz smiled and shrugged. His tone was slightly bitter.

"There's jealousy even in the halls of learning, Mr. Hammond. I sometimes think Professor Ornstein fears Smith as a future rival. Ornstein is a little erratic himself at times. He works too hard---often late at night. And he goes in for social life a great deal. We all wonder how he stands up under it."

After his interview with Professor Hartz, Wade got permission to search Zadok Smith's dormitory room. He hoped to find a diary, or papers that might throw more light on his character. But he found only an endless quantity of scientific notes written in Smith's painfully neat hand.

The room was neat, too, and Smith's few personal belongings had been chosen with care. He was evidently a serious-minded student who felt that he had a career before him.

Wade spent the rest of the day going over every detail of the case with Inspector Thompson.

A footprint had been found outside the window of Arlene Munn's room, just beside the ladder. It compared with another footprint discovered on the lawn of Munn's house. Both had been made by Zadok Smith apparently. This led to the belief that he had kidnapped her. A police dragnet was thrown out in an effort to trap the missing man.

Wade went back to his apartment late that evening and for a time paced the floor in deep thought.

He wondered grimly if the Purple Peril would strike again. Would the police find the man who hid behind the name of Doctor Zero before another victim had been claimed?

HE went to bed toward eleven that night and read a book for half an hour before dropping off to sleep. His brain was tired but restless from beating against the blank wall that had been reached in the Munn murder case.

Sometime after midnight he woke up suddenly. His nerves were tingling oddly and he had a strange feeling--a sense that someone or something had been in the room with him while he slept.

Was it a dream brought on by the happenings of the past twenty-four hours? Or had someone really entered his apartment?

He got up, half ashamed of himself, and snapped on the lights. So far as he could see nothing had been disturbed. There was no one hiding in the place, and the doorway into the hall was locked. But he had used skeleton keys often enough himself to know that locks were not invulnerable. Someone might have entered.

He took the precaution now of snapping the special night latch on his door into place. Then he turned off the lights and went back to bed again.

But he couldn't sleep. Back in his mind was a feeling of uneasiness that refused to be shaken off. Something else was growing out of it--an intangible sense of menace which deepened steadily like a thickening gray cloud.

He tried to ignore it, tried to tell himself that it was only his imagination playing tricks on him. But he kept on tossing restlessly.

He turned on his pillow for the tenth time and faced the window. Then suddenly his body tensed and his eyes grew wide with horror.

The oblong patch of sky that he could see was growing lighter, turning from the dark of night into a weird purple.

He leaped out of bed and reached the window with one bound. There, over the housetops, he could see it plainly now--a strange pinpoint of light like a shooting star. As he watched, it gained in size, revolving itself into a whirling, eerie ball of fire.

The Purple Peril! The beacon of death itself!

With cold fingers clutching at his heart, Wade Hammond realized that the sinister ball of light was coming straight toward the window of his own apartment!

CHAPTER V - THE FIGURE IN BLACK

HE stared for seconds at the onrushing messenger of doom, unable to move. The ball came nearer, hovered overhead for an instant, then began a parabolic swoop toward earth. As it did so Wade's brain whipped the paralyzed muscles of his body into action.

He'd been a fighter all his life. Now he had a fight on his hands against the unknown forces of Doctor Zero.

He jumped to the window and slammed it shut, then turned and grabbed for his coat on the wall. He pulled it over his night clothes and reached the door in three strides. To stay in that room meant being blasted into eternity as Gordon Munn had been.

He snapped the lock open, stepped into the hallway and banged the door shut behind him. At the instant he did so the fireball reached its mark.

There came again that sound like a giant whip being cracked, then a jarring concussion and the noise of shattering glass. The door strained on its hinges and slivers of glass tinkled against it.

Wade went down the apartment house stairs three at a time. He wanted to reach the street and see if another ball were coming. His brain was grappling with the mystery of the thing. It looked as though this

visit had something to do with the deadly certainty of the fireball's approach.

He ran across the dimly lighted foyer, stepped out into the street and looked up. A purple glow was visible again. Another of the lethal spheres was on its way. The street was deserted; but lights were beginning to show in nearby windows.

The glow deepened as Wade watched. Then the ball flashed into sight. It was coming across the housetops like a comet.

Wade stared, and his face whitened in horror. The ball hung overhead for an instant as the first one had done, then curved downward, a darting will-o'-the-wisp of destruction. But it wasn't headed for his window now. Its single glowing eye was moving straight toward him with terrible purpose, as though it possessed human intelligence.

Dampness broke out on Wade's forehead as he dashed headlong up the street. The ball dropped past his window and reached the spot where he had been a second before. It hung over the pavement, a glowing, incandescent globe of death. Then it floated after him in the same way that it had pursued the police car.

Screams came from those looking on overhead. Wade's breath whistled through his teeth in labored, horrified gasps. He zigzagged, trying to escape the terror that followed him like Fate itself. He could feel the heat of it close behind him now. Any instant it might make contact with his body and accomplish its work of destruction. His feet seemed weighted with lead and his flapping overcoat hampered him.

Then he noticed something he hadn't been conscious of before. The left pocket of his coat seemed to sag. He thrust his hand in. His groping fingers closed over a piece of oblong metal, cold to the touch.

He hadn't put it there himself. What was it? Where had it come from? A strange look came into his eyes. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the purple ball of light close behind. He could hear the hissing, crackling noise it made as it swept through the air.

His hand came out of his pocket grasping the oblong piece of metal. With a fierce gesture he flung it away--and then a miracle seemed to happen.

The purple ball flashed off at a sudden tangent, hissing and whirling as it went, then dropped toward the spot where the strange metal had skidded to a stop.

Wade threw himself flat on the pavement as the air behind him seemed to explode with a roar. A wave of deafening sound came, followed by a battering current of wind. Stones and asphalt flew up in shattered pieces.

Where the metal had been all was darkness except for a few glowing sparks. These faded, and Wade, panting for breath, lifted himself to his feet.

He understood now. Someone had visited his room. Someone had dropped that piece of metal into his coat. Doctor Zero had visited him and marked him for death with this element that would attract the Purple Peril.

Wade went grimly back to his apartment with the ripping, crackling sound of the exploding fireball still ringing in his ears. An alarm had been turned in by someone. He could hear a fire engine tearing up the street with its siren shrieking.

Bric-a-brac around the apartment had been broken by the explosion, and the telephone had been knocked off its table. Wade picked it up and called Inspector Thompson's number. Thompson would want to know that he was all right when reports of the attack came. The voice of the inspector reached

him over the wire, sleepy and peevish.

"A hell of a time to get a man out of bed, Hammond."

"That's what I thought just now when Doctor Zero tried to bump me off," said Wade. "He pretty nearly succeeded, chief. My room here looks like a Texas cyclone had struck it."

He heard Thompson's gasp of surprise.

"He tried to get you, Hammond? Did you find out anything?"

"Yes, it's scientific stuff we're dealing with all right. I'm going to see someone about it."

"Who?"

"Professor Ornstein, chief. He can tell me a lot of things if he wants to, I'll bet."

Wade was dressed at the end of five minutes and on his way downstairs again. A huge crowd had collected in the street outside. People were staring up at his broken windows, at the shattered glass, and at the hole in the pavement.

He shouldered his way through them and got his roadster out of the garage. He shoved the accelerator down to the floorboards as he headed for the Technological Institute campus.

This time he parked his car outside the grounds and went toward Ornstein's laboratory without letting the night watchman see him. Lights were burning in Ornstein's place again. The professor was evidently hard at work.

Wade started to go in the front way; then hesitated and walked around to the fire escape. He wondered if he could jump up and reach the bottom ladder which was balanced and hung up from the ground by a weight. Then suddenly he shrank back into the shadows. He had heard the sound of footsteps on the iron rungs. Someone was coming down.

A moment more and Wade got a glimpse of a muffled black form descending the fire escape. As he watched, the man stepped on the ladder which automatically lowered itself as the weight went up. Rusty pivots squeaked in protest. The figure in black seemed hardly more than a sinister shadow.

Who was he and what was he doing there?

Wade leaped forward. But a flower box close to the building and hidden by the darkness caught his foot. He half-tripped over it, fell to his knees on the grass, and his shoe clattered on the box.

The man on the ladder gave a muttered curse. He leaped sidewise, landing on his feet on the grass below, then turned and darted away, blending with the night shadows before Wade could reach him.

Wade didn't try to give chase. There were a score of places on the campus where the blackrobed stranger could hide. Wade ran into the building and pressed the button controlling the automatic elevator.

He waited impatiently while the car crawled up. Who was this stranger he had seen? Was it Ornstein himself?

He ran along the corridor and knocked loudly on Ornstein's door. He waited, knocked again, but there was no answer. Then he examined the door. He could see a thin glow of light coming from beneath it. Someone must be inside--unless the man he had seen had been Ornstein--or unless---

Wade suddenly reached into his pocket and drew out a bunch of skeleton keys. They were marvelously delicate. One was more than a key. It was a complicated little tool with an adjusting screw at the end and teeth that could be set into any size lock. It was Wade's own invention.

He thrust it into the lock on Ornstein's door, turned the knurled screw head with sensitive fingers, and in a moment had the door open.

The lights in Ornstein's laboratory were still burning brightly. He stared around, then his eyes suddenly came to rest on the far end of the room. They widened in horror.

The huddled figure of Professor Ornstein was lying on the floor, his white coat thrown open. And at one side of the coat was a sinister circle of spreading crimson!

CHAPTER VI - A CRY FOR HELP

"MURDERED!" Wade's lips framed the word silently.

The man whom he had more than half-suspected of being the killer was now lying dead at his feet! The handle of a small, sharp knife projected from Ornstein's side.

It was a knife that Wade remembered having seen on a shelf at the time of his former visit. Ornstein had used it as a paper cutter.

There were no signs of a struggle. The killer must have taken Ornstein by surprise.

Then Wade saw a half-open door into the next room. He walked to it, opened it farther, and saw that it gave into a small laboratory with a window opening on a fire escape.

Something was lying in the center of the floor. It was a crumpled cambric handkerchief. He picked it up, then whistled. In one corner of the handkerchief were the initials "Z.S."

He went to the window and stared at it tensely. A square had been cut cleverly out of the pane and the glass pushed in so that someone could reach the lock. It had been done so neatly and quietly that Ornstein in the next room hadn't heard anyone enter.

Wade examined the edges of the cut pane. The cuts were deep but uneven. They hadn't been made by any regular glass cutter; but they had been effective.

He went back into the main laboratory, picked up the telephone and called Thompson's number again.

"You might as well stay out of bed, chief," he said. "You won't get any sleep tonight. Ornstein has been bumped off now. Not a fireball this time. Someone sneaked up and stabbed him with his own knife. You'll want to come over and take a look."

In fifteen minutes the siren of a fast police car made complaining echoes over the campus grounds. Wade had spent those fifteen minutes prowling around Ornstein's laboratory. But he hadn't found anything of interest. The still, marblewhite face of the professor kept its secret. There was surprise rather than fear written on his dead features.

When Thompson arrived Wade told him all that he had seen and found, including the handkerchief with the initials Z.S. on it.

"It's Smith all right," said Thompson grimly. "But how to find him? He must have a hideout somewhere near here."

The inspector turned and snapped orders to two of his men.

"Hunt around the campus. Look for his tracks. If you find one of his footprints near the fire escape we'll have him nailed as the murderer. Then we'll smoke him out of his hole if it takes a year."

He sent two other men on the run to Smith's dormitory.

"We've had the place shadowed," he said. "But he may have sneaked in."

All over the campus, lights were springing up as the news of the murder spread to students and sleepy faculty members.

Wade began to examine the window again with Thompson at his side. Then the telephone in the outer laboratory began ringing harshly.

A detective picked it up, listened, then held the instrument out. There were tense lines in his face.

"Someone's calling for help!" he said.

Wade, stepping forward first, snatched the phone from the man's hand and put the receiver to his ear. A voice he recognized at once came over the wire.

"For God's sake--I'm being attacked--here in my laboratory--help--I--"

The voice trailed off in a wheezing gasp. It was Professor Hartz speaking.

Wade verified this from the frightened operator downstairs. Hartz had called the Institute switchboard and the operator had transferred the call to Ornstein's room, knowing the police were there.

"Come on," said Wade, turning to Thompson. "I know where Hartz is. Someone is up there with him--Doctor Zero, I think."

He went downstairs with Thompson and a detective at his side. They ran across a section of the campus and Wade led them to the building, on the top floor of which Hartz had his place.

Thompson fumed with impatience as the old-fashioned elevator in Hartz's building went skyward sluggishly.

"Hell," he said, "this place is like the Ark. He'll be dead by the time we get there."

But Hartz wasn't dead. A muffled voice called out in answer to their knock.

"Come in!"

HARTZ was on the floor, his head and shoulders resting against a couch. His collar and tie were ripped open. He was fingering his neck and gasping hoarsely. The room was in complete disorder with books and papers scattered around and a chair tipped over. The window was open. Hartz pointed toward it.

"He came through there--and left the same way." Hartz's voice was a hoarse croak. "I didn't see him. He grabbed me from behind."

Wade ran to the window. A fire escape zigzagged down here, too, and night shadows obscured its bottom.

Thompson lifted Hartz onto the sofa, then went and got him a drink of water from the cooler.

"Was it young Smith? Didn't you get a glimpse of him?"

Hartz shook his white head.

"No, but it was his hands I felt. The poor boy must have gone insane."

"Ornstein was murdered a few minutes ago," said Thompson. "We've got to locate Smith now. He and Doctor Zero are the same man."

Hartz nodded.

"An egomaniac," he said. "A man with a Napoleonic complex."

Wade recognized phrases from the terminology of popular psychology. He was staring around Hartz's laboratory. A skylight window lighted it in the daytime. Batteries of powerful bulbs hung down with silvered reflectors behind them to make the place bright at night. On three sides of the room the walls were lined with books and cabinets containing minerals and chemicals.

Wade seemed suddenly to lose interest in Hartz and what he was saying. He walked over to a bookshelf and began taking down volumes. The professor turned his white head to stare at Wade's back. Inspector Thompson turned, too. His voice was sarcastic.

"We've got a murder investigation on our hands, Hammond. If you want to read why don't you join a library?"

But Wade wasn't reading. He couldn't seem to find a book that satisfied him. He was pulling them out now and piling them on a nearby table. Thompson spoke again.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Hammond? Have you gone nuts? Leave those books alone!"

Professor Hartz lifted his feet off the sofa and banged them down on the floor. His expression had suddenly changed.

"Keep away from my books," he snapped. "Leave them alone, young man."

Harsh lines had come into the professor's face all at once. They were lines of poisonous bitterness; lines that seemed to have been etched there by hidden, unhealthy emotions and secret hell fires.

He rose and moved toward Wade, one claw-like hand stretched out and his eyes blazing. For Wade had paid no attention to either him or Thompson. He was pulling out more books and reaching in behind them.

Suddenly he grabbed two large red volumes. They left a hole in the shelf, and Wade's hand darted in. For a moment his fingers groped. Then there came a click of metal.

Wade stepped back and Inspector Thompson gasped. The shelves of books covering the whole side of the room were swinging outward, disclosing a door in the wall behind them.

"My God, Hammond--what's this?"

Thompson was staring in amazement at the secret door.

Professor Hartz seemed suddenly to have turned into a madman. He leaped toward Wade, his withered old features a hideous mask of hate. His eyes seemed inhuman in their ferocity. He wasn't the cool scientist now. His hands reached toward Wade's throat like talons. But Wade stepped aside and whirled.

He gave Hartz a sudden violent push that sent him staggering back across the room.

"Watch him, chief. See that he doesn't pull a gun or a knife. I want to take a look in here."

WADE spoke with an air of confidence that left Thompson speechless. He pulled the hidden door open and stepped into the room behind it after snapping on a light switch. The room was another laboratory, compact and efficient, with a cement floor and a strange, squat piece of mechanism crouching in the center like an evil monster.

"Look!" Wade was pointing up toward the skylight.

There were windows up there which could be slid back on rollers, and, close to them, was the end of a telescoping metal shaft which had its base in the strange machine.

"I'm not enough of a scientist to tell you just what it is," said Wade. "But here's where those fireballs that killed Munn and the two detectives came from. It's an electro-atomic generator of some sort, capable of creating ball lightning which can be directed by means of a radioactive metal."

A noise interrupted his words. It was the sound of thumping feet. Someone was kicking on wood. It came from the door of a nearby closet. Wade walked over and flung it open. His face showed little surprise; but Thompson muttered in amazement.

Inside the closet a young man with a gag in his mouth was tied hand and foot and lying on the floor. He had drawn his knees up and was thumping his heels against the wall lustily. It was Zadok Smith.

Wade took a penknife from his pocket, reached down and freed the young man. Smith was willing to talk this time. Words tumbled over each other, "What did that old buzzard mean--tying me up? Did Ornstein put him up to it--and what's this place here?" "This," said Wade softly, "is Doctor Zero's laboratory. Our old friend, Hartz, has a dual personality. He's Doctor Zero, master criminal, with a brain fired by ambitious schemes, and Professor Hartz, Ph.D., savant of science. You've been studying with a versatile man, Smith. You should feel honored."

"Good God--you don't mean it! Hartz has been doing all this?"

"Yes, look over there, Smith. Even I can guess what he was doing here besides making lethal ball lightning. That was a side issue."

Wade was pointing toward one side of the secret laboratory. A big electric furnace stood on a metal table. There was a cooling tank beside it and a shelf of glass jars containing hundreds of carbon crystals.

"I knew he was bugs on the notion of making artificial diamonds," said Smith. "But I didn't guess he'd ever tried it."

"That was the motive behind his killings," said Wade. "He had to have money and lots of it for his experiments. It was why he thought of his extortion plot against Munn. He was nuts on diamonds. I felt when I first met him that those two stones he wore were somehow out of character. He even used a diamond to cut the glass on Ornstein's window. He must have thought Ornstein was getting suspicious and he went there to plant a chunk of metal as he did in my apartment and then send a couple of fireballs to do the trick. Ornstein caught him at it and Hartz used a knife to cover his tracks. He used you, Smith, to spy on Ornstein's electrical work and keep track of him."

Smith stammered and flushed.

"I thought Ornstein was the murderer," he said.

"Yes," said Wade. "You thought you were being a pretty clever amateur detective with that gadget of yours. I suppose you found that the fireballs came from the direction of the Institute."

"Yes, I thought Ornstein was sending them."

"So did I for a while," said Wade. "Hartz was clever. His acting just now showed that. He knew we'd suspect Ornstein and you. He dropped your handkerchief when he went to Ornstein's place to make sure."

Thompson edged forward. "There's one thing I don't get," he said. "Who kidnapped Miss Munn? Where is she?"

Wade nodded toward Smith. "I've got an idea you can answer that," he said.

Smith nodded and turned red again.

"I didn't kidnap her," he said. "I warned her that she was in danger and got her to hide for a while in a safe place. She was scared. She didn't like Ornstein as much as she seemed to. She always trusted me. She's in a hotel in the country."

"That's another reason I began to think Smith wasn't the criminal," said Wade. "I figured by the tracks that Arlene Munn had left her aunt's willingly. Then that clue of the handkerchief in Ornstein's place was a little too obvious. That and the diamond scratches on the window made me think that Hartz was the murderer. With Ornstein dead and Smith out there seemed to be no one else. This room of Hartz's didn't look big enough to take up all the space here. I figured there was another room behind one of those book shelves."

Thompson wiped his face.

"You've done a swell job, Hammond. We may not land Hartz in the hot seat. They may send him to the bughouse instead. But with Doctor Zero out of the way we'll be able to get a good night's sleep again and the department will have some peace."

MISTRESS OF SNARLING DEATH

STEPHEN DEMEREST stopped when he saw the figure coming toward him across the desolate, rain-drenched fields. It was his first glimpse of a human being since his car had mired in the thick mud of the country road.

He was on foot now, lost in a dreary region of deserted farms and rocky fields, from which all fertility seemed to have been pressed by the weight of ages. Even the spring rain had brought no life back to the barren, eroded earth.

He waited beside the rough path he'd followed. The figure was only a dimly moving shape in the dusk, at first. Then, it materialized into a human form enveloped in some sort of dark cloak, with a stiff, wide-brimmed hat standing out queerly from the head, reminding him of a fantastic figure out of the mists of antique Spanish legend. But this was New England he was in, not ancient Spain, and the approaching figure was incongruous.

Then Stephen Demerest started. For the lowering sunset clouds broke apart a little. A sulphurous glow came through them, touching the wet landscape with a weird, sickly saffron light. And he saw that the person coming toward him was a woman.

She moved with stately grace. There was something so odd about her presence in this lonely spot, something so arresting in her costume, that Demerest stared in growing wonder.

She got closer. He saw that she was youthful, hardly more than a girl. A girl with pale, impassive features, beautifully molded, and great dark eyes that were strangely fixed upon him.

He stood speechless, breathless. She was directly opposite before he pulled himself out of his trance sufficiently to speak. "Can you tell me," he said, "if I'm anywhere near the Benjamin Halliday house?"

Her eyes remained fixed upon him, but she didn't answer. Demerest hurriedly explained: "My car got stuck in the mud. I had to leave it. I thought I was taking a short-cut across country to the Halliday house, but apparently I'm lost."

Still she was silent, her oval, cameo-clear face unchanging in its expression, her dark, unfathomable eyes staring at him as though he were something less than human.

Demerest, wet, cold, weary and annoyed, stepped quickly toward her--and at once stopped with a stifled gasp. For a sound reached him that he hadn't heard before--the soft, rustling patter of many feet. He saw suddenly that the girl wasn't alone.

Behind her, their shaggy bodies almost invisible against the dark ground, six great black dogs padded two abreast in somber escort. Their huge muzzles hung close to the earth. They rolled their eyes upward, until a dozen points of sinister, greenish fire glared at Demerest. He stood transfixed, spellbound, feeling his spine crawl with horror.

Yet they were only dogs after all, he reasoned, and this girl constituted his one hope of finding his way out of the wilderness before night came.

He took another step toward her. The dogs, as though obeying a quick, unspoken command, broke their strange formation and suddenly ringed him, the giant leaders slinking around to his back, the others stationing themselves one on each side and two in front. They stood stiff-legged, fangs bared, the fur on their necks lifting up in savage hackles.

Demerest felt a moment of instinctive, cringing dread. He wasn't a coward. But his good sense told him that he stood in the presence of violent death. In a concerted attack these dogs would rip out his throat, literally tear him to pieces.

The girl stopped, too. Tall, imperious, and lovely in spite of her grotesque garb, she regarded him searchingly for many seconds, her great, dark eyes lingering on his face. Then her lips moved. She made a clucking sound to the dogs.

They fell out of their ring formation as quickly as they had assumed it, and slunk behind her again, following with silent obedience as she moved away.

Demerest stood weak and trembling, a light sweat beading his forehead, as the weird cavalcade passed on. The dogs appeared to vanish almost at once, their great shapes blending with the darkness of the ground.

For a full minute he watched the girl move off, and got a suggestion of the lithe loveliness of her figure beneath her cloak, the exquisite grace of her carriage. He stared until her imperious shoulders blurred and disappeared in the gathering dusk.

Then, resolutely, he turned and followed. She had refused to speak to him. Her dogs had menaced his life. She'd treated him as something to be ignored or scorned. But there must, he reasoned, be some

human habitation in the direction she had taken.

DARKNESS came. The sulphurous glow faded from the west, extinguished by the dying day, and blotted out by the low-seeping rain clouds that were gathering again. A wind whimpered across the soggy fields like a tortured spirit. Demerest strayed from the path several times.

He bumped into jagged rocks, scratched himself on ground-clinging bushes. At the end of half an hour it was pitch-black. His small flashlight, with its battery nearly exhausted and its bulb already weakly red, shed hardly enough illumination for him to see a yard ahead. Finally he caught sight of a wan glimmer in the darkness.

He moved toward it, seeing in imagination the shapes of the great black dogs creeping close. The glimmer became an old-fashioned porch lantern swinging above the door of a massive stone house.

Demerest stooped and groped for a stick. If the black beasts served as watch dogs for this mansion, they might attack him.

He got closer, stared at the imposing front of the building, and realized that this must be the Halliday place. A sudden sense of the strangeness of his mission came to him. It was deeper, more eerie than when he'd received the letter in his pocket, every word of which he remembered clearly. It read:

Dear Stephen:

You probably have forgotten me, but your dear father and I were very close friends. And now, because I'm in desperate trouble, I'm turning to you, his son.

I've heard that you're engaged in radio work. Please come to my country home at once. Pretend you're nothing more than a radio repair man whom I've summoned. Don't admit that you know me. Be formal when we meet, unless we get a chance to talk alone. Guard every action, every word. Be ready to help me when the signal is given. There's no one else on the outside I'd dare turn to.

I've made many mistakes. I've been a wicked, selfish old fool. But, for the sake of one I love more than life itself, I ask you to help me. The enclosed check for five hundred dollars will defray expenses.

Thinking back, Stephen Demerest shook his head. He had no inkling of the letter's meaning. He remembered Benjamin Halliday only dimly, recalling, however, that he had once been his father's friend. Only a few meager bits of information had come to him about Halliday. The man had grown wealthy in Europe. He had married brilliantly but unhappily. His wife had run off with another man, leaving him with an infant daughter. Then no further reports of Halliday had reached Demerest until, two years ago, he'd seen a brief notice in the paper of Halliday's arrival in America.

What the man's trouble now was, why he had buried himself in the wildest part of New England, Demerest could not imagine.

But the size of the house before him indicated wealth. He believed it was Halliday's place. He approached the door, lifted the old-fashioned knocker and heard the hollow thud of it echo far inside the house.

Footsteps approached. The door was opened and Demerest froze into startled wonder. It was as though the mouth of some fantastic sub-chamber of hell had opened. Never had he seen such a revoltingly ugly man as the one who stood in the threshold.

A single, glaring eye gazed out of a scarred, pockmarked face. The man's nose had been eaten away by accident or disease. His mouth was twisted into a misshapen hole that showed two broken teeth. The

place where his other eye should have been was a gaping, horrible cavity in his cadaverous face.

Demerest made an effort to keep his voice steady. "Is this Mr. Halliday's house?" he asked.

For almost a minute the single eye of the man before him searched his face, probed like a bright gimlet, trying, it seemed, to read his thoughts. Then the ugly head bobbed. The man stood waiting.

"I'm a radio specialist," went on Demerest. "Mr. Halliday asked me to come to do some repairing. My car, with all my tools in it, got mired in the mud. I'll have to get it in the morning. I wonder if I can stay here for the night?"

Again the noseless face bobbed. The man could understand, but seemed incapable of speech. It came to Demerest with another pang of horror that he was not only disfigured but also mute.

The hideous servant stood aside and motioned for Demerest to enter. Demerest did so and found himself in a richly decorated hall. He started to look about him, then jumped as a voice suddenly spoke at his side. "This way if you please!"

He had seen no one else come in, but when he looked around, there was another man almost as ugly as the first--a gnome-like figure with immensely broad shoulders and arms that nearly reached the floor. His simian, brutal face appeared hardly human, yet it was he who had spoken. He added gruffly: "You can't see Mr. Halliday now. The doctor's with him. Wait in here."

The gnome-man ushered Demerest into a big drawing-room, then turned and left him. Demerest nervously drew a cigarette from his coat and lit it. But he'd barely taken a puff when a shuffling step sounded.

He whirled, went close to the door. An old man carrying a physician's black satchel came slowly down the stairs. He, too, was hideously ugly, chinless, with a great projecting nose like the beak of some bird, and a pompadour of stiff white hair, giving him the look of an evil, crested parrot. He nodded at the servant, turned red-rimmed eyes on Demerest.

Demerest shuddered. Every human being he had seen in this fantastic place had been ugly as Satan.

The gnome-man saw the doctor to the door, then came back and planted himself in front of Demerest. "You may now go up and see Mr. Halliday," he said, harshly. "I understand he's expecting you."

Demerest didn't answer. He moved up the stairs, heard the gnome-man's step close behind him. The servant was dogging his footsteps like an evil shadow.

"Right here!" The servant held open a door and followed Demerest into a room where there was a huge, old-fashioned canopied bed.

Demerest's eyes swung to the figure on it, then to the two others who stood beside it.

HE man in the bed was obviously Halliday. That wrinkled, crafty face, prematurely aged, stirred vague memories in Demerest's mind. The other two, a youngish, fair-haired couple, were the first civilized-looking people he'd seen in the house. The woman had fair skin, a shapely body and washed-out but still attractive blue eyes. The man bore a striking resemblance to her. Both seemed well-bred, quiet.

Halliday turned feverish eyes on his visitor. Demerest could sense the hideous, gnome-like servant standing close behind him; and Halliday's expression seemed to plead craftily for Demerest to be discreet.

"You've come about the radio," said Halliday in a thin, flat voice. "I'm glad. It hasn't been acting right. I'm an old man, bedridden, helpless. The radio, which keeps me in touch with the outside world, is one of my few pleasures."

"I won't be able to fix it until tomorrow," Demerest said. "My car, with all my tubes and testing equipment, is stuck in the road a mile from here. If you'll let me spend the night, I'll start on the radio tomorrow."

"I expected you to spend the night," said Halliday. "We're far from things here--isolated, as you see." He waved his thin hand toward the man and the woman. "My good friends, Eric and Nana Larsen! They and my daughter, Gail, are taking turns nursing me."

Demerest looked into the faded blue eyes of the man and the woman, and knew that these two must be brother and sister.

The woman favored him with a smile that made her look younger and glamorously appealing, in a foreign sort of way. "Please to meet you," she said, with a slight, becoming accent. Then her eyes fell on the hideous gnome standing behind Demerest. The smile left her face and she shuddered. An air of tenseness settled over the room.

Halliday's features, now that the first effort of greeting was over, had become wan and corpselike, their only expression one of inscrutable, deepseated terror. He said, listlessly: "Dinner will soon be ready. I'm sorry I can't join you; but I shall not be alone. Either Eric or Nana will stay with me."

The invitation to dinner seemed also dismissal. The hideous servant, standing so close behind Demerest that he could feel the man's breath on his neck, said: "Come, Mr. Demerest. I'll find you a room."

Demerest had only a small grip with him. He followed the squat-bodied servant down a long hall. The man thrust open a door, lighted an oil lamp and favored Demerest with a curious leer. He said: "Here's where you'll sleep."

There was another canopied bed in the room---like the one Halliday had. The house was obviously ancient, all the furnishings dating back to Colonial times. The servant withdrew, then abruptly thrust his ugly face back around the door. "Dinner will be ready in ten minutes," he growled.

Demerest unpacked his things, went out into the hall, and saw Nana Larsen descending the staircase. She had changed her gown, as though for his especial benefit. Her low-cut dress revealed the shapeliness and alluring whiteness of her shoulders.

But a moment later the pale beauty of Nana Larsen was eclipsed by the lush, dark loveliness of the girl who entered the hall below, through another door.

Demerest started, stared, felt his heart contract. For he was again looking at the classic, inscrutable features of the mystery girl, whose great dogs had menaced his life.

Nana Larsen smiled. "Miss Halliday, this is Mr. Demerest, your father's radio man."

The mystery girl's dark eyes searched Demerest's face. She nodded briefly, acknowledging the introduction. There was something both haughty and tragic in her bearing. She preceded them into the dining room, and Demerest noticed that she was dressed almost as strangely as before. Her gown was individual and exquisitely becoming, but old-fashioned, Victorian in its cut, as though the girl were costumed for some part in a play.

A third repulsive and gnome-like servant, seeming to be a brother of the one who had given Demerest his

orders, was in the dining room. Gail Halliday seated herself with all the hauteur of a princess. Nana Larsen smiling slid into her chair. Demerest took a place facing the two women.

He had a strange feeling of unreality. No one spoke. The candles on the table shed a light that barely penetrated to the corners of the big Colonial room. The presence of the monster-like servants cast a damper on the meal. Demerest could feel their eyes boring into him, watching his every move.

Each time one of them went near Nana Larsen, to present a dish, she cringed away, as though the white, bare skin of her arms and shoulders shrank from any possible contact with their simian hands.

GAIL HALLIDAY kept her eyes steadfastly on her plate. Demerest found himself watching her with ever-increasing fascination. He'd never seen a girl like her, never beheld such a mixture of strange beauty and chill aloofness. Once, when she raised her dark eyes and glanced at him, he had a sense of hidden, unaroused depths, tragic and exciting. He was attracted by her and afraid of her, at one and the same time. Nana Larsen made conversation finally by asking him about his trip from the city, slurring soft words in her peculiarly accented voice.

The meal ended at last. Gail Halliday slipped away as mysteriously, as silently, as she had come. Nana Larsen went upstairs and Eric Larsen came down. But he did not attempt to talk to Demerest, and Demerest went to his room, after one cigarette.

There seemed nothing else to do. Halliday hadn't called him, and he found himself wondering if the old man's strange letter had not been the product of delirium.

As he went along the hall to his chamber, he caught sight of the most hideous of the servants, the one with the single burning eye and noseless face, watching him. The ugly mute stared, as though in secret, diabolical speculation.

Demerest paced his room nervously, smoking cigarette after cigarette. The whimpering wind rose outside to a tortured moan. Spurts of rain rapped against his window with a sound like bony knuckles. Demerest drew the shade, gazed out.

He started when he looked across to another wing of the house, where there were lighted shades, across which a figure moved--the tall, lithe, glorious figure of Gail Halliday. She was also pacing, appearing and reappearing against the shades.

Then Demerest heard the throaty howling of dogs, a strange, clamorous, oddly menacing chorus, out in the darkness of the night. Somewhere on the other side of the court, in the girl's wing of the house, the great black beasts were imprisoned, stirred apparently by the noise of the storm, and by a macabre, vaguely-felt restlessness that filled the air. Demerest suddenly had a sense that unknown, devilish forces were all about; that some storm other than the wind and the rain was gathering, creeping closer and closer, threatening them all.

The girl finally stopped pacing. She disappeared from a window, then came back. For a moment he saw her figure eerily silhouetted without the strange gown on it; saw the chaste, proud lines of her body. Then her light went out.

Demerest lay down on his bed without undressing. Steadily, above the wind and rain, he heard the mournful howling of the dogs. He dozed into fitful slumber, their animal voices ringing in his ears like some weird devil's chorus.

A scream awakened him, brought him bolt upright in bed, then sent him lunging off it, straight toward the door. For there was terror, anger in the shrill cry, and it was in the hall outside.

Demerest flung the door open, leaped into the corridor. In the glow of a hanging lamp near the stairway he saw two struggling figures. One was the hideous, apelike gnome-man who had spoken to him. The other was Nana Larsen.

She tried to break away as Demerest stood gaping. Her face was convulsed in terror and loathing. The servant clutched her with arms that writhed like constricting pythons. He lifted her bodily, tried to carry her toward the stairs.

With a cry Demerest leaped forward. But he stopped almost at once, as though steel cables were looped about his wrists. He stooped and whirled, gasping, with the clutch of muscular fingers around his arms. He looked back, saw that the other gnome-man had sneaked up behind him.

THE inhuman-appearing monster was incredibly strong, so strong that, with the surprise hold he had taken, Demerest was helpless. He cursed, kicked back, but the gnome-man twisted his arms until they ached, blocking all movement.

Nana Larsen shrieked, trying desperately to get free. Demerest saw her frantic movements tear her gown, saw the gleam of bare flesh, white as alabaster. The gnome-man's fingers twined closer around her. He clutched her desperately, jaws clenched, eyes glaring, panting with his efforts.

Then the tall form of Eric Larsen bounded into the hall. His eyes were blazing. He had a gun in his hand. With a nerve that Demerest admired, he took aim, waited a brief instant till his sister's squirmings left a portion of the servant's chest uncovered. Then he fired, twice.

With a hideous howl, the ugly servant dropped the woman. He took three steps backward, clutched at his chest, toppled down the stairs, with death glazing his eyeballs. The man holding Demerest whimpered and broke away. He was quick as he darted along the hall, but Eric Larsen was quicker. He slapped a bullet after the retreating figure.

Demerest heard the spat of it against flesh, saw the gnome-man's arm jerk, heard his moan of pain. Then the man was gone through a door. And Demerest turned and strode toward the fallen woman.

She was just picking herself up, her clothes halftorn from her. But in her agitation she didn't seem to notice them. Her brother, Eric, was panting with fury, face tense and white. The sound of the shots had aroused the dogs still more. Their barking rose to a frenzied pitch, blended with the moaning of the wind. Nana shivered, pressed her arms across her body. Eric tensely said: "Stay here. Miss Halliday is in danger. I've got to see."

Demerest started to follow, but Nana clutched him. "No, stay with me! I've got to go back to Mr. Halliday. He is in danger, too, but--" She suddenly turned, ran down the stairs to where the fallen gnome-man lay in a tumbled heap. Demerest saw her stoop and retrieve a small automatic, which the man had evidently taken from her. She came running up the stairs, her torn clothes flapping wide.

Eric Larsen had gone, and Nana motioned Demerest to follow her into Halliday's room. Halliday was sitting up in bed, wild-eyed, staring. His face whitened at sight of Demerest and Nana. He said in a strained whisper: "What--what has happened?"

Nana went to him, laid her hand on his forehead, and pushed him gently but firmly back. "Nothing, my friend. Please calm yourself. One of your servants attacked me, and Eric had to shoot him. The man was mad. But there is nothing to fear. Eric has gone to see that Gail isn't harmed."

An unearthly howling came from the dogs, rising in a crescendo louder than at anytime before. Halliday pushed himself up, bright feverish spots burning in his gaunt cheeks, eyes like living coals. "No, no!" he

cried. "Something must be done. Demerest, go to Gail. Help her!"

Demerest turned toward the door, but a sudden icy voice checked him. "Fool--stay quiet! Another step, and I'll kill you."

He whirled. Nana Larsen was clutching the automatic, had pointed it straight at his heart. Her pale blue eyes were glittering and deadly, chill as ice. Her voluptuous body was as rigid as a figure carved from snow. He saw her finger tighten on the trigger as she read defiance in his eyes, saw murder on her face.

He did the one thing possible, leaped sidewise and dropped flat. He heard the report of the gun, felt the fanning flame of the bullet above his head. He caught hold of a light chair and flung it at her. As she leaped aside screaming, he rushed her in the brief instant that her gun was deflected.

She swung wildly, crashed two more shots his way. But she missed him. He closed with her, thrusting her wrist downward and aside in a grip of iron.

She fought like a trapped panther. She kicked him, scratched him. When he wrestled the gun from her fingers, made her drop it, she bent suddenly and sank her white teeth into his arm.

He cried out, hugged her in a restricting grip that made her hardly able to move. She hissed like a cat, came up out of her bursting dress, her body gleaming, and tried to scratch out his eyes. Demerest, in the straining emergency of the moment, did something he'd never done before, something ungallant but necessary. He crashed a fist to the point of her chin, dropping her, senseless, to the floor.

He turned away, picked up her gun, and ran to the door, with Halliday shouting for him to hurry. He didn't know what weird conspiracy he had to face. He only knew that Gail Halliday was in some sort of danger. He seemed to feel her dark, unfathomable eyes upon him, no longer arrogant, but helpless and appealing.

He ran through the corridor down a flight of stairs, around another hall into that other wing of the mansion. He heard a sound of battle, saw Eric Larsen struggling with the second gnome-like figure. The servant had evidently jumped him, taken him by surprise. With his one good arm, he was trying to hold Larsen, clutching both wrists, to prevent him from again using his weapon. Larsen was snarling, cursing, and the dogs in a nearby room were howling frightfully, leaping against a closed door, scratching and whining with desperate claws.

DEMEREEST ran straight toward the fighting figures. He raised the gun he had taken from Nana Larsen. Then Eric Larsen saw him. With a superhuman wrench, he broke away from the servant. He whirled, his gun aimed straight at Demerest.

Demerest pumped the trigger of the small automatic. He felt a brief, sickening sensation inside when no shot sounded. The gun's magazine was empty.

He saw the quick flash of Larsen's pistol, felt a hot, stinging pain at the top of his head. He sank to his knees, as though a burning iron had been laid across his scalp. He sank inertly, saw Larsen turn and fire straight into the gnome-man's face. The ugly creature went down spouting blood.

Larsen turned and disappeared through a door. Demerest could still see. His eyes were half-open. His mind was even capable of registering impressions. But the stunning force of the bullet that had laid his scalp open, almost seared his brain, made movement impossible. He could only lie and stare through half-closed lids.

Dimly he heard a scream, then silence--except for the fearful racket of the dogs. A moment later, Larsen

came through the door. He was carrying Gail Halliday. There was a bruise on the girl's white forehead. She was in her nightdress, with her white legs trailing. Larsen, without a single glance at Demerest, bore her along the hall and out into the night.

Demerest tried to rise. He fought within himself, as a man fights a horrible, paralyzing force; fought while his brain burned in agony, and hot blood trickled down his face. But he couldn't rise. And he saw a shadow, as in a nightmare, creep along the hall when Larsen had gone.

It was the horrible, noseless servant with the single eye. The eye was glaring now, burning with the fierce light of a devil's torch. The man was shaking. His lips were moving, writhing across his broken teeth, though no sound came from them.

He moved straight toward the door, from behind which the howling of the dogs sounded. He sprang a bolt, drew the door outward. He went down writhing under a mad rush of flying black bodies.

Like the moving ribbon of some satanic cyclorama, Demerest saw the snarling, wicked heads of the great black dogs. He saw their green eyes, their slaver lips, their bared and glistening fangs. He saw them come straight toward him in a surging flood of fury. They loomed as large as mammoths, their fangs were curving scimitars that seemed, to his dazed brain, to sweep the whole hallway. He already thought he felt them, rending, tearing at his throat, thought he felt his own hot blood choking him.

But instead the dogs passed over him, unheeding, trampled him with their flying paws, went by so near him that he could feel their fetid breaths on his face. They passed on along the hall, turned in a column and plunged through the open doorway out into the night.

Demerest lay weakly, sheer terror bringing his numb brain slowly back. He watched as the one-eyed, monstrous servant got to his feet. He saw a hideous, sinister expression on the man's scarred face. The servant disappeared for a brief moment, returned, and came toward Demerest with something in his fingers.

Demerest cringed with returning consciousness, gasped and shrank back in horror as the one-eyed servant pressed a cold substance against his face. Then reason asserted itself. Demerest relaxed for an instant, trembling.

The one-eyed man was pressing a wet cloth to his skin, trying to revive him. Demerest helped, battling the cloudy pain in his head. The servant got two more cloths, then dragged Demerest to his feet. He plucked at Demerest's coat sleeve, made strange, inarticulate whimpers in his scarred throat, pointed out the door through which the dogs had gone.

Demerest understood that he was to follow them. The servant drew an old-fashioned lantern from a closet. He shuffled ahead of Demerest, still beckoning fiercely.

As he neared the doorway, Demerest heard a sound he was never to forget, a sound of mortal, bloodcurdling horror coming out of the darkness---a scream torn from a human throat. Above it, he heard the snarling of the dogs like that of a pack of ravening wolves.

The one-eyed servant hurried forward. Demerest, weak and trembling, followed. The cold rain on his face helped to revive him, washed the blood from the crease along his scalp. The sound of the horrible battle ahead lent speed to his feet.

Then under the glow of the lantern, he saw what was happening; saw a bloodstained body leap upward, like a huge white fish, above a sea of tossing black muzzles. The sea of savage animal forms was speared with green points of light, like stars blazing above water.

LARSEN, stripped from the waist up, his flesh torn already into awful ribbons, was striking right and left with his gun butt. But the fierce dogs pulled him down. His crimson-stained back disappeared under a tidal wave of furry bodies. He didn't appear again, and the sound of gurgling, bubbling worryings that followed sickened Demerest.

The servant waved his skinny arms, again making meaningless noises. The dogs snarled and broke away a little. Demerest caught sight of the still, shapeless thing that had a moment before been Larsen. Faint and sickened, he turned toward the slumped form on the ground a little way off.

The dogs, jaws dripping, instantly sprang away from their dead quarry. Demerest thought for an instant they were going to fly at him. But they ringed the form of Gail Halliday and snarled their menace at him until the clucking of the noseless servant made them draw off.

Then Demerest and the servant bent over Gail Halliday. She lay unconscious but feebly stirring, the thin, rain-soaked nightdress plastered to the lovely lines of her body, beautiful, Demerest thought, as some reclining, fabled goddess. The servant plucked Demerest's arm, made motions for him to pick the girl up and carry her.

Demerest did so, feeling a strange, thrilling sense of protective tenderness as her warm body lay against his chest. Her face was upturned. Her black, silky hair lay in damp, sweet ringlets on her glorious shoulders.

As the servant led the way, Demerest bore her toward the house, leaving that grisly thing out in the dark. The dogs fell into step behind him, escorting him now, as though in carrying their strange mistress he had become their master. Demerest thrilled with an exultant feeling of power as he heard their padding feet.

As he entered the house, and the light fell on Gail Halliday's face, he stopped in wonder.

The pain in his head seemed to turn to a quivering song; the beat of tumultuous music. She was beautiful, so beautiful, that he bent irresistibly, as one in a dream, and pressed his lips against her warm, damp ones. It was a tender kiss, respectful in its lightness, an impulse born of the whirling giddiness in his head, and the great strain he'd been under.

But as he kissed her, Gail Halliday's eyes opened. The lids fluttered like moth wings for a moment, uncovering the dark, glorious depths that lay beneath. She lay still in his arms for a breathless second, looking up, while a slow, strange smile softened her face. Childlike, trusting, her arms tightened about his neck for the barest instant. Then color flooded her pale cheeks. She slipped from his grasp, said huskily: "We must go to my father. He may have been hurt. Those terrible people!"

She turned and ran down the hall, her damp hair swinging against her neck. Demerest and the servant followed, around the wing of the house, up a stairway, into Halliday's room.

HALLIDAY was sitting up in bed, face twitching, hoarsely calling out. Nana Larsen still lay crumpled.

Halliday sank back gasping and held out his shaking arms to his daughter. She fled to them, said soft, reassuring things to comfort him. Then suddenly remembering her thin nightdress, she shrank shyly away into a corner.

Demerest stared at Halliday, and the sick man, finding his voice, spoke to his daughter. "Please go outside a minute, Gail. There are some things I want to tell our friend, Demerest--things he will want to know."

When the girl had gone, Halliday grasped Demerest's hand in his. "You have been kind," he said, "so

kind to come here. You have saved us."

Demerest shook his head. He pointed to the noseless servant. "Thank him. He saved things, just now, by turning the dogs on Larsen. Larsen shot the two others. He is dead, now, himself."

"If you hadn't come," said Halliday, "my servants would never have had the courage to act. Your arrival was the signal."

"The signal for what?"

"To make an attempt to free ourselves from the bondage of the Larsens." Halliday bent forward, his voice trembling. "You must have guessed that they had some hold over me. I know I am dying; I can talk freely, now. There are many things I've done that I shouldn't, but I didn't deserve such persecution. The Larsens were criminals, wicked people trying to steal my money--and Eric Larsen wanted Gail."

"I don't think I quite understand," said Demerest.

"No, no, you wouldn't. But this will help to explain it. I killed the man who ran off with my wife--shot him in a fair fight after he had caused her death by his brutal treatment. I am not a murderer, really--but the law is sometimes cruel. It seemed best to leave Europe, quickly. I thought nobody knew, but the Larsens learned what I had done somehow. They followed me here to blackmail me, bleed me. They threatened to expose me as a criminal, unless I turned over everything I had. They knew I was old, dying, and when I was stubborn, Eric Larsen saw a way of accomplishing his ends through Gail. He might have succeeded---if you hadn't come. He would have taken her away--I don't know where."

Halliday lay back breathing laboredly for a moment. Demerest could see the tortured pounding of his heart, and knew that the man's days were numbered. Halliday went on slowly, huskily:

"In many ways, as I said in my letter, I've been a wicked, selfish fool. But after my wife, Grace, left me, after I'd brought up Gail from babyhood, nursed her, watched over her, I made up my mind that no man should ever take her from me. She had reached lovely young womanhood when I brought her here. I tried my best to see that no attractive man should ever meet her. I hired the most hideous servants I could find. I saw to it that even our family doctor was old and ugly. I went further, and encouraged a scorn of men in Gail herself, told her never to speak to any stranger, gave her clothes that were unconventional, queer. Even the dogs were my doing. She's held in such terror by the few neighbors we have, that no man would go near her.

"But it was wrong, wicked. What has happened in the last few weeks has made me see it. She might, even in her loneliness, have been beguiled by that monster, Larsen. It was wrong, and I want to ask a favor of you, Demerest. I want to pay you handsomely to see, after I'm dead, that Gail leads a more normal life: that she meets some good young men and finds love and marriage, if that is her wish. Will you do that for me, in memory of the friendship that I bore your father?"

Demerest started to speak, then turned his head. Gail Halliday had stolen back into the room. She stood just inside the doorway, tall, white, lovely as a vision, her dark eyes fixed upon him, a strange, knowing smile softening her lips.

Demerest turned toward her father and bowed his head. "I think I can promise to take good care of Gail," he said. "Something tells me she and I are always going to understand each other, and be---dear friends."

THE THING THAT KILLED

WE didn't kill old Doc. The rotten press campaign against us is just low-down yellow journalism. The vicious attack of District Attorney Gleason is a lot of political hooey, thrown out to catch a few extra votes. Patsy Stevens and I are not guilty of the murder of the world's greatest botanist, Dr. Heinrich Sigmund Bloch. Out of respect for his family, and because I didn't want to chuck mud at the name of a Nobel Prize winner, I've kept my mouth shut up till now. I've refused to give the details of the craziest, creepiest scientific experiment ever pulled off. Before that nightmare evening when Bloch's mania for digging into the mysteries of life made him go hog-wild, he was tops in science. I guess you know that his studies in hybridism and his four-volume work, *Osmotic Irregularities among the Sarraceniacious Plants*, are classics. I still think of him myself as a sort of intellectual dynamo, a great botanical genius. And, in spite of the spine-jolting bumps he put me over, I can separate Bloch the experimentalist from Bloch the man.

But I can't hold my tongue any longer. The only chance Patsy Stevens and I have of clearing away the cloud of suspicion that's making life tough for us is to tell the truth frankly. Then maybe people will stop heckling us, stop whispering about us, stop pointing at us as if we were a couple of homicidal crooks.

It all began when I got Sigmund's note, written in his crabbed, old-maid handwriting:

Dear Jerry: You're the fellow I need to help me in a job of work I've got on hand. It's terribly important. Please come out to my place this evening. And--this will probably seem odd to you--don't tell a living soul you're coming. Destroy this note, Jerry, if you still respect your cranky old prof.

Yours affectionately,

Sigmund.

There were two reasons why that note bothered me. Doc was never one to be furtive about anything. He was so honest and open he would just as leave hand his bankbook to a confidence man as not. Now he was acting as secretive as a spy. And I couldn't see why he had picked on me to help him in a "terribly important" experiment, inasmuch as I nearly flunked two of his courses at school.

As Doc had once said himself, I was better at the "dynamic tropisms of the football field" than I was at lab work. There was something phony about the whole set-up. But I was flattered up to my neck that he wanted me to help him.

Grinning, I touched a match to the note and let the ashes drop. I wouldn't have grinned if I had realized that in burning that note and accepting Bloch's invitation I was letting myself in for a taste of unadulterated scientific horror that would haunt me like a nightmare the rest of my life.

But then, as I've indicated, I'm no mental Titan. I'm just one of those chaps who, was thrown in the first round by the Einstein theory and who's still fighting a losing battle with math.

I did what old Sigmund asked me to---said nothing to anybody about where I was going. I slipped away right after supper and headed my Lizzie, which runs in defiance of the laws of equilibrium, gravitation and the conservation of energy, toward the Jersey hills where Doc has his hangout.

It's quite a dump, too. Some of his breeds of crazy plants have been bought by nurserymen all over the country. Doc has picked up some dough to play with. He has put it into greenhouses and buildings on his hundred-acre farm.

I got there just at sunset. Doc met me at the door and I thought at first it was the sunset light that made him look so queer. Then I figured he must be sick. For he was just about the color of the sheepskin I almost didn't get. It was a funny kind of paleness, as if he had a bad case of anemia.

HIS long nose was white and pinched. There were blue circles under his eyes and his cheeks were sunken.

His voice was hearty enough when he said: "Hello, Jerry." But I noticed when he shook hands that his fingers trembled. He turned and led me into the house and I couldn't help seeing that his legs were shaky, too.

"You don't feel well, do you, Prof?" I said.

He turned and gave me a funny look. There was something strange in it, something I'd never seen before. It was almost like suspicion, or cunning.

"I never felt better in my life, Jerry," he said. "But I've been working hard; maybe not eating or sleeping quite enough--and this job of mine is exacting."

I sensed suddenly that he was being evasive.

"What's the job?" I asked.

He ignored that, led me through several doors into a back room of the main house, and I noticed something else that struck me as funny. Every time he went through a door old Doc locked it after him.

He got more and more excited and shaky. By the time we reached his back-room den, there were small hectic flush spots on his paper-white skin. I was more sure than ever that he was sick.

But he didn't talk like a sick or discouraged man. His voice held excitement, elation. He seemed to have some big secret under his hat.

"You're curious, aren't you, Jerry?" he said. When I nodded, he added: "I don't blame you. You've a right to be eaten up with curiosity. But before I tell you about my work, I want to prepare you a little. I don't want you to think I've become a crackpot."

He looked at me with an odd mixture of defiance and appeal as though he were begging me to be indulgent.

"Prof," I said. "I'd have faith in you if you told me you'd transplanted strawberries to the moon. I'm only wondering why you picked out a dumbbell like me to help you when you might have got a whole bunch of sixteen-cylinder, valve--in-the-head brain trusters."

"There's a reason for that," Doc said mysteriously. "I'll explain. But let me show you a few things first."

He drew a bunch of microphotographs from his desk and shoved them toward me. They had things on them that looked like little boats with the bare ribs showing. There were others that were round, like circular sections of honeycomb with perfectly formed hexagonal cells.

"You know what those are, Jerry?"

I nodded. "Diatoms. You can dredge them out of any pond. Every amateur microscopist in the country has squinted at them."

Doc chuckled.

"And you know, Jerry, that we botanists like to call them motile plants. But--" he held up a trembling finger---"there's no absolute assurance that they're plants except that they show traces of chlorophyll. Old-timers thought they were tiny marine animals. They have siliceous skeletons that withstand boiling in

sulphuric acid. They move around and behave very much like mollusks. They may be plants or animals or both. They may be one of the missing links between the plant and animal kingdoms."

Doc was on one of his favorite subjects. I nodded again.

"You used to tell us that in the classroom, Prof."

"Forgive an old man's lapse of memory," he murmured. "I just wanted to be sure you understood, Jerry. Here's another picture. You can identify that, too, of course."

"Sure, Prof," I said. "I'm no botanist, but we got several specimens of those when you took us out on field excursions. They're pitcher plants. Once we almost drowned in a swamp, I remember, getting them."

"Yes, Jerry. Very fine examples of *Sarracenia*. And you know, too, that they're carnivorous, like the sundews, butterworts and bladderworts. The pitchers have a gummy nectar in the bottom and hairs pointing in one direction. Insects can get in, but not out. The plant devours them."

AS Doc said this I thought suddenly of all those doors he had locked behind me. A queer thought, but something in his face or in the atmosphere, brought it to my mind.

Then I suddenly stared at Doc's wrist. His coat cuff had pulled up a little as he reached for the picture, and I saw that there was a strange--looking, bumpy scar on the skin. A little higher up was a queer, lumpy bandage.

"You've hurt yourself, Prof," I said.

He yanked at his cuff quickly.

"It's nothing," he answered. "Only a scratch."

For a second there was an embarrassed silence. For a reason I couldn't understand, Doc's eyes refused to meet mine. Then he looked down at the pictures and spoke.

"Jerry," he said, "both of the photos I've shown you indicate that the plant and animal orders aren't so far apart as some people think. Some day--" He paused again.

"Some day what, Prof?"

"Well, suppose, Jerry, that human beings could borrow some of the secrets that plants possess? Food from the air; untold energy from the sunshine; mineral salts and nitrogen from the soil."

"We get all that by eating green stuff, Prof. Spinach, for instance--"

"I know, Jerry, but suppose a race of men were developed who could do their own direct chemical synthesizing as plants do? Think of the vast possibilities! No food shortages. No worry over droughts. No international conflicts over land to feed growing populations."

I began to feel a little queer. "I see what you're driving at, Prof," I said. "But chlorophyl and haemoglobin are two different things. They--"

He stopped me, smacking his trembling hand down on his desk.

"That's it, boy--chlorophyl and haemoglobin! That's my angle. That's what I'm working on. That's the basis of an experiment of mine that will set the world by its ears. I may not live to see it perfected--you

may not. But centuries hence--"

He had a strange look on his face, the look of a fanatic who is letting his mind chase along one line of thought till he sees everything else cockeyed. The world's full of guys like that right now--dictators who pop their eyes and preen their mustaches, and make whole nations goose-step. I was sorry to see Doc, a scientist, getting lopsided, too. But he went on.

"You don't know what this means to me, Jerry. It's the climax of my whole life's work. I've already taken the first step across the threshold."

"You mean, Prof?"

"I mean I've got a plant closer to the animal kingdom than either the diatom or the common *Sarracenia*. I want you to help me carry on, Jerry, where I've had to leave off."

His voice faltered. His eyes dropped from mine again. Abruptly I had a strange, creepy feeling of uneasiness along my back.

"You're young, Jerry," he added huskily. "You have enough scientific curiosity to understand and appreciate, and enough physical stamina to contribute... You were a football player. You're robust, full-blooded. You'll help me, won't you?"

"Sure," I said a little weakly. "Sure. But what is it you want me to do?"

"Come and I'll show you," he said.

He led the way to a flight of stairs which seemed to go down to a cellar. He locked the door behind us, descended to a small, square hallway with double glass doors in the middle, which I recognized as a sort of air lock. On the other side of that the atmosphere suddenly got strange, unpleasant, and as humid as the tropics.

There was another door with bright lights showing around the edges of it. As Doc opened this a girl in a white uniform came toward us.

I HELD my breath because she was so pretty. She had a mass of copper-blond hair cut in a page-boy bob. Her features were like those of some goddess on an old Greek coin. Her skin was warm, rich, sun-tanned, and she had big, blue, long-lashed eyes.

It wasn't till I took a second look that I noticed the strange expression in those eyes. The pupils were expanded, vacant, as though she were heavily doped.

"This is Patricia Stevens, my assistant," Doc said. "She's a trained nurse and a very competent young woman. Miss Stevens, meet Jerry Lane, a former pupil of mine."

The girl said nothing. Her only response was a brief nod and a vacant glance from her long-lashed eyes. I had the feeling that she was looking through me rather than at me. I saw suddenly that the lovely, sun-tanned complexion that made her look like an outdoors girl came from a battery of blinding flood-lights overhead. They were sunlamps, super-powerful ones, burning some kind of mercury vapor, I guessed, in quartz crystal tubes.

Without any word from Doc she went to the wall with the queer mechanical steps of a sleepwalker or an automaton, and pulled a switch. It was as though it were part of a routine job that she had been trained in till her subconscious mind directed her actions. .

As soon as the switch clicked the big flood--lamps dimmed to a yellow glow and I could see beyond them.

Then I forgot about the girl, forgot even about Doc. Little cold maggots seemed to crawl up my spine.

For there was a plant in the middle of that cellar room such as I've never seen before and never want to see again. It was a horrible, nightmare sort of plant. It had broad, thick leaves covered with thorns and hair and ending in whiplike tendrils. Some of the leaves were curled into deep cups. The stem of the plant was twisty and shiny, It was at least twelve feet high; almost as high as the room. And the color of the stem held me fascinated. That was a sort of blue-red, waxy and feverish.

I drew in my breath, then felt my heart begin to hammer. For something else was happening.

As the lights went dim the plant began to move. Not much--for it was rooted in a tub. But the stem began a slight, snaky undulation and the great, thick leaves started groping in a way that made my spine crawl.

One leaf that I watched seemed to open and shut like the palm of a giant, fingerless hand. There was a strange, eerie energy here. That moving leaf seemed to be a mute gesture out of the chill, prehistoric past before living forms on Earth had become differentiated as they are today.

A sweat broke out on my face and I don't know how long I might have stared like a man in a dream if Doc hadn't spoken.

"Nepenthe Splendens!" he whispered, his voice shaking with pride. "Its ancestors were the great Nepenthe pitcher plants from Malaya. It's taken five years of cross-breeding to develop it. That's the living experiment Jerry, that I want you to help me with."

I saw then that the plant's stem, low down, almost at the base, was split a little and that a length of flexible tubing was held in place there by carefully wound bands of linen tape. The other end of the tubing was coiled in a little box on the floor. The end of it seemed to be forked. There were some dials and gadgets on the floor, too, that I couldn't make anything of.

THE moving leaves of the plant seemed now to be dipping down toward that tubing in a strange, monotonous pulsation that was like the restless wings of a great moth. The lowest leaves of all bent down till they almost touched the tube.

I had a feeling that the plant was struggling to make itself understood; that some blind instinct was shooting powerful impulses through all its cells.

"It's hungry," said Doc quietly. "Photosynthesis stops as soon as we turn the lights off. The plant is growing very fast and has become accustomed to cooperative nutrition the instant its own chlorophyll ceases activity."

He looked at me to see if I understood.

I did understand, with a growing sense of horror, as though cold fingers were pressed around my neck. I understood so well that I pretended dumbness, and forced myself to say:

"Better turn the lights on again and let the plant do its stuff."

"No, Jerry. That wouldn't solve the problem now. This is a wonderful case of interdependence between two living orders--vegetable and animal. The marine alga that finds its home on the backs of horseshoe crabs is as nothing compared to this partnership. This is a true mingling of chlorophyll and haemoglobin in the most remarkable synthetic cooperation the world has ever seen. The plant has reached the stage

where, without periods of mutual cooperation, it will die. It needs such cooperation now. I've served it faithfully. I must rest awhile now for the sake of my health. I'm asking you to take my place, Jerry, in the interest of science."

"You mean--" My voice was trembling so I could hardly recognize it.

"I mean that I'm going to connect your veins with the plant's cells for a time just as I have done with my own veins for days."

He held up his arms, let me see both wrists and I understood the full meaning of those strange scars. I was silent, stunned. "It's no worse than a blood transfusion that is done every day in a hospital," Doc said quietly. "It's a small thing to contribute to an experiment that probably ranks as the greatest in history."

"But--but--" I stammered. "You say this is a case of cooperation. If my blood circulates in the plant, then the plant's sap will circulate in me?"

"Exactly, Jerry. Your blood will be thinned a little, but that is all. You will exchange some proteins for other nutritive elements that the plant manufactures," he spoke very expectantly.

I stared at Doc's sickly, transparent skin and felt my gorge rise. It didn't look as if he had got much out of his partnership with the plant. He divined my thought and tried to head me off it.

"I'm old, Jerry. My cooperation with the plant has been slightly onesided from the first. Because my stamina has lessened through the years I haven't been able to give back my share of energy to *Nepenthes splendens*. But you can. You and he should achieve a perfect chemical balance."

"Look here, Prof," I said. "I'd do almost anything for you--you know it. But this--this is crazy, suicidal. That plant is growing constantly. You said so. It's twelve feet tall now, I won't be able to feed it long anyway. You're starting something you can't finish."

"Can't I!" he said. He chuckled then and got a strange glint in his eyes. "I can get other men," he said.

I realized suddenly then, insofar as his experiment was concerned, he had slipped over the brink. He was so in the grip of his big idea that he had lost all perspective. He wouldn't let anything stop him--not even kidnapping, or murder. If I helped him in this wild business now I'd just be leading him on to his own doom. He was headed for terrible trouble as sure as Fate. But I made my voice soothing.

"You've proved your point now, Prof," I said. "You've fed this plant and you say the plant's fed you. That's about as far as you can carry the experiment till you've gone into all the chemical angles of it."

"You're instructing me in my own life's work, Jerry!"

His voice was cold, ironic for a moment. It was the first time I had ever heard Doc talk like that. But it's the way all fanatics get, dictators included. They don't want to be told anything.

"I was afraid you mightn't understand, Jerry, that's why--"

WHAT Doc did then was something I had not expected or anticipated. He moved faster than I had supposed an old, weak, shaking man could. His thin hand dived into his coat pocket, came out with what seemed to be a tiny toy pistol.

Before I could even open my mouth he touched the trigger and there was a faint hiss of compressed air. I felt a tiny prick like a needle against my side.

I reached forward, took the gun away from Doc.

"What's the idea!" I said. "You're liable to put a guy's eye out. You must--"

I didn't get any further. All at once I began to feel funny. It was as though a kind of thick film was crawling over my skin. My tongue felt thick, too.

"Why, Prof!" I said. "Now I get it! You've pulled a murder-mystery stunt! That was a poison dart. I didn't think you--"

My tongue was so thick I couldn't go on. I tried to take a step toward Doc, stopped.

There were tears running down Doc's cheeks. I realized suddenly that he was putting up a scrap inside himself--the scientist and the man fighting; an experimentalist who wouldn't stop at anything, and one of the best-hearted guys that ever lived.

"It won't hurt you, Jerry!" he almost sobbed. "Don't be frightened. It's just a harmless drug. It will wear off. But I hoped I wouldn't have to--I thought you'd be willing--"

Either he was getting incoherent or else I couldn't understand him on account of that drug in my body.

I was helpless now. I'd have fallen like a fool if Doc hadn't come forward and held me up. Then he signaled, and I dimly saw the white-clad nurse, Miss Stevens, coming up, too. Her face was a blank mask and her eyes were still vacant. The old boy, in his hog-wild experiment, had given her some other kind of drug. She didn't look at me, didn't seem to feel much of anything. She just helped him get me into a heavy, wheeled chair.

That was ready and waiting, and it was plain to me, even in my dazed state, that Doc had planned this thing in advance. That's why he had written that funny note. It showed how completely obsessed he was--and how dangerous.

He had stopped crying now. His eyes were like bright lights dancing before mine. I heard metal click, saw straps being buckled. I felt my ankles and arms and body being fastened into that heavy steel chair. Then Doc rolled my sleeves up and bared my wrists. Miss Stevens brought the tube forward.

Doc worked like some great surgeon. He was dexterous, swift. He made incisions in both my wrists near large veins. His knife was so sharp that it hardly hurt at all. He slipped small metal suction cups on the ends of the tubes over the incisions, and he did it so quickly that hardly a drop of blood spilled. He clamped the cups to my skin with rubber wrist bands, then stepped back.

All this time the big plant had been moving more swiftly. Its dipping, throbbing leaves were almost like the arms of a man or an ape, gesticulating. It bent toward me as I was strapped in the chair and the suction cups were clamped on.

NOW the movements of the plant stopped abruptly. Its leaves were quiet. I could feel a cool sensation in my wrists. There was very little pain, but the coolness increased, crept up my arms, and was accompanied by a strange dizziness and faintness.

I guess I was scared, too. And I was like a man who stands outside himself and watches. I felt my mouth come open, heard sounds that must have been myself yelling.

Miss Stevens was looking down at me. For a moment my yells seemed to push aside the blank veil across her eyes. There was compassion there, sympathy, understanding. Anyway it made me ashamed of myself, made some of the affects of the drug wear off.

I stopped yelling, relaxed and stared up into the blue eyes of Miss Stevens while I felt the coldness of the plant creep up my arms into my body. I seemed to sink into a deep pool of horror and dizziness. But I kept staring into her eyes, and there my thoughts fell into another pool--a pool as clear and blue and quiet as the skies in tenderest April.

Honestly, I could almost smell roses and hear birds sing.

"You've got the grandest eyes I ever saw," I heard myself saying. "You're the sweetest--looking kid. I'm going to call you Patsy."

I was out of my head, of course, absolutely nuts, or I wouldn't have talked that way to a girl I'd never seen before in my life. But I was telling the truth, and people do go on that way when they're doped or crazy scared. Ask any nurse who has ever worked in a hospital!

I wanted Miss Stevens to hold my hand. As the sap of *Nepenthe Splendens* began to filter through my body I tried to reach out. But my hands were strapped down.

She seemed to get the idea, though, that I liked her. She laid her white hand on my forehead, and smiled a funny, strange little smile, like a dopey kitten that wants to do the right thing and can't quite figure it out.

And because she was there, close by, smiling, I didn't so much mind being a partner to a devil plant in a botanical hell that old Doc had manufactured.

"Shoot the works, Prof, and see if I mind!" I heard myself say wildly, foolishly.

He did. That was the beginning of the strangest, wildest night I've ever spent. Every two or three hours I was unclamped from the plant and the flood-lights were put on. When the plant wasn't exchanging blood for sap it was getting fed by artificial sunlight.

But I noticed that its leaves still waved a little and reached toward me even when the lights were on. Once it swayed toward my chair and almost tipped the tub over, and Doc, who stayed in the cellar laboratory constantly, had to cut the photosynthetic period short and clamp me back on the job.

Old Heinrich had a cot in the room, and I could see he was so keyed up over his experiment that he intended to sleep right there. His sessions with the plant before I arrived had made him weak and groggy. He was crying for sleep, and if it hadn't been for his wrought-up condition, he would have keeled over.

Every now and then his excitement left him and his eyelids drooped. He kept up a running fire of apologies to me for what he had done, mixed with wild conjectures as to where this experiment was going to lead.

I didn't answer. Dumb as I may be I saw plainly where it would lead. After only six hours of "cooperation" with the plant I was beginning to feel like a guy who has been drawn through a wringer. My blood was thinned with that hellish sap. I looked at my hands and saw that they had a greenish color already. Lord knew what that chlorophyll in my system would do.

But I knew I was weakening fast. The plant was huskier that when Doc had fed it. I saw that I was headed for unconsciousness or a breakdown, and that Dog-Face would have to get some other sucker to help him. That would only be the beginning. If he got too desperate he might even decide to strap Patsy in the chair.

THAT thought made me desperate. Maybe you'll think it was part of my nutty condition, but I'd fallen in love with the kid. Yes, fallen into those blue eyes of hers just like a guy falling into a well. And I suddenly wanted to get her out, just as I wanted to get myself out. She was too sweet, too fine to be mixed up in a

hellish thing like this. If Doc hadn't doped her she would never have helped him, I knew.

I had to save her, but how? She had been trained in a mechanical routine as Doc's assistant. Right now she was more like a robot than a human being. There didn't seem to be anything I could do. Dog-Face was determined to hold me, and Patsy was too much under his control to unstrap me herself.

I tried talking to her once when Dog-Face went out to get himself some cigars. I pleaded with her to unfasten the straps, even told her I'd fallen for her head over heels, hoping that it would jar her out of her dopiness.

But it was no go. Her mind was a blank except for the orders Doc had given her. She was set to carry them out. Nothing I could say would make any difference.

The hours ticked on and along toward morning Dog-Face lay down on his cot.

"I just want a wink of sleep, Jerry," he muttered. "Just a wink. Don't begrudge it to me, and don't think too harshly of me. I'm ashamed of what I've done, but--it had to be that way."

His voice was sincere. He meant what he said. According to the lopsided way he had grown to look at things it was inevitable that I be sacrificed in the interests of science. That plant was more important to him than my life. And somehow, knowing how he felt, I didn't get sore or anything.

I told him I forgave him, but even as I talked, I began to plot secretly how I could get loose. There must be some way, I kept telling myself---some way.

It's funny how bright even a dumb guy will get when it comes to a matter of self-preservation. I was trapped, cornered, scared stiff for myself and for Patsy Stevens, and I had an inspiration right then that burst like a bunch of atoms exploding in my brain. My mind began to focus on something Doc had once told me himself about pitcher plants in general--something I thought I'd forgotten, but which must have stayed down in my subconscious all the time.

I stared up at one big cup-shaped leaf of *Nepenthe Splendens* that hung almost over my head.

Spooky-looking and weirdly developed as this nightmare creation of old Heinrich's was, it was still one of the *Sarracenia* family. Those leaf cups bore a resemblance to the common pitcher plants that I used to pull up in the swamp when I was one of Doc's students.

And I knew there must be liquid inside it. The air of the room was heavily humid. Besides that, there was a water spray hitched to a pipe over by the wall.

Yes, there was moisture in that cup so near to me--and not just plain water either!

My heart began to hammer, and my mind began to grope for words and phrases buried under a couple of layers of sluggish gray matter. Enzymes! A proteolytic acid, something like $C_{14}H_{10}O_9 \cdot 2H_2O$. That was tannic acid, and hadn't Doc once told us gaping students that all pitcher plants secreted this powerful proteolytic acid from certain cells inside the cups? This, mixed with water down below, acted as an enzyme to digest the insects that fell in.

Look in your botany book and see for yourself. A proteolytic acid that will soften and break up animal matter!

With my heart beating a swingtime rhythm I stared from the cup over my head to the strap on my right wrist. It was leather, and any kind of tannic acid would soften leather. Even water by itself was a softener, and if water alone would do the trick, how much better it would behave if it had acid in it!

THAT'S what I was thinking as I watched Doc lie down for his nap. I was so excited suddenly I nearly keeled over. By the time Dog--Face began really to relax I had it all doped out just how I was going to get that acid solution in *Nepenthe Splendens* leaf cup exactly where I wanted it. And I began to wonder right then if I hadn't been wrong all my life in calling myself a dumb cluck. I leave it to you if what I did next didn't take some dome work.

You've heard of a tourniquet, used to cut off blood circulation and stop bleeding? Well, I shoved my arms forward and twisted both of them sideward, elbows out, turning those straps on my wrists into tourniquets. They hurt like hell. The straps pressed into my skin till I almost yelled. But I held them there, stopping the blood circulation in my arm veins through minutes that seemed like ages.

After awhile what I wanted to happen did happen. *Nepenthe Splenden's* sap couldn't get through into my blood any more. The big plant began to show signs of restlessness as its food was cut off.

It was eerie, horrible, to see that unholy quivering begin to start. Slow undulations convulsed the stem and the leaves began to dip and vibrate. The cup over my head scooped lower and lower and the thick, flat leaf next to it opened and shut like a ghastly, fingerless human palm.

Patsy Stevens had been trained in a strict mechanical routine, as I've said. Her doped mind couldn't grapple with the unexpected. The plant was restless, sore as a boil. She could see that. But it wasn't time for the vapor lights to go on and the photosynthetic period to begin.

I was supposed to be feeding *Nepenthe Splendens* and somehow I wasn't doing it. Patsy didn't know what to do. She just stood by helplessly. And she didn't even try to stop me when the leaf cup dipped so low that I was able to grab it with the tips of my curled-up fingers.

I hung on like a bulldog with my fingernails, digging into the pulpy green flesh. And I held my breath, too, and even prayed I guess. For I had my own life there in my fingers and knew it.

Slowly I eased my elbows in, drew the big leaf gently down till the pitcher bowl tipped forward and spilled the acid water over my wrist. Some of it splashed too wide, but most of it fell just where I had hoped--on the leather strap around my arm.

I leaned back then, weak and faint, let go of the leaf, let the blood circulate and let the plant feed again. But only for a few minutes. Moving my arm a little, I could already feel that the leather strap was softening, stretching.

It softened more and more as the proteolytic acid penetrated the leather fibers. I worked my wrist back and forth, pulling till I was nearly dizzy. And then it happened! My hand came free.

I yanked that ghastly feeding tube off my wrist, and Patsy Stevens still stood by helplessly while I reached down with my right hand and unbuckled the other straps. I was out of the chair the next instant and staggering across the room to get my leg muscles limbered.

PATSY followed me, looking uncertain, and I did something I hated to do, but which the occasion seemed to call for. I turned and slapped Patsy right in the face till her cheeks got red and she began to cry. It was one way I knew of to knock sense into a dopey person. I grabbed her by the arm then, walked her back and forth till she stopped crying and till her eyes got almost normal.

"We've got to get out of here quick, Patsy," I whispered.

She blinked a minute, shook her head.

"We can't!" she whispered back, "He'll wake up. He'll be mad at us both."

For answer I tiptoed over to the cot where Doc slept, slipped my hand into his pocket, and pulled out his bunch of keys. He was so sound asleep he never knew it. As a kidnaper Doc wasn't so hot.

I grinned as I stepped away from him. He looked so innocent and calm sleeping like that! You'd never think that dome of his could have hatched such a thing as *Nepenthe Splendens*. I turned then and stared at the plant, and stopped grinning immediately.

The thing actually seemed to sense that I was leaving for good and was sore. Its leaves had begun their monotonous waving again. The tendrils twitched and vibrated, giving out a faint rustling that was almost like the scraping scales of a snake.

Patsy Stevens shivered. Her eyes were wide now, staring at the plant.

"I'm afraid!" she gasped, as though she just seen it for the first time. "I want to leave this place, too."

"You bet!" I said. "Let's, before the old boy wakes up."

We went out of the cellar then with the rustle of the plant still in our ears. I unlocked all the doors, and Patsy Stevens and I stole into the early dawn. None of Doc's nurserymen was up yet. No one saw us go.

My old flivver was in Doc's garage. In it we drove back to town and in a little hash-house in the suburbs Patsy and I got really acquainted over breakfast. We exchanged life histories the way kids do, said things with our eyes that we were too shy to say with our tongues.

We got along swell, and I knew we were going to get along even better the more we saw of each other. We did, as things turned out--and now we're engaged to be married. But it's time to soft pedal all that part of it.

The important thing is what happened to old Doc. We never thought there would be any such startling climax. When the story broke it knocked Patsy and myself right between the eyes.

We didn't hear anything about Doc all that morning or anything from him. But the afternoon papers carried wild headlines.

FAMOUS BOTANIST DEAD

BODY IN CELLAR LAB

BRUTAL MURDER HINTED

The story below the headlines read:

Dr. Heinrich Sigmund Bloch, Nobel Prize winner and one of the world's greatest experimental botanists, was found dead at noon today in a cellar that he used as a laboratory. The presence of a cot in the room indicated that he slept there while he watched over some sort of plant experiment, apparently having to do with the circulation of sap, about which he was an authority.

The workmen on Dr. Bloch's hundred-acre farm could give no information concerning this experiment. They said Bloch had not taken them into his confidence on this particular branch of his work.

The county coroner gives as his opinion that some tramp may have broken into his laboratory and killed him, with possible robbery as the motive. A large plant of unknown species stood in a tub in the center of the room. This was tipped over and Doctor Bloch's face and hands were scratched by its thorns.

There were other indications of a struggle, as if the doctor had fought with some marauder and been slain

by him. But there is also a possibility that the plant may have fallen over on him accidentally while he slept, and that he was scratched trying to extricate himself from its thorns, and bled to death.

His body was partially covered by the plant when his housekeeper found him. It appeared that the mysterious marauder might have attempted to hide his victim's corpse and then been frightened away by some sound in the house. The police are making a thorough investigation.

THERE was a picture of Doc's body with the plant, now dead and wilted, half concealing him, and under it the caption:

MURDER OR ACCIDENT?

Patsy Stevens and I looked at each other. Her face was white. We knew that the police would probably find clues connecting us both with Dr. Bloch and proving that we had been out there that night. That would be easy. Patsy had left some things behind, and so had I. The tracks of my car could be traced--as the police afterward did do---giving the D. A. his chance to get nasty.

But the police didn't know the name of the real murderer, and wouldn't have believed us if we'd told them. They didn't know that *Nepenthe Splendens*, cheated out of a cooperative session with its new victim, had tipped its own tub over, attacked Doc with its thorny leaves, and wilted to death when Doc's blood had stopped circulating.

You can't blame the police. I guess it's the first time in history a plant ever killed a guy.

SKYSCRAPER HORROR

"Wade Hammond" Bucks the Egotist of Crime

Paul Chadwick

THE face of Daugherty, night watchman on the fiftieth floor of the Empire Towers Building, was putty-hued. His voice was a rasping croak.

"There it is now--you can see it out there, Mr. Hammond!"

Leaning far out of the window he pointed with one trembling finger.

Wade Hammond, newspaper man and special investigator of crime, bent forward eagerly. The dim light from a hallway bulb shone on his lean, tanned face with its thin mustache line. His eyes were steel hard.

He still had newspaper connections. He had come up here to investigate a wild rumor, a story which might make some good copy. His attitude toward the whole thing had been jocular. But he wasn't smiling now. He, too, saw something moving along the wall of this most giant of skyscrapers. His scalp tingled and his heart beat faster. It was unthinkable that any living thing could creep along the building's glass-smooth exterior.

The watchman's voice sounded hoarsely in his ear.

"It's the ghost of one of the workmen who was killed when they was putting 'er up. The place is haunted. No guy could crawl around out there."

Wade clutched the man's arm tensely.

"It's parallel with this floor," he said, "about twenty windows away. You have the keys. We'll see if we

can't get closer."

The watchman shook his head.

"It won't do any good, Mr. Hammond. It'll be gone when you get there. I tried it before. It's always gone when you get close."

The eeriness of the night seemed to envelop them. The prickly sensation along Wade's scalp increased. It was quiet up here. The traffic noises came in a sound that was no more than the faint wash of a distant sea. A maze of streets showed far below. The motor cars were tiny beetles with phosphorescent eyes. The people were infinitesimal dots, fusing and separating like microbes in a laboratory culture.

"Give me the keys anyway," said Wade.

With the watchman following him shakily he ran back along the hallway to a point opposite the spot where the mysterious shadow had shown itself.

He found the right key, plunged it into the lock, and entered a large suite of offices. He strode across a rug, reached a window and threw it up, then cautiously thrust his head out and stared along the sides of the building. There was a tightness in his throat now, a feeling of tenseness and dread that he could not even explain to himself. What was that thing he had seen on the building's face so high above the street?

There was nothing visible now. The smooth expanse of the wall showed no ghostly blur. But he had seen it, and the watchman had seen it on other nights. It had been spoken of in whispers by the night employees of the building. It had grown into a spine-chilling legend.

He swiveled his eyes in all directions. Here and there on the skyscraper's gigantic face, lights still showed in office windows where some busy executive or clerk was working late. Far overhead, on the eightieth floor, the windows of the Skyrocket Club, where hundreds of pleasure seekers came nightly, emitted a corona-like illumination.

He drew in his head and closed the window, deeply puzzled.

"I'll stick around and maybe we'll see it again," he said, turning to the watchman who had trailed into the office after him. The man shook his head.

"It generally don't show up more than once in a night. It gets scared off I guess."

Wade laughed jerkily. "Then I'll go home and turn in. I'll drop in to see you again tomorrow night--and I'll bring the biggest electric flash I can lay my hands on."

He said good-night to the watchman, then descended to the ground floor in one of the plummeting elevators. It was a mystery all right, a big one, but, so far, the crime element hadn't entered into it; and there was hardly enough material for a story as yet.

ON the pavement, in the act of lighting a cigarette, he stopped dead short. His head jerked up. A familiar sound reached his ears, seeming to fill the whole air. It was a banshee-like wail echoing and re-echoing along the street's dark canyon. A siren!

The sound came closer. The traffic stopped to let a long blue-bodied car with glaring headlights slip through. The next moment Wade drew in his breath. For the speeding car was from police headquarters and it was drawing up before the entrance of the chromium-sheathed Empire Towers Building.

Two plainclothes men sprang out, then a familiar figure--an owl-faced man of middle age. Wade

stepped forward smiling.

"Hello, there--what's all the excitement, inspector?"

Inspector Thompson, Homicide Bureau head, turned. His gimlet eyes focused on Wade.

"What are you doing here?" he countered.

"Looking for ghosts, chief--I just saw one uptop."

A strange expression crossed the inspector's face. He came closer to Wade. His voice was grim.

"Ghosts, is it? That's not all that's been going on up there tonight. There's been a murder, Wade. You're at the right spot at the right time. Come along."

The smile on Wade's face faded. Cold fingers seemed to pass over his flesh. Somehow his hunch had been warning him of a sinister something in the air; a sense of impending tragedy. He turned and followed the old man-hunter. Thompson and he had worked on some tough cases together. Someone had dubbed them "Twins of Trouble," though there was thirty years' difference in their ages. He asked no questions, but he got the details as they shot skyward in an express elevator.

Thompson spoke from the corner of his mouth, in abrupt sentences.

"Jacob Schmelzer's been murdered--shot. You know who he is--the big-time meatpacker. He and his brother are the kingpins of the industry. Rich is no name for it. This is going to raise hell, Wade. I'm glad you're here. When a big guy's bumped off there's always a lot of publicity. That's why I came--to see that my boys don't pull a boner. It's the sort of thing that's got to be cleaned up quick."

Wade nodded, still silent. What connection, if any, did the ghostly shadow he had seen bear to this murder? And ought he to mention it to the practical-minded Thompson?

For a full minute they stayed in the rocketing elevator, then changed to a second car. At the seventy-first floor they got out and walked down a corridor to the door of a palatial suite of offices. Across the glass paneling the words "Schmelzer Bros." were written in conservative lettering. From inside came a buzz of voices.

The talking ceased as Thompson and Wade entered. The place was alive with men from the Homicide Squad. A beefy-faced cop loomed near the door of the inner office. A pale, slim girl was standing at one side of the room, biting her lips and staring aimlessly about out of worried eyes. A plainclothes man jerked his thumb toward her.

"That's Miss Crocker, chief--the stenog who heard the shot. Her story sounds a little phony."

Thompson stepped forward and faced the girl. "Tell us about it," he snapped.

Wade listened, eyeing the secretary closely. Her voice trembled. She was obviously wrought up.

"We were working late," she said. "Mr. Schmelzer told me to stay--to take a few more notes. I waited in the main office. An hour must have passed. Then I heard what sounded like a shot. I ran to Mr. Schmelzer's door and tried to open it, but it was locked. So I phoned the building superintendent and he got a policeman. They broke open the door and--found--him."

Thompson nodded and pursed up his lips.

"Thanks, Miss Crocker, I'll want to talk to you again later."

He beckoned to Wade and together they entered Schmelzer's private office.

Wade looked curiously at the figure sitting propped up before the big mahogany desk, arms sprawled out and head hanging loosely.

Jacob Schmelzer's eyes were open, glazed in death, and a trickle of crimson ran down from his white head to form a pool on the desk top.

A detective joined them.

"Someone propped him in his chair after the killing, chief," he said. "There's some spots of blood over there near the window."

Wade turned and looked. The smooth, velvety green of the expensive carpet was broken by dark, sinister stains.

HE went closer and examined the dead man. It was incomprehensible to him why a bullet wound had been inflicted in such a spot. For the gaping hole that had caused the millionaire's death was directly in the top of his head.

"It's like I phoned you, chief," the detective said. "The door was locked on the inside. There ain't no other exits to this office but the windows."

"And this is seventy stories up! How could a guy come in by a window?"

As though to convince himself of the impossibility of it, Thompson went over and threw the sash up. Wade saw that the window was unlocked. He joined the inspector and stared down the side of the building toward the streets far below.

"The killer might have come down a rope from one of the floors above," he said softly.

Thompson nodded. "I thought of that. It's the only explanation if the girl ain't lying."

"You don't think she could have lifted Schmelzer off the floor and to his chair?" asked Wade skeptically.

"Maybe she had a boyfriend."

"But the door was locked on the inside."

"That could have been fixed. I've seen it done. We'll keep an eye on her."

Wade shrugged. "I'm going to take a look at the windows of the floors above this one."

"Go high enough and you'll strike the Skyrocket Club," said Thompson. "They've got the top on a ten-year lease."

Wade nodded. He remained silent about the thing he had seen--the "Skyscraper Horror" that crept along the building's face. But he had a growing hunch that there was something weird and grotesquely sinister about this affair; something unknown and unguessed.

With the help of the building superintendent he followed the floors up one by one. The office directly over Schmelzer's was empty and the dust on the windowsills had not been disturbed. He could find no trace of an intruder in any of the other offices he visited.

Before the police downstairs had finished their routine examination, Wade reached the level on which the

nightclub was located. He displayed his special investigator's card to the uniformed attendant at the door. "I'd like to see the manager," he said.

A HEAD WAITER led him between rows of tables and around a dance floor where couples were swaying to the sensuous strains of a jazz band. They reached the large private office where Russ Vogel, owner and manager of the Skyrocket Club, conducted his business.

Vogel, suave and bald-headed, rose from his chair. "What's this I hear--a murder downstairs---old Schmelzer killed?"

Wade nodded. "You know about it, then?"

"It's all over the building. Manny's gone down to get the dope."

"Manny?"

"Yes--Manny Arden, my partner."

Wade recalled the name of the ex-gangster with a start. Manny Arden, so rumor had it, had been connected with a booze racket on a grand scale, until he had quit to join Vogel in an even more lucrative business.

For ten minutes Wade chatted with the manager, sizing him up. Then he took a look around the night club, paying particular attention to the windows on the side of the building above Schmelzer Bros.' offices.

When he descended to the seventy-first floor again there were three newcomers in the Schmelzer suite--Manny Arden, Jacob Schmelzer's brother, Manfred, and his nephew Arnold Bassett.

Manfred Schmelzer was like the dead man in appearance, save that he was a bit stockier. Bassett, a thin blue-eyed young man, had a pleasant but aloof manner. It was Manny Arden who attracted Wade's interest.

The ex-gangster, who was evidently well acquainted with the Schmelzers, had the look of his type. Under a surface polish there were indications of cunning and brutality. He had hard eyes, mean lips and wore a veiled hostile expression.

Wade exchanged a few words, then drifted on to the group of detectives around Inspector Thompson.

"Any luck, chief?"

Thompson turned. "Not much. The motive was robbery. But that's all we've established."

"Robbery?"

"Yes, Schmelzer's safe was opened and a thousand in cash was taken. His brother and nephew agree to that. They remember that the money was sent in from the bank this morning."

"The murderer went to a lot of trouble for one grand," said Wade, a shade of doubt in his voice.

Thompson ignored the implication.

"Doctor Morgan is going to perform an autopsy tonight," he said. "When we get the bullet that killed Schmelzer we may have more to work on. I think that secretary of his may figure in this. She isn't as dumb as she looks. Maybe it's a love triangle as well as robbery. An old guy with a young sweetie, and

all that sort of stuff."

Wade's face was serious. He hung around while the police searched for clues and cross-questioned Miss Crocker without shaking her story. He left at midnight, after Jacob Schmelzer's body had been removed to a spot where the medical examiner could probe for the bullet.

HE clatter of the telephone jerked Wade out of peaceful slumber. Milk wagons were rattling in the street outside. The clock showed six. He picked up the receiver, and the voice of Inspector Thompson buzzed excitedly in his ear.

"Here's some news for you, Hammond, on that Schmelzer killing. It's hot stuff."

"Shoot! Don't keep me in suspense."

"Listen--and laugh this off if you can." There was a dramatic pause at the end of the wire, then Thompson spoke harshly. "Doc Morgan did his work on Schmelzer--and there wasn't any bullet! Get that, Wade, a guy shot, and no lead in his head!"

"No bullet!" Wade spoke explosively. Then he whistled. The full significance of the thing grew on him. It was a weird turn of events. It made him think again of that fleeting ghostly shadow that crept along the Empire Towers Building.

"The doc couldn't have made a mistake, I suppose," he muttered.

"No--he's not the type." Thompson's voice grew complaining, then sardonic. "We'll have to look for a gun that kills without bullets. Let me know if you get any bright ideas."

After he had hung up, Wade paced the floor of his apartment, smoking cigarettes. His gaunt, young-old face looked troubled. Thompson's grim joke had set him to thinking. A gun that didn't fire bullets! Where had he heard of such a thing?

A half-hour later he had dressed, breakfasted, and was on his way to the Empire Towers Building. He ascended to the fiftieth floor where he had seen the "ghost" on the previous evening. He got in touch with the day superintendent and received permission to examine the outside of the structure.

With the help of one of the janitors and a piece of rope he climbed out of a window and lowered himself a few feet. He was intent, oblivious of danger. He did not look down. Then he nodded to himself as though in silent agreement of some theory he had worked out.

Frowning intently, Wade climbed back through the window. He ascended to the seventy-first floor this time, to the Schmelzer offices. It was too early for the office help to be there. The body of Jacob Schmelzer no longer reposed gruesomely in the chair. But a couple of plainclothes men were on duty, and the telltale bloodstains near the window were still in evidence.

Wade remembered his promise to the watchman, Daugherty. The ghost might walk again tonight, and if it did he intended to be there.

A CURTAIN of darkness lay upon the city. It seemed to hang over the Empire Towers Building like a sinister pall. A clock in Madison Square boomed eight times. A chill wind blew off the river, making Wade turn up the collar of his coat.

For half an hour he had been patrolling the ledge that ran around the building at the forty-fifth floor. The street was far below, too far to give aid if he should be attacked; too far, in spite of its teeming myriads, to give him a feeling of human companionship.

But he was not alone tonight. At the other edge of the ledge, half the length of a city block away, one of Thompson's picked men was stationed; a veteran detective of the Homicide Squad.

Wade knew he could depend on this man, Grady by name; but he knew also that they were fighting something, some human fiend, whose methods were outside the realm of everyday police experience. And each time he walked to the center of the ledge and saw Grady's rugged bulk, he had a feeling of relief. When they were on opposite ends, the night shut them in, set them apart, and each man was thrown on his own initiative.

An hour passed, and Wade kept up his slow, sentry-like pacing. In the pocket of his overcoat was a long-barreled flashlight and a snub-nosed Colt automatic. The rubber butt of it gave him a feeling of reassurance. It had been with him on many a strange adventure.

Every few seconds he leaned over the low stone railing and gazed down along the side of the building, or looked up to where the dim light of the stars made the facing visible. But clouds blew across the sky now, darkening it with black wraithlike fingers. Still he could see the structure's smooth exterior, for here and there an office window was lighted. Manfred Schmelzer, with his brother's secretary, Miss Crocker, was at work tonight straightening out the confusion in the affairs of the company that Jacob's death had caused. The power of the Almighty Dollar must not be dimmed even by the Grim Reaper.

But a plainclothes man patrolled the corridor outside Schmelzer's door. Another was stationed inside the office.

Wade felt the need of a cigarette. His fingers toyed with the package inside his coat pocket. His brain toyed with the idea of smoking. Then suddenly he crouched and stiffened.

Out of the night, in the gloom that hid Detective Grady from his eyes, came a ghastly cry. It was the cry of a man in mortal terror; the cry of a man who is face to face with death. Like a mad thing Wade leaped forward. Whipping his gun and flashlight out he dashed along the narrow ledge. He sent the long beam probing ahead.

The cry came again, muffled and gasping. The ray of the flashlight picked out a struggling figure--two--then magically one again. Wade fired into the air. His breath came in gasps. His teeth were clenched.

A form was half over the narrow railing. A white face struggling to retain its hold on life was turned toward Wade. Hands clutched at stone in an effort to stay off the plunge that would spell destruction.

Wade reached the side of the detective before he slipped over. He pulled the man back, heaved him onto the ledge, where he lay gasping and almost sobbing.

"What happened? Where did he come from?"

Wade hurled the questions harshly; then saw that they were momentarily useless. Grady was too winded to answer, and on his forehead was a large lump, a bruise.

While the detective was recovering his breath and gathering his dazed faculties, Wade turned his flashlight up and down the face of the building. But the thing, the horror, had gone.

"It--slipped--down--from--above," croaked Grady. "It grabbed me, struck me, and tried to throw me over. I fought back. If you hadn't come--"

"We'd better go inside," said Wade. "We'll call up headquarters and have a squad of men search every office in the building."

"Wait," said Grady. "I can't move yet."

It was five minutes before the big detective could stand on his feet. With Wade's help he reached the nearest doorway to the ledge. The warm inside air touched their faces. They walked into the glowing light of the corridor.

But a figure was running toward them--a detective, another headquarters man. His face was drawn with excitement. He was waving his arms.

"Did you see him?" he cried. "Did he come here?"

"Yes," said Wade grimly. "Why? What's happened?"

"Happened!" The dick almost choked. "Plenty, Hammond--plenty! The other Schmelzer got it, too--murdered. The nightclub's been robbed. There's hell to pay."

"What!" Wade ripped out the one word, then became electrified into action. "I thought you boys were guarding Schmelzer?"

"We were--until they telephoned down that the nightclub had been robbed. Then we went up--and Schmelzer was dead when we got back. The place is surrounded now. Every dick on the force is coming here."

"Where's Vogel and Manny Arden?" said Wade.

"Vogel's upstairs. We don't know where Arden is."

"Ah!" Wade's breath hissed between tight lips.

HE was off down the corridor, jabbing the elevator button. He was cursing himself for a blunder, for not anticipating this. Out of the confused series of happenings he was beginning to see a pattern. The secret lay there with a man whose brain rose to hysterical heights of cunning. A supreme egotist of crime who thought he could lick the world.

The elevator shot Wade up to the nightclub.

"Where's Arden?" he gasped, collaring the manager, Vogel.

"Haven't seen him for an hour. I've forgot about him in the excitement. Our guests have been robbed--all their jewelry and money gone."

Wade wheeled on a couple of detectives who seemed to be wandering futilely about. His voice cracked with authority.

"Go down through every office and every vacant room. Find Manny Arden."

They turned to obey him and he followed after. They covered floor after floor, probing with flashlights, searching closets and washrooms.

Sergeant Terrant was there, red-faced and perspiring, a veteran hunter of murderers, and an old friend of Wade's. They reached the end of the corridor. Terrant threw up a window and leaned out.

Then his face turned a sickly white. They all heard it. Up out of the darkness came a sound, a scream high-pitched and terrible, a cry that was almost unearthly. Again and again it came beating intolerably on the eardrums. Then it stopped as abruptly as it had sounded, seeming to leave a hole in the darkness.

Somewhere a telephone jangled. A detective answered it.

"They're calling from below," he said hoarsely. "They've found him--the murderer. That was him we heard slipping. He fell."

They all got into the elevator car and stood silently while it descended. Wade's face was inscrutable.

On the pavement, inside the police cordon, a group of men were bent over something. Inspector Thompson was there. The dark object on the pavement did not move. It was sprawled horribly. Crimson ran from it. Wade came close.

"That's him," said Thompson, "the robber and murderer. He's got the jewels and the money in his pockets. He fell--trying to get away--and it served him right."

Wade saw the distorted, mutilated face of Manny Arden. He saw the detectives holding the stolen loot in their hands. And suddenly he bent down and touched one of the dead man's hands.

He recoiled as though in horror, but it was something else, some other emotion that snapped his figure erect.

"Feel them--feel his hands, inspector. They're cold--he's been dead a half hour or more."

"What!" Thompson was bending down, reaching with trembling fingers for the exgangster's lifeless hands.

"My God--he's right. What does this mean, Wade?"

"It means that this is a trick--the murderer's still at large. We're dealing with a man who might have been a genius if he wasn't a maniac--a man who has overreached himself. Keep your men posted, chief. Don't let anybody in or out of the building."

Wade turned and dashed back in himself, ignoring the order that he had prescribed for others. He took the elevator to the first set-back ledge. He dashed out of it, along the corridor and out the first door. His flashlight was stabbing in all directions. He ran along the ledge probing the darkness. Then his whole body stiffened. Ahead of him something black showed, a snakelike coil of wire. It was moving mysteriously.

He ran toward it; but it jerked up, disappeared. He turned his flashlight aloft, gasped and whipped out his gun. But in that instant something huge and black descended upon him. A sound like the snarl of an animal was in his ears. Arms locked around his body.

If the attack had not been so swift, so unexpected, he would not have gone down. As it was he fought tigerishly; fought, and felt his gun kicked out of his hand; felt something striking against his shoulder and reaching for his head.

He breathed through clenched teeth. His muscles were straining. Spots of light danced before his eyes. Then with a mighty effort he hurled his assailant off and stumbled backwards himself, striking his skull against metal. He arose groggily to his feet, prepared for a new attack. But none came.

The dark bulk on the ledge was running toward the corner of the building with rat-like quickness. A voice suddenly sounded, muffled and unearthly.

"One more to go--a woman, this time."

The words were followed by a brutal, mocking laugh. There was a faint clicking sound. Then the human

ghost disappeared from sight, seemed to leap up the side of the building and whisk around a corner.

WADE'S gun and flashlight were gone. He did not attempt to retrieve them. He had a sense of all-pervading horror; but his quick mind jumped and sought to answer the riddle of those mocking words--"a woman this time." There was only one he could think of--Miss Crocker. She had been closely associated with the murdered brothers. She might have information that would make her dangerous to the killer. Was her life to be snuffed out, too, by this assassin who slew with a bulletless gun?

There were harsh, bitter lines in Wade Hammond's face now. He sprang forward toward the door of the building. There might still be time to save the girl--if he could prevent the murderer from reaching her first.

He dashed along a corridor, reached with groping fingers for a wall telephone. His voice was snapping.

"Give me the head electrician. Yes, this is Wade Hammond speaking. It's a police order. Turn off the lights--throw the main switch--cut off all power in the building. Quick--now!"

He stood tensely, silently as the corridor lights winked out, as the whole vast edifice was plunged in darkness. The seconds seemed like an eternity, until he heard what he was listening for.

It was a sound, a scream again. And this time it was a scream that he would never forget to his dying day; a scream that whipped past the windows with the onrush of a falling body; a scream that continued on downward fainter and fainter till it was lost in silence.

And Wade knew that he had cheated the law, put a murderer to death as surely as though he had thrown the switch of an electric chair.

He picked up the telephone again.

"Lights on," he said. "Thanks, old man."

He was fumbling for a cigarette as he pressed the elevator button. He was puffing on it as he descended to the street floor. And he came out of the vestibule with the calmness of a man who knows what he will find.

Detectives were swearing outside. Inspector Thompson's voice was the loudest of the lot.

"What the hell--is it raining bodies tonight? That's the second man who's fallen. We'd better get the fire nets to catch 'em!"

"There won't be any more," said Wade quietly. "There's the real murderer. There's a scientific genius for you--look at that contraption on his body. I had to take a chance that he would fall inside your police line down here and not hit anyone."

"Who is it? What's he got on?"

"Arnold Bassett," said Wade softly. "Old Schmelzer's nephew--a man who had ambitions to inherit all the millions in the packing industry; a man who committed a couple of robberies and an extra murder just to throw us off the trail."

"And what are those things on his wrists?"

"Magnets," said Wade. "He's got them strapped to his knees, too. That thing on his back is a smallsize transformer, stepping up the current Lord knows how many volts. He's the greatest human fly you'll ever see, chief. He's a man who saw the possibilities in a building faced with chromium steel, and who

equipped himself to move up and down it and around it as easily as you and I walk on the pavement. He's a man who planned the deaths of his uncles weeks or months in advance."

"And what made him fall like that?"

"I am responsible for it," said Wade, his voice hard. "It was a question of Miss Crocker's life or his. He was going up to finish her off, because she knew too much--or he was afraid she did. I ordered the power switch thrown. Bassett here depended on a wire attached to the light circuit to operate his electro-magnets.

"The four metal plates at his wrists and knees must have had a make-and-break contact system so that when the top ones were gripping the lower ones were free. He could draw himself up like an inch worm. But with the current off his grip was gone and he fell."

"What made you get onto him, Wade?" Inspector Thompson's tone held admiration.

"I noticed some scratches his metal plates had made on the building--and see here--"

Wade reached down and pulled something out of the dead man's pocket. It looked like an ordinary automatic pistol, except that there was no opening at its end; nothing but a round piece of metal that fitted inside the barrel. Wade held the weapon up.

"We knew that a bullet-less gun had been used. It sounded phony--but I had heard of such a gun. Here it is--the kind used in slaughterhouses to kill cattle. The bolt always remains in the barrel. There is a rim on the inside end of it to hold it in. It is like a piston that the powder explosion drives forward four or five inches, but does not let it leave the barrel. This vent at the side of the barrel allows the gases of the explosion to escape when the bolt has reached the limit of its movement. Bassett probably tapped on the glass, and when his Uncle Jacob came forward to open the window and look out, Bassett shot him through the head with the gun held close. He propped him in his chair afterward to make the killing look even more fantastic.

"The use of such a weapon made me suspect someone familiar with the packing industry. When I saw Manny Arden's dead body with the jewelry and money planted on him, I knew who the killer must be. He had, of course, killed Arden in advance, before he staged the robbery. That first scream of Bassett's was a good imitation of a man falling. But the second one was genuine enough---too genuine for comfort."

Wade took out a pocket handkerchief and mopped his glistening forehead.

"I had to do it, chief, to save the life of an innocent girl. He would have gone to the chair anyway. I finished him by having the current turned off instead of on. Just a mere technicality."

CROSS WORDS FOR CROOKS

A puzzle fan finds himself juggling with a tough problem.

SAM BICKLE, who is best known to patrons of the Hotel Paris as bellhop No. 36, swiveled his eyes in both directions along the tenth-floor hallway. When he had assured himself that no one was in sight, he propped his back luxuriously against a marble column beside the elevator door. With studied carelessness, he neglected to ring the signal bell. The car would stop at his floor in its own good time. Meanwhile, he looked forward to a period of peaceful recreation.

Sighing contentedly, he took a newspaper from an inside pocket and poised the stub of a pencil above one smudgy page. His forehead wrinkled as he tried to think of a five-letter word beginning with "A" and signifying "skillful." The rest of the lines were all filled in. It was that one vertical that stumped him--and he prided himself that, when it came to crossword puzzles, he was the cat's pajamas and the canary's toenails all rolled into one.

He became so absorbed in his problem, that he didn't even hear the elevator go by or notice that the bulb over the annunciator board down the hall was glowing.

It wasn't until a portentous shadow fell across his page and a porcine bulk projected itself into his horizon, that he came back to the grim realities of life.

He found himself staring into the ruddy features of "Big Jim" Shallop, hotel detective.

"Ah," said Sam, and made an inaccurate stab toward the elevator button with one quivering finger.

"Yeah," growled Shallop ominously. "That's right--ring it. I been watching you for the last five minutes. I seen you wastin' the hotel's time on another one of them dumb crossword puzzles."

Sam tried to make his voice express an arrogance he didn't feel.

"Is that all this cheap boarding house pays you for--just to snoop around and spy on the bellhops?"

"My job," said Shallop pompously, "is to protect the interests of the hotel--to see that crooks don't steal from the guests, and that employees don't steal from the management. A guy who swipes time is just as bad as any other kind of thief. I've told you before to leave them crossword puzzles alone. Now, I'm gonna speak to the boss. You'll find a pretty pink slip in your next pay envelope. You're always lookin' for funny words. The next one you'll read in this hotel will be a five--letter word beginning with 'F'--fired. Get that? And you won't need a pencil to figure it out either."

As an added insult, Shallop seized Sam's newspaper and tore the crossword puzzle in half.

"Ow!" cried Sam. "You big double-crossing ape! Just when I had it all done but one word!"

But his complaint fell upon deaf ears. Shallop was pointing dramatically toward the annunciator box.

"Go and see what that guy wants!" he ordered. "Make yourself useful the rest of the time you're here. It won't be long now."

Sam shuffled off, muttering to himself. The big pussyfooting gorilla had nothing to do but stand around looking pretty and smoking vile cigars. Yet, he was always telling Sam where to get off. Sam had to admit, though, that as a gumshoe artist, Shallop was all there. He had a way of turning up when a man least expected it. He was worse than a bad penny.

Sam slammed ice viciously into a pitcher. These darned booze hounds with their hangovers! It was guys like that and big lard pails like Shallop that made a bellhop's life hard.

When he got down to the street floor again, he hunched himself disconsolately on the bench and waited for another call. His cap was tipped forward more rakishly than the strict standards of the hotel allowed.

The gay night life of Broadway still streamed by the canopied entrance outside, but it held no thrill for Sam. At the end of the week, he'd be out of a job again, watching the bread lines grow longer, and using up shoe leather in a futile attempt to find work.

He hadn't even a good snappy crossword puzzle to cheer him in his hour of need. He looked at the checkered tiles on the floor, and imagined what puzzles a man could make there with a piece of chalk and a pencil.

It was then that he saw the two newcomers who entered the revolving door with their big leather grips. Sam leaped forward. No use letting a few last tips get away from him!

The strangers stared down the ends of their noses and released their grips with seeming reluctance. Tough-looking eggs, thought Sam. They'd be wanting ginger ale and ice water before the night was over.

But their grips were light. No booze there! Sam had got so that he could classify most of the guests who stopped at the Paris. But these two had him guessing. One was short, and dressed in gray. The other was a head taller, and had on a brown suit with a hairline white stripe. They both had eyes that squinted.

"Give us a room up top," he heard one of them tell the desk clerk. "We want to be up where it's quiet--and where we can get a look-see. This old town has grown some since we were here before."

"Yeah," said the other.

Sam couldn't see what names they signed in the register. The clerk handed them the key to Room No. 3019. That was one of the tower rooms. They couldn't get much higher unless they went up on the roof. It was the part of the hotel where all the swells liked to stay. It gave them a feeling of being high and mighty. These two had plenty of dough. They didn't even ask the price of the room.

But when Sam showed them into it, the man who tipped him, the taller of the two, handed him a dime. He wrinkled his nose at that. These two birds took a twelve-dollar-a-day room without blinking, then handed a thin dime to the guy who had carried up their luggage.

"I ain't got any change, mister," said Sam, staring at the dime in his palm and shaking his head sadly.

"A wise guy, eh?" said the tall man.

Sam beat a hasty retreat. He had enough trouble on his hands already. These two men didn't talk or act like the guests who usually took rooms in the tower.

He thought no more about them until Mr. Dennison, in Room No. 3012, ordered some more grape juice for his bridge guests. A great old guy was Mr. Dennison, one of the hotel's regular paychecks. He'd been a society beau in his time. Tonight, he was giving a card party to a bunch of swells. Sam had seen them coming in, tricked out in furs and jewels. Reporters had even interviewed Dennison just to stick advance notices in the papers.

As he came out of the Dennison suite, he noticed Shallop talking to one of the two strangers whose grips he had carried. It was the short man in the gray suit. He was gesturing toward a door which Sam knew opened on a stairway leading up to the roof. Shallop was rolling a cigar around in his mouth and looking interested. Sam couldn't help catching what was being said as he passed by.

"We heard a noise and saw him trying to get into our room," the short man was saying. "He ran through that door."

Sam hurried on. But when he reached a turn in the hallway, he paused, then retraced his steps slowly and stuck his head around a corner. Something was going on. He wasn't the sort who liked to miss a free show.

He saw Shallop open the door leading to the stairway to the roof and enter it, followed by the other man.

Sam felt himself getting excited. Real detective work was going on. He gathered that the two strangers had discovered someone trying to get into their room, and had told Shallop about it.

As long as he was going to be fired, anyway, Sam reasoned that he might as well enjoy himself now. If there was a manhunt in progress, he wanted to be there to watch it. He walked resolutely back to the door of the stairway and started up.

Shallop and the gray-suited man had reached the roof now. The door was open. Sam got a glimpse of stars, and sniffed at the fresh night air. He heard Shallop's voice.

"If he's up here, we'll find him. There ain't no other way down."

Sam stuck his head through the door at the top of the stairway. He was all agog. He saw the lumbering form of Shallop and the figure of the smaller man behind him. Then the smaller man took something out of his pocket and thrust it against Shallop's back.

The detective gave an audible grunt of surprise.

"Stick 'em up," said the gray-suited man in a hard, tense voice.

"Hey!" yelled Sam.

The gray-suited man turned his head then. It almost gave Shallop a chance to grab the gun away from him--almost, but not quite. The man with the gat still had one eye cocked.

"Take care of that nosey bellhop," he said from the corner of his mouth.

Something hard was jammed into Sam's ribs then. It was the other man, the tall one, who had slipped out of the shadows beside the door.

"Raise your mitts, too," he said, "and come on up. The air's fine. You'll like it."

Sam kept his arms stiffly aloft, as did Shallop. He saw the man in the gray suit go through the detective's pockets and remove a gun, a wallet, and a bunch of keys. Then he saw him give Shallop a clip behind the ear with the blunt muzzle of his automatic. The big detective sank to his knees and fell sidewise.

The man behind Sam duplicated the blow, but not so expertly. Sam ducked his head a little. He saw red-and-blue lights dance before his eyes, and he pitched forward, but he wasn't completely out. Dimly, he saw the two men slip through the doorway to the stairs and closed the door after them. He heard the sound of a key being turned in the lock.

Then he understood the whole neat trick. They had lured Shallop up on the roof to get his keys away from him and to get him out of the way. They were crooks, and were planning to pull some sort of job. He thought of Dennison's bridge party and the bejeweled guests who were in attendance.

He sat up, rubbing the back of his head. Then he went over to see Shallop. The detective was breathing heavily. Sam tried to rouse him, but couldn't. He went back to the door and pounded on it, but it was made of metal and was locked.

He stared over the coping at the street thirty stories below. There was no fire escape, no way of getting down. The roof was empty, except for a few pipes and the huge electric sign that rose on a steel framework and blinked in and out as a lure to the teeming denizens of Broadway.

Sam gathered some rainwater in the palms of his hands and threw it into the face of Shallop. The

detective groaned, and fluttered his eyelids. Another shower of cold water made him sit up groggily. The sky overhead shed a faint, reflected illumination.

"What the hell?" said Shallop.

"It's me," said Sam. "A couple of crooks socked you on the dome and took your keys away from you. What are you going to do about it?"

"What are you doing here?" countered Shallop, glaring fiercely at Sam.

"Just looking round," said Sam. "I heard you talking to one of the crooks. You fell for his slick trick, didn't you?"

Shallop broke into a torrent of profanity. He arose, groaned, felt of his head, then limped toward the door.

"It's locked," said Sam. "We couldn't break it down if we tried all night."

"We gotta," said Shallop. "They took my keys so they could crib the sparklers off Dennison's guests. I'm cooked if they get away with it."

But, try as they would, they couldn't force the door.

Overhead, the big electric sign continued to wink in and out as though in sly humor at their plight.

HOTEL PARIS

Then after a period of darkness:

HOTEL PARIS

Sam stared up at it. He began muttering to himself. Then he grabbed Shallop's arm.

"Quick," he said, "boost me up on that sign, Shallop. I got an idea."

Then he saw he wouldn't need Shallop's help, after all. There was a small ladder running up to the huge letters.

"What are you gonna do?" growled Shallop.

"Another crossword puzzle," Sam shouted back enigmatically.

The cold night wind lashed at him as he hung on dizzily. When he reached the sign, he began working with feverish energy, unscrewing bulbs and darkening letters here and there with the confident air of a man who knows what he is about.

When he climbed down from the big framework and joined Shallop on the roof again, the sound coming up through the canyon of Broadway had changed. It had a louder, more strident note. Sam looked at Shallop significantly.

It was twenty minutes later that there came a shouting and a stamping at the door leading to the stairs. Then it opened, and a cop came up on the roof. Shallop greeted him excitedly.

"Quick," he said, "a couple of crooks are pulling off a heist job here tonight."

"I know it," said the cop. "We got 'em just as they were leaving. That signal of yours was seen all up and

down Broadway. They got the reserves outside. We thought there was a riot here--but I've got to hand it to you, Shallop--it was a clever trick all right. Better get it fixed, though, as soon as you can. It's stoppin' traffic all along the street."

Shallop seemed to fight within himself then. He squared his shoulders and looked the cop in the eye. His lips were firm.

"I didn't do it," he said. "It was the bellhop here. He's a crossword puzzle fan, and I've been riding him for it. When I saw him up there unscrewing the bulbs in the 'O' and 'T' of 'HOTEL,' and leaving the 'H--EL,' I didn't catch on to what he was doin', and thought he'd gone crazy. Then, when he began puttin' out the 'A' in 'PARIS' and all the rest of the letters except the 'P,' I saw he'd spelled 'H-EL-P!'"

As Shallop finished speaking, he reached into his pocket and took out a newspaper. He solemnly folded it to the crossword puzzle page, and handed it to Sam.

"That's to make up for the one I tore in two," he said gruffly. "Do it when you get the chance--and don't worry about your job. I'm going to tell the boss about this, and let him know that you ain't only a crossword puzzlin' fool, but the greatest crook-catchin' bellhop on little ol' Broadway."

THE END