

# HUGH CAVE'S

## WEIRD MENACE 3 PACK

### *DAUGHTERS OF DARK DESIRE* \_\_\_\_\_ **3**

*"I cannot help myself, Laura," muttered Peter Langdon brokenly, even as his hands were curving about the throat of the girl he loved with all his heart. For even the accursed spell that was upon the young people in that doomed town held no such terrors for them as did the displeasure of the stone-faced horror that was their master.*

### *ENSLAVED TO SATAN* \_\_\_\_\_ **24**

*Paul Norton thought himself a man of God. But a black-robed fiend came up from nowhere to tell him he had sold his soul to Satan, and blood-red letters flamed before his eyes to vouch the truth of his iniquity. Yet not till Satan's handmaidens had dragged him down to the foul depths of their pain-filled horror chamber did he believe that his eyes and ears had spoken truth . . .*

### *THE TWISTED MEN* \_\_\_\_\_ **47**

*The Virus of Idiocy was in that Vile Potion Clutched in a Dead Man's Hand*

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## DAUGHTERS OF DARK DESIRE

By Hugh B. Cave

*"I cannot help myself, Laura," muttered Peter Langdon brokenly, even as his hands were curving about the throat of the girl he loved with all his heart. For even the accursed spell that was upon the young people in that doomed town held no such terrors for them as did the displeasure of the stone-faced horror that was their master.*

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A STRANGE thing, this sensation called fear. It means little until it strikes close to home; then, becoming terror, it sickens the soul and turns the heart to ice.

It was that way with Peter Langdon. He had known, of course, of the evil malady which was spreading through Cannadale. For days the newspapers had carried unlovely reports and photographs of young men and women who had fallen prey to the hellish spell. But the evil had not struck close to home yet, and so was not terror.

It struck with full force that evening when Laura Welkin, his fiancée, stared at him so strangely in the seclusion of her living-room and said in a faltering whisper: "I feel it coming closer to me, Peter! I'm so afraid! This morning—"

"This morning?" Peter said, scowling. "Yes?"

"My own cousin! She acted so strangely! When she came downstairs she was like a wanton woman, and I saw hunger in her eyes.... Even father noticed it—and then she went to him and kissed him, the way some women kiss their lovers. She laughed in a queer, terrible way while she did it, and I saw horror come into father's eyes. He—he carried Jane to her room and locked her in."

"You mean she is locked in her room now?"

"Yes, Peter. We don't dare let her out. So many others...."

Peter Langdon stared with widening eyes into his sweetheart's terrified face and remembered the newspaper accounts which had until now meant little to him. Headlines had screamed their black tales of victims who had become slaves to the mad lust. Columns of newsprint told of young men, young women wandering the night-shrouded streets of Cannadale—respectable men and women caught in a whirlpool of madness and darkest desire.

Some had been apprehended and returned to their homes, their clothing torn, their bodies clawed and gouged and mutilated by unknown hands of unimaginable evil. Others had disappeared ....

Now the horror had invaded the home of Laura Welkin and claimed a new victim....

"We've got to help her," Peter said grimly.

As though resigned to the knowledge that nothing could be done, Laura nodded wearily. "Father has gone to Marlboro to bring back a specialist. The doctors here can do nothing. They've tried to cure others, and failed. You must go home, Peter. It's late. Aunt Millicent will be angry."

FEAR walked with Peter Langdon through the streets of Cannadale. Was it safe to leave Laura alone in that big house with an eccentric old aunt and a young girl who had become possessed? Laura's father was in Marlboro, a hundred miles away. If the night brought creeping shadows, would locked doors and windows keep them at bay?

Creeping shadows! They were abroad now, stalking him through the murk! His own home lay on the other side of the city, more than a mile from here, and that mile snaked crookedly through the city's downtown section and through slum-streets near the river front.

He went slowly, striving to make himself believe that his intended wife was in no danger. She wasn't in danger, of course. This was a civilized city where policemen were paid to provide protection. People here were safe.

But newspaper headlines danced in his brain, tormenting him, and he knew that for the past few weeks people here had been safe. That vile disease, if disease it were, had claimed too

many. Men and women had been lured into the night, had been found—some of them—wandering nearly mad, their bodies mutilated by marks of torture. And at least one reputable physician—Dr. Arnold Coleman—had declared his grim belief that the tortures were self-inflicted.

Shadows . . . creeping in the dark. More than once Peter turned to peer behind him, certain that some sinister shape was dogging his steps. Passing pedestrians were silent ghosts in an unsavory murk, and around him were the frowning, evil-smelling tenements of Cannadale's slums, through which he must pass.

He quickened his pace. Always before, he had enjoyed prowling through this district, for it was like peering into an alien world inhabited by strange, uncouth denizens of squalor. But now the shadows were reaching out to clutch at him, and the fear in his heart had become a strangling weight.

Ahead, something sidled crookedly from a tenement house doorway and moved toward him, to block his path.

Peter swayed to a dead stop and stood staring. It was dark here. That furtive prowler had chosen a murky no-man's land of gloom between the pale halos of far-apart street lamps in which to accost him. There was an eerie sound of wind front the river-front moaning against tall buildings, and up ahead, beyond the ochre puddle of the second street lamp and beyond that slouching, advancing shape of shadow, a scarlet and black sign creaked on rusty hinges above the doorway of a pawn shop.

A cold wet mist rode the breeze and slid clamily across Peter's stiff face as if seeking something there. Cold as it was, it failed to cool the burning thickness in his throat as he waited with big body swaying and feet glued to the unclean sidewalk.

That advancing shape was a woman. Realizing that, he was vaguely relieved and moved forward to go past her, for she had stopped and was apparently timid about coming closer.

She was the one who seemed afraid now, and he wondered why. She was young; well dressed. Was she lost here in the slums and trying to find her way out? Was she ....

Peter Langdon stiffened with a sudden gasp of breath and realized that the girl was ill. She was stumbling toward him, but she was not going

to make it! He sprang forward. The girl staggered, pitched to her knees on the sidewalk and swayed there, sobbing. And then Peter's hands were clutching her arm

"What's wrong?" he cried anxiously "What's the matter?"

THE girls lips mumbled some sort of answer but he did not hear it. Horror filled his widening eyes. He stared down at her trembling body, and even the darkness failed to hide the fact that the front of her dress had been ripped open. Her half-exposed breasts were torn, bleeding, where cruel fingers had gouged strips of flesh from her young body. Her own fingers, clutching at him, were red with fresh blood!

"Good God!" Peter muttered.

She was clawing at him now with sharp nails, as if suddenly afraid that he might jerk free and leave her. She spoke his name, in a low, husky voice, and the voice was turbulent with dark passion.

Wide-eyed with horror, he stared at the girl's mutilated breasts, heard again the grim voice of Dr. Arnold Coleman stating an opinion which few people had given credence to. "I tell you," Coleman had growled, examining a recent victim, "these marks of torture are a result of masochistic madness! They are self-imposed!"

Good God, had *this* girl mutilated herself? Was she *mad*?

Mad or not, she possessed a strength that seemed impossible in one so young, so terribly wounded. "Wait a while, will you?" she said softly, dragging Peter closer. "What's your . . . hurry? Maybe we can be friends."

Peter stood very, still, very stiff, and returned the girl's stare.

She had been attractive once. Even the darkness could not hide that. Her satin skin and sleek black hair showed unmistakable evidence of having been carefully cared for. But the gaze of those dark eyes was like a dank breeze from the river, coldly and sensually searching his face. He shuddered from it.

"You want to be friends, don't you?" the girl demanded. "I'm good looking enough.....?"

Good looking? She was, despite an alabaster paleness which told of some lurking illness. But there was something more. He knew this girl! He

had met her before under far different circumstances!

And she was on her feet now, dragging him across the sidewalk hauling him toward the doorway from which she had emerged. Scowling, he put his hands on her shoulders and forcibly swung her to face him, peered more closely.

The yellow glow of the street lamp showed him her face. "My God!" he gasped. "Jane!"

Jane! Jane Berkely, Laura's cousin. But Laura had said that this girl was even now locked in her room, for fear that she might go wandering into the streets and become a creature of mad lust, as others had done before her. This couldn't be Jane!

She was gazing at him queerly, almost savagely. "Well, what's the matter with you?" she demanded. "What if my name is Jane? You're a man and I'm a woman. Isn't that enough?"

Peter Langdon looked into her hunger-twisted face and felt a slow, numbing stream of horror course through him. This girl, Laura's cousin? This strange, fiery-eyed woman whose half-naked bosom was red with blotches of blood where savage fingers had torn away flesh? It wasn't—couldn't be—true! Yet the girl herself had used the name Jane, called herself by it!

He pulled her closer, and she misunderstood his meaning. "Now you're being sensible," she whispered eagerly. "Love me, Peter! No one will ever know!"

"I'm taking you to a doctor!"

"No, no! I have a room where we can be alone."

"You're going with me, I say!"

She realized that he meant it. Her staring eyes filled with quick dark rage. "You fool!" she screamed. "I offer you my love and you refuse! What kind of man are you?"

Words would be futile—Peter knew that. This girl was insane with desire. Curling hard fingers around her arm, he dragged her along the sidewalk.

Snarling, kicking, she went with him. Only because she had to. That little body possessed unusual strength; bared teeth sought with animal hunger to fasten on the hands that held her. "Damn you, let me go!" she screamed at him. "I won't be taken back there and locked in again!"

He ignored her screams, ignored even the vile epithets she flung at him. When he stopped, it

was because of something else—because in the gloom before him where river mist yellowed by lamplight hung like a huge festering sore in the night, a silent shape had suddenly detached itself from the wall and was striding forward. And there was a face swimming in the mist ....

Men are afraid of things they do not understand. Peter, staring, was suddenly and tremblingly afraid of the face, because it was unreal.

Still clinging tenaciously to the woman beside him, he gaped in wide-eyed terror at the thing which glided toward him. Jane Berkely stopped squirming, ceased spitting epithets. The shadowed street was full of the slow, hollow thumping of the thing's footsteps, and breath rattled in Peter's throat. He wanted then to run. The night itself, it seemed, screamed at him that this approaching stranger was the embodiment of all things evil, was somehow connected with the hideous disease which had swept through Cannadale.

That face was cold and grey, a mask carved of stone possessing eyes like globules of wet hard tar which had caught and held the feeble gleam of the street lamp. It swayed closer ....

PETER LANGDON jerked his flaccid limbs into action and turned trembling toward the curb, to pass that advancing shape without walking closer than was necessary. He had no need now to drag Jane with him; she came willingly, staring with fearful expectancy at the stone-faced thing in the gloom. Did she too sense the menace in those unblinking eyes? Did she know the man?

Peter clung to her and strode forward, through a stench-laden mist that blurred his gaze and distorted the swimming face into something greyishly inhuman. Again he suddenly wanted to rush madly, screaming, in the opposite direction. But why? What was there to be afraid of? Simply because this gaunt-faced stranger had appeared so abruptly out of the night's gloom, was that any reason to suspect him of being some sinister monster spawned by the night itself?

"Come!" Peter said to the girl.

But Jane Berkely was not willing to go with him. Not any longer. Her feet had jarred to a halt on the wet sidewalk and she was staring at the approaching shape the way a hypnotized bird might stare at the gliding coils of some sinuous snake.

"Come!" Peter rasped. And suddenly the stranger was standing before him, staring.

"You are in trouble?"

"In trouble?" Peter stared wildly into the man's unblinking eyes. "Yes, yes, I'm in trouble! This girl is ill—terribly ill! For God's sake get help, will you? Call an ambulance, a cab—"

"An ambulance? I think that is not necessary." The voice came through the mist, out of stonelike lips that hung there, distorted, in the street lamp's farthest reaching tentacle of light. The lips seemed hardly to twitch, yet the voice came low and distinct between them, and the face swam nearer. "I think I know what is wrong with her, my friend, and I am sure that I myself can attend to her better than any doctor."

Peter Langdon shrank back, peering into a face that seemed made of stone: a face whose shrunken cheeks and broad, slanting forehead were as hard and grey as granite. Only the glittering eyes, staring now into Jane Berkely's terrified countenance, possessed anything like life.

"I think she will go with me."

Peter heard the words, felt their horrible connection with the terror in Cannadale. Then he was hearing another voice, his own, snarling harshly: "You get to hell out of here! Get out!"

The eyes smiled at him. A very old man might have smiled that way at the ridiculous ravings of a small child. "You do not seem to understand. I have come for the young lady, to take her with me."

Something very cold, very dreadful, lurked in the quiet of those slurred words, yet Peter released his hold on the girl's arm and thrust himself forward. It would be easy to push this unwelcome stranger aside. The man was short, stumpy; beneath those mist-dampened garments his body must surely be a puny thing without much strength. Only his face seemed strong—hard and inflexible as granite.

"Move on," Peter said grimly, clamping a hand on the man's shoulder. "Take yourself out of here before I lose my temper."

The man smiled gently, almost without moving the muscles of his face. "You are not strong enough to send me away," he said.

PETER LANGDON'S temper broke its bonds. His clenched fist swept up from belt-level,

sweeping through the mist to crash savagely, powerfully, against the face that swam there. It was a good fist; many men would have been proud of the strength behind it. And the target, hanging there like a grey gargoyle, did not jerk away.

The fist crashed home with a hard, grinding thud. Agony surged into Peter's rigid wrist, coursed upward through his arm. He gasped a cry of pain and swayed on stiff legs, staring. Striking that stony face had been like swinging a mighty fist into a concrete wall! And the face was still smiling!

"You are not strong enough," the thin lips murmured, "to hurt me."

Swift as a striking serpent, the man moved. Steel fingers closed over Peter's wrist, jerking him forward. He knew then, with blinding terror, that the power in that puny body was greater than his own. But how could that be?

He fought! There on a mist-wet sidewalk where midnight's gloom was relieved only by far-apart street lamps, he fought in sobbing desperation to defend himself. Steel hands were at his throat, strangling him and while he twisted in torment the granite face of his assailant hung before him, expressionless except for that lingering, perhaps indelible smile of mockery.

His fists beat a frantic tattoo against the man's chest, hurting themselves more than they harmed their target. Good God, what was this man? Was he an unearthly visitant from some dark world where men were created of stone? Did the blows of those hammering human fists harm him not at all?

In agony Peter saw the white, startled face of Jane Berkely and knew that the girl was standing against the wall of the building, her hands curled in terror against the mounds of her slashed breasts. She too seemed to know the inevitable outcome of the battle, yet seemed unable to flee. In a moment more those granite hands would clutch the quivering flesh of her own cringing body...

Darkness swirled before Peter's bulging eyes. He no longer beat at the smiling face of his assailant; instead, his hands clawed futilely at those other hands which were throttling him, while agony seared his struggling body. . .

No man could break the grip of those murderous fingers. On his knees, writhing, Peter hurled himself against the creature's legs, hoping

to hurl that rigid body off balance and then sprawl on top of it. Lights danced in his brain and a sound of low laughter, laden with mockery, gibbered at his ears. It was so useless now, so horribly futile. Nothing on earth could loosen the clutch of the hands that were killing him. And the darkness was deeper, filled with sounds of torment that must surely be groaning from his own bloody lips....

The hands did release their hold. One of them slid higher, fastening itself in Peter Langdon's hair. From beneath, a bludgeon hard as iron swept through the crimson murk and crashed against Peter's chin while he knelt there. The bludgeon was a knee—a human knee as solid, destroying, as a thing of iron hardened in the hell of a blast furnace.

Peter shot over backward, slid in a twisted heap across the wet pavement and rolled grotesquely into the gutter, arms flailing like the wings of a crippled bat. Half conscious he lay writhing in a bed of foul water that whispered an echo to the triumphant soft laughter of the fiend who stood over him. Silently the man moved away.

And then a woman was screaming! Jane Berkely—shrieking in frantic fear as those granite hands dragged her from the wall. Clawing and kicking, she pulled relentlessly toward the black doorway from which the monster had first emerged.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### ***Hand of Stone***

PETER LANGDON lay moaning in the murk of the gutter while eternities passed and agony subsided in the depths of his tortured body. Terror labored within him; again he felt that overpowering desire to run, to keep on running until the crowding shadows were left far behind. Yet other shadows, equally venomous, lurked in every direction. There was no escape . . .

Terror and pain are companionate creators of delusions, leading men's minds along strange warped passageways of darkness! Peter Langdon mouthed the name of the girl he loved, and moaned to a god of mercy to save her from the

clutches of the monster who he thought had carried her away.

"Laura! Oh God, Laura ....!"

His confused brain had forgotten that it was not Laura, but her cousin, Jane, who had fallen victim to the monster ....

Later, the sidewalk of that shadowed street echoed a slow and heavy thud of approaching footsteps, and through the yellow murk of far-apart street lamps strode a tall, stoop-shouldered figure who walked in a world of his own.

Looking neither to right nor left, the man trudged methodically through gloom, the collar of his heavy suit-coat turned high to keep out the night. Tall and spare, possessing a bearded face in which the eyes were half closed with weariness, the man mumbled to himself as he walked—and then, hearing the moans of Peter Langdon, he stopped and turned with a jerk that shook the drowsiness out of him.

He stared with widening eyes as Peter's fumbling hand clawed feebly on the curb.

The street lamp's wandering glow showed him Peter's face.

"Langdon! Good heavens!"

Peter peered dully into that swooping face and mumbled thickly: "Coleman. Doctor Coleman. Thank God." And then strong hands hauled him across the sidewalk and propped him where the wall of the building would hold him erect. Coleman blurted questions.

And Peter screamed out the madness in his soul.

"Laura! The fiend took Laura away from me, Coleman! For God's sake go after her; bring her back before something horrible—"

Delusions—spawned by terror and pain and by those granite fingers which while twisting Peter's throat had also twisted his brain.

Arnold Coleman had been a physician for years and worked now at the Cannadale Hospital. Mental cases were not new to him. "What are you talking about?" he said curtly.

"Laura! The man with the stone face took her!"

"You're ill," Coleman growled. "I've just come from Laura's house; went there to have a talk with her father, but he wasn't at home. She was home though, and couldn't possibly have been here in

the slums at the same time. You're quite mistaken."

"No, no, Coleman. I tell you—"

Arnold Coleman made clucking sounds with his tongue and shook his head sideways. For a doctor he had very little patience. Suspicion was in the peering eyes under his furrowed brows, and he said quietly: "You're in bad shape, Langdon. Drunk, were you?" Then, clamping strong hands under Peter's armpits and lifting him erect: "Home is the place for you. Home and in bed. Come!"

Peter had no strength to resist with, yet tried to wrench himself free. As he fought, tears drenched his twisted face and words croaked from his bloody lips. "I won't go home! My God, Coleman, I've got to find her!"

For answer, Coleman murmured the same soothing words he might have used on some hysterical patient at the hospital. Then he pulled the struggling figure along with him. Peter, sobbing with each stumbling step, could not resist.

Along dark streets Coleman led him, ever away from that evil doorway. When a prowling cab crept past he signaled, then bundled his dazed patient into it and said curtly to the driver: "The Langdon residence, East Side." No further directions were necessary. The Langdons, in Cannadale, were important and wealthy.

"Just to prove to you that nothing has happened to your sweetheart," Coleman said, as they rode, "I'll phone her when I get you home, and you can talk to her yourself."

HE did that, after leading Peter up the high white steps of the Langdon residence and half-pushing, half-carrying him into the living-room. Still dazed, Peter slumped there on a sofa and stared dully into the face of Bernice Marnell, his father's secretary who came at Coleman's call, from her bed-chamber on the floor above. But tonight, he had no eyes for the dark beauty of the face that hovered above him. Instead he saw only the softer, less mature features of the girl who had promised soon to be his wife—and in his mind the belief that Laura was lost to him grew to a numbing certainty.

"She won't answer the phone," he mumbled. "She's not there to answer it. That fiend took her..."

"What is it, Peter?" The eyes of Bernice Marnell—dark, liquid eyes filled now with

compassion—searched his twitching face anxiously. "Tell me what happened."

Ordinarily he would have been eager to reach out to her for comfort. She was like a sister to him, this woman. In the beginning she had come here to work for Joshua Langdon, but for years now she had been so much a member of the family that even bonds of birth could have drawn her no closer.

And she was beautiful in a way that few women, even Laura, could ever hope to be, with luxuriant black hair and shadowed eyes that seemed always to be glowing with strange warmth. Only the deformity of her left foot marred that loveliness—and perhaps God had done that intentionally, knowing that without it He might have created too perfect a woman.

The club-foot scraped now, as Bernice limped from the room to bring water with which to wash the purpling wounds in Peter's throat. Dully he looked toward the hall doorway and heard the rasping click of the dial as Coleman, for the third time, sought a response from the home of Laura Welkin.

"She won't answer," Peter mumbled. "We're wasting time . . ."

Coleman, pacing over the threshold, scowled and said irritably: "They must be asleep. But I tell you she was there when I left, and nothing could have happened!"

Peter was erect, swaying. "Nothing—could have happened!" The words came bitterly, harshly. "Damn you, Coleman, I told you to leave me alone back there in the slums! Now it may be too late!"

Even Coleman could not stop him then. A measure of strength had returned sluggishly to Peter's big body. Staggering, he flung the doctor aside and blundered to the door. When Coleman tried again to halt him, Peter's clenched fist raised a livid welt on the man's cheek and sent him crashing to the wall.

It was not far to the slums. There might still be time if only he could find that dark doorway! If only he could find it before Laura became completely enslaved to the disease which had claimed so many others ....

TERROR rode Peter's hunched shoulders as he went prowling into the slums. He talked to himself incoherently. On the corner of that street of mystery, a sidewalk clock said two A.M.



Somewhere along here was the doorway—the black chasm where Laura had been dragged, screaming after stone hands had beaten Peter Langdon to submission. Now there was no sound except the ceaseless mutter of rain and the gurgle of water in unclean gutters. But somewhere, a doorway... .

He lurched toward the glow of a familiar street lamp and stopped sluggishly, aware that there was a sound in the street's dark stillness. An alien sound of high heels tapping quickly, nervously in the gloom ahead!

Hope blazed in Peter's eyes. High heels? A woman, then—and the woman might be the one he sought! Surely at this hour, in a district so renowned for its perils, no girl would be just out for a stroll!

He saw her then, but at that distance could not be sure. The girl walked as if afraid—a trim, rain-wet figure tapping hurriedly along the pavement, into the yellow blotch of light flung from the lamp above. Her head was lowered to the sweep of the rain, her face hidden. Unaware yet of Peter's presence, she came toward him, past a certain murky doorway which to Peter was a place of evil. And then—she was no longer alone! From the shadows of that doorway a crouching shape detached itself, leaped forward with the sudden gliding attack of a wolf!

The cry of warning that rose in Peter's throat was smothered by the girl's scream of terror as she whirled. Too late she flung herself sideways; too late Peter lurched forward, striving to hurl himself across the intervening space in time.

That lean, snarling shape had swept the screaming girl into its arms, was dragging her now toward the deeper gloom of the doorway. Her screams were smothered under a cruel hand; the fiend's other hand was tearing at the wet garments that covered her slender body!

Peter surged forward, bellowing hoarsely in a throat tight with returning terror. "Laura!" Good God, if the girl were Laura—!

She was on her knees now, screaming for help while with furious hands her assailant bared the cringing flesh of her shoulders. When Peter charged, the monster turned his head and glared. A gasp of relief choked in Peter's throat. That hungry face was not made of stone! It was human!

He, Peter Langdon, could hurl *this* man aside without being strangled by granite hands and left writhing in the gutter....

Then other shapes erupted out of the gloom. Uniformed shapes. Policemen! And the girl's assailant was lurching erect, standing now with his back to the wall.

He had no chance, yet he fought with the fury of a trapped tiger. Strong hands tore him away from the girl who lay sobbing on the sidewalk at his feet. Nightsticks shattered his fists when he battled for freedom. Other fists as powerful as his own felled him and battered him to submission . . . and then he was hauled erect, slammed against the wall and pinned there.

Peter Langdon, stumbling forward, gaped with horrified eyes into the man's bloody countenance.

It was not a stone face nor was it old. Before lust had claimed it, it had been the face of a decent, clean-living fellow of about twenty-five. But now the fellow's big chest was heaving enormously beneath the open front of his shirt, and Peter saw through a mist of horror that the chest was mutilated.

Mutilated! Not bruised by the fists of the policemen or by their nightsticks, but torn and gouged and gashed by something sharper—by fingernails, perhaps, or by hellish instruments of torture!

The man's chest and face and arms were carmine with blood, and the blood was seeping from wounds which Doctor Coleman would say were self-inflicted.

"It's Granville," Peter said dully. "It's—Jack Granville."

One of the policemen stared at him, recognized him and said tersely: "We been keeping an eye on this guy for the last hour or so. You know him, Mr. Langdon?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." Stiff with amazement, Peter fought to clear his brain of the mist that had enveloped it. "He—he's engaged to my sister." The words had no life behind them, came as if uttered in sleep.

Jack Granville, an attacker of helpless women! It couldn't be true! This man, pinned here against the wall and staring now in dull, stupid bewilderment as if unaware of the crime he had been about to commit, this man must be someone

who *looked* like Jack Granville. Not Jack himself! But there was no mistake....

Peter swayed forward, peered into the fellow's face. For more than a year now, Granville had been engaged to Peter's sister, who would return soon to Cannadale from a trip abroad with her parents. The family had approved. Peter himself had approved. And now....

Horried, he turned from Granville to the whimpering girl who was being helped erect. Cruel fingers had torn the girl's dress, ripped it from neck to waist and left red claw-marks on white flesh. Jack Granville had done that.

"You know the girl, too, Mr. Langdon ?"

Peter shook his head. No. He had never seen her before. She was not Laura.

He stood there, dazed, while the policemen led Jack Granville away. They had no trouble doing that. Granville seemed stupefied, drunkenly bewildered, unaware of what had happened. He went without resisting. And the girl went too, clinging fearfully to the arm of a policeman.

Peter stood there, staring.

TERROR returned with the realization that he had found not Laura, but only more of the horror which was seeping like malignant poison through Cannadale. The picture of Jack Granville and of the bruised, bleeding body of Granville's screaming victim went with him as he paced sluggishly forward.

Laura . . . Dear God, where was Laura ? Had she too suffered the terrors which that girl must have suffered, in the embrace of a lusting madman? Had she endured even more?

The doorway loomed dark and forbidding before him, in its depths a sound of rain-water spilling noisily from a ledge above. The street was deserted again. Peter slouched forward. And then—someone was walking beside him. A familiar voice from lips that seemed fashioned of stone was saying ever so softly: "Perhaps I can help you find her. Who knows?"

With a gasping intake of breath, Peter whirled.

The granite-gray face that hung in the rain beside him was wet now, and gleamed yellow in the glow of the street lamp. A smile hung on the man's bloodless mouth as if indeed those lips were molded of some substance other than flesh, and could assume no different expression.

"Yes, perhaps I can help you find her," the man murmured.

Peter Langdon stood with feet apart on the sidewalk in water that ran loudly from the depths of the doorway. Swaying, he knew that his own face had turned ghastly white, his eyes were swelling in their sockets. Good God, what manner of man was this? Was the form beneath those black garments a human form or something risen from an unholy grave—something able to come and go as silently as death itself?

He clenched his fists in anticipation of the fiend's attack. But that granite face was still smiling; a cold hand reached gently to fasten on his upraised arm.

"You *are* seeking your loved one, I know. Come with me."

"Damn you!" Peter snarled. "What have you done with her?"

"She is unharmed. The rest you must learn for yourself."

Peter hung back. Afraid? Terror was the word. But why in God's name should he be so afraid of this man? He, Peter Langdon, possessed two powerful fists and a body which towered head and shoulders above the puny creature before him!

"I—I won't go."

"But I insist. And *she* insists. Come."

The hand on Peter's arm closed slowly, drawing him forward. Clenching, it bit into the drenched sleeve of his coat, was like an iron claw twisting cruelly into flesh that burned with sudden agony. "Come. Surely you know by now that I am strong enough, if need be, to force you!"

Peter moved in a daze, without further protest. He went because he feared not to, and because the undulating drone of the man's voice numbed him. In the depths of his stupefied brain another voice whispered a warning; but the grip of those compelling fingers did not relax. "Come!" And Peter went.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### ***The Hunger Plague***

HERE was danger. Here where rainwater spilled from rotted timbers overhead and a flight of

black stairs snaked upward into gloom, lay the secret of the disease which had claimed so many of Cannadale's young men and women. Peter knew it. Why then was he allowing himself to be led into the trap? Was it because he knew also that there was no other way of learning the truth?

The fingers had loosened their hold, yet he slowly ascended the stairs as that silent shape before him climbed to the second floor landing. There was a light now, dancing from the flame of a match in the man's outthrust hand. The light moved to a gas-jet and clung there, stirred by a draft that swept the empty hall. In the glow of it the granite face swung round again; the sunken, horribly alive eyes smiled mockingly.

"Come!"

What was this house? Was it an empty tenement, perhaps, which the monster had transformed into a dark den of iniquity from which he could prowl forth on nightly missions of evil? Everything here was so tomblike, so deathly still!

The scrape of his own shoes rasped like a file against Peter's nerves. Those other feet ahead of him thumped hollowly along the hall toward yet another doorway. Strange, that they should beat so loudly. The feet of a stone idol, endowed with life, would thud that way....

"Where—are you taking me?"

No answer. One of those granite hands, outstretched, pushed the door open; darkness swelled forth to envelope the fiend's shrunken body. Groping, Peter followed. The door swung shut behind him. "You will be seated—there." The man with the stone face, standing now like a black ghoul in the dark, was pointing to a chair.

Peter slumped down, staring. "You—you'll bring her to me?" Why in God's name was he letting those glittering eyes make a puppet of him? Why couldn't he stand up and seize that withered body in his hands and break it in two? Was it terror alone that made him sit there, gaping—or was it something more sinister?

"Perhaps you wonder who I am, Peter Langdon." Stone-faced paced closer, stood now within arm's reach. "Wait, and you shall know. First—"

Too late Peter saw the hands that stabbed toward him! His effort to lurch erect was thwarted; the iron fingers clamped on his arms, held him. Too late he realized that the chair into which he had so foolishly slumped was no ordinary chair!

It was bolted to the wall, had iron shackles jutting from its arms. And Peter's own arms were being forced into the shackles, despite his frantic efforts to writhe erect. In ghastly silence he fought with the fiend who had so cunningly trapped him. Fought? It was not that! No man with the strength of an ordinary mortal could hope to break the grip of those granite fingers!

His fists smashed against the hovering face, beat a tattoo against flesh that felt no pain. Sobbing, he sank his teeth into the hunched shoulder that pressed him back, but there was no outcry from the fiend's lips.

One of the iron shackles had clamped shut. The other did likewise, with a metallic clank like the striking of a clock. Then the monster was on his knees, gripping Peter's ankles, forcing them into other shackles on the chair-legs despite Peter's superhuman efforts to kick loose.

Breathing noisily, the man with the stone face stood erect, and was smiling.

"Now I shall bring the girl to you and let you see what has been done to her. It is always better to show a man what *can* be done; then he is the more willing to believe that the same can be done to him!"

The mocking smile inspired Peter to new efforts, dragged him forward in a mad lunge that brought agony when the shackles whipped him back again. "Damn you! If you've harmed Laura—"

"Laura? But she told me her name was Jane. Jane Berkely. Yes, I am sure of it. It was she who told me your name also."

Jane Berkely? That was the name of Laura's cousin. How did this man know? Peter stared dully into the glittering eyes that watched him. Jane Berkely? The girl's face swam in the torment-mist of his brain. Jane's face, as he had always known it, young and gently attractive. And then suddenly the face changed expression; blurred by a dank mist from the river, it swayed toward him—hungry, distorted by lust.

Jane! It was she then, and not Laura, who had accosted him there on the street, eternities ago! *Jane* was the girl who had been dragged away in the embrace of those granite arms!

THE truth, knifing home, brought a hoarse cry from Peter's lips. Good Lord, how had he made such a mistake? How had he been such a fool? Laura, his Laura, was safe!

But she had not answered the phone when Doctor Coleman had called. More than likely, having discovered Jane's absence, she had gone out into the streets in hysterical search, and had not returned.... Had she too fallen prey to the plague? Was she here—here in this house of shadows—with Jane?

Peter looked wildly into the grey face above him, said hoarsely: "How many girls have you dragged here? Who else is here besides Jane? Tell me!"

"You shall see for yourself."

The man with the stone face had turned away, was pacing toward a door in the opposite wall while Peter sat stiff, gripping the rungs of the chair. There was only the sound of two men breathing and the leaden thump of the fiend's slow-moving feet. Where was he going? *Whom would he bring back with him?*

"Damn you!" Peter stormed. "Let me loose! Take these shackles off!" Abruptly he was silent, because another sound had whispered into the room's shadows. Against the farther door the man with the granite face was rigid, staring.

Footsteps! Heavy, hurrying footsteps on the stairs and in the corridor!

No expression came into that stone face. No expression could come into it, Peter was certain, unless chiseled there with some instrument capable of carving solid rock. The glittering eyes, though, showed sudden fear. Like phosphorescent beetles they leaped in their sockets as the man took a faltering step backward.

A heavy fist hammered on the corridor door. "Open up in there! Open in the name of the law!"

Stone-face shrank back, seemed for a moment to be trembling with terror. Then his out-thrust hand jerked to the other door and pulled it open. The door thudded shut behind him. The echoes of his pounding footsteps were smothered by harsh voices clamoring for admission.

Gone! The fiend was escaping, carrying his secrets and perhaps his prisoners with him! A scream tore from Peter's throat as he fought to free himself, to give chase. The corridor door was swaying, groaning on its hinges. It crashed inward.

Uniformed policemen stormed into the room.

After that, Peter Langdon was not sure what happened. His voice, bellowing instructions, all

but incoherent; his frantic efforts to free himself only made the task more difficult for those who struggled to release him.

Some of the policemen knew him; one told him briefly that Laura Welkin's Aunt Millicent had rushed wildly into the station, some time ago, to report the disappearance of Jane Berkely—whereupon the police had sent men into the slums in search of her. Those men had seen Stone-face and trailed him. . . .

Peter understood only part of it. Enormous in his brain was the single thought that the man with the stone face was escaping! Then, freed at last from his shackles, he went stumbling over the threshold where the fiend had vanished. Men in uniform went with him.

IT was a house with many rooms and multiple dark corridors where the beat of prowling feet made thunder in a tomblike silence. Many rooms—all of them dark, empty. Of the master of the house there was no slightest trace nor even a clue to say which way he had fled.

"A face like stone?" one of the policemen said to Peter, scowling. "You—sure?"

In the gleam cast by an advancing searchlight, Peter's own face was like stone, white and stiff as marble. "He dragged Jane in here. Maybe Laura, too. Now he's gone—gone—"

"Well, don't you worry, Mr. Langdon. Every cop in Cannadale has been on this case since the first of these damned disappearances was reported. We'll get to the bottom of it."

Mirthless laughter rattled in Peter's throat. "Yes, you'll get to the bottom of it—too late! It's already too late!"

Alone he went away from there, out over that cursed threshold which led to the slum street where the horror had first begun. Uptown a clock was tolling four. Perhaps if he went now to Laura's house, she would have returned there. If not, he could walk the streets looking for her . . . looking and hoping until hope died.

The big house was dark when he climbed the steps and rang the bell. The hope within him had already been murdered by too much thinking, by a realization that this new horror was no separate ghastly thing in itself, but merely one link in a chain which had begun weeks ago and might stretch unendingly into a dismal future.

Drenched to the skin he stood waiting to hear a sound of footsteps beyond the door. But there would be no steps . . .

The door opened in his face!

Peter's cry of thanksgiving welled on wings of wild joy. "Laura! You're safe! Oh, my dear!" But he got no answer. The pajama-clad figure stood strangely stiff in the gloom of the doorway; wide eyes stared at him with queer intentness.

"Laura, what's wrong? What is it?"

"So you've come at last," she whispered. She drew him inside, impatiently closed the door. "We're alone now, Peter . . ." Her clutching hand was cold. "Come, Peter!" And she led him furtively along the hall, up the big staircase to her own room on the floor above.

The door clicked shut. Peter stood stiff, gazing with troubled eyes at the girl he had come seeking. She stood between him and a lamp glowing there on the dressing-table—stood in filmy flesh-colored pajamas through which the light gleamed like something unreal, revealing every curve of her swaying body.

In Laura Welkin's eager eyes lurked the same mad lust which had blazed so long in the eyes of Jane Berkely, on that fog-ridden street in the slums!

Stunned, Peter fell away from her, pushed out a trembling hand as she glided toward him. "Laura! What's come over you?" Terror filled his voice with metallic harshness. This wasn't—couldn't be—the Laura he loved! She had always been so shy, so modest!

"I've waited, Peter. When Aunt Millicent went to the police I went into the streets to find Jane. I looked everywhere, then came back here and waited for you. I knew you'd come to me."

She came closer to him, closer, and horror swelled in Peter's eyes, jangled in the hoarse croak of his voice as he pushed her away.

"You're insane, Laura! You're not yourself!"

In her terribly bright eyes blazed an anger such as he had never before seen in them. "You mean you don't want me?"

Peter staggered to the door, leaned there. Dully, stupidly, he knew what had happened, knew that in walking the streets in search of Jane, Laura had somehow come in contact with the same hideous disease which had transformed Jane into a lusting masochist.

The knowledge seared through him, burned like fire in his veins; then the fire cooled and left him cold, horribly stiff. "Laura," he mumbled, "for God's sake—"

"You're being silly, Peter." Her voice was honey-sweet, alluring.

"But you don't know what you're doing! I'll get a doctor and—"

"No!"

"But you *need* a doctor! My God, if you'd seen Jane the way I saw her, you'd realize what this cursed disease does to its victims! In a little while you'll be like that. You'll torture yourself the way she did, the way Jack Granville did. You'll *want* to do that, and you'll find pleasure in the pain of it! Oh, my dear—"

A strange, wild gleam came into the girl's eyes. She repeated the word "torture" in a low whisper and looked down at her own swaying body.

"Pain must be so sweet ...." The words were almost inaudible, like those of a person slowly awakening from deep slumber.

She was moving away from him, turning toward the dressing-table. Her questing hands picked up a comb and discarded it, did the same with a small mirror. Her fingers closed over a bone-handled nail file, long and sharp, and she smiled.

HORRIFIED, Peter lurched toward her, but not in time to prevent her from pressing the sharp point of the file into the bared flesh of her arm. The strange wild gleam in her eyes had blazed to madness. She dragged the file down her arm, tearing flesh.

"Stop it!" Peter bellowed. "My God, stop!"

"But I like it, Peter. Here." She was holding the infernal thing toward him, its sharp point dripping blood onto the carpet. "Here, take it." Her hands slid upward to her shoulders, baring white skin.

Peter's fist sent the file spinning across the room. "You're coming with me," he said hoarsely. "You need a doctor and it isn't safe to leave you here while I go for one."

She stared at him. Snarling, she retreated from his outthrust hands and stood with her slippered feet wide apart on the carpet, her breasts heaving, her face a livid mask in which every muscle twitched. Peter lurched to a stop,

frightened by the menace of her gaze. Merciful God, what had happened to the girl he loved? What could he do to drag her back from the hell into which she had wandered?

"Laura, listen to me." His voice was a wail. "Please listen. You're ill. You're out of your mind. I'll get a doctor and—"

"A doctor!" Her shrill laugh froze the blood in his veins.

"You're mad!"

The word "mad" dragged that volcano of hell-fire to the surface in all its stark fury. The rage of the girl before him swelled to scarlet hate. She hurled herself straight at him, both hands reaching to gouge his face. And there was only one answer, no other explanation for the strange, fearsome expression of ecstasy that filled her face!

She attacked him again and again, forcing him to hurl her back lest his own eyes be torn out by her raking fingers. She screamed curses, spat at him, shrieked at him to strike her if he dared.

If he dared! There was no other way, much as he loved her. Flattening himself against the wall, he clenched his right hand into a fist and drove it in a short, hard jab to her jaw. She went down, unconscious.

Dazed, Peter went over the threshold, went groping and stumbling downstairs and out of the house. The terror that rode his wretched body was a leering, mocking monster that hammered at his sanity. Like an animated corpse, half dead and half alive, he trudged through the rain, not realizing in his madness that he had left behind him a girl who needed help.

WHAT time it was when he reached home he had no idea, nor did he speak more than a few incoherent words to Bernice Marnell, who was aroused by the noise of his stumbling feet in the hall and came downstairs to help him.

Mumbling to her that he wanted to be left alone, he went to his own room and sprawled there on the bed. But the door opened again Bernice was at his side, bending above him.

"Peter, what's wrong? Please tell me."

Dully he stared into the lovely dark eyes which were now so full of concern for him. Why should he not tell her what had happened? Surely it would do no harm—and he had to tell someone or go mad.

When he had finished, her warm hands caressed his fevered face and she was sobbing softly with pity for him. "Oh my dear, I'm so sorry. But Laura must have been out of her mind. She *must* have been."

"You're—good to me," Peter muttered.

She made hot black coffee and he sipped it, felt dully grateful for her attentiveness as she sat there on the bed and talked to him. When she left the room, he hunched himself on one elbow and watched her until she clicked the light switch. God was cruel. A god of mercy would never have handicapped such a beautiful woman with the curse of a club foot. Never....

He slept because the devouring terrors of the night had fed on his strength. In sleep the triumphantly terrible eyes of the stone-faced man watched over him; he relived those ghastly hours of torment when Doctor Arnold Coleman had hauled him from the murk of a gutter in Cannadale's slums. Strange that the police, searching that huge tenement house, had found no trace of Stone-face or of Laura's cousin Jane. Strange . . .

In sleep the hostile eyes of Aunt Millicent came to take the place of those other eyes and stared coldly out of wrinkled flesh-pits. "You're not Laura's husband yet, Peter Langdon! If I have my way you never will be!" She had said that once, and Peter had never forgotten ....

Sunlight was yellow on his face when he awoke. The door was open and Coleman stood there, quietly staring at him. Coleman, who worked at the Cannadale Hospital among crippled unfortunates who looked upon him as some kind of god.

The man paced forward, seated himself with professional calm. "You're not doing so well, Langdon, eh? Bernice called me, told me to come and look you over."

He went through the usual routine, pulse, temperature, questions to which Peter mumbled half-way answers. "You need sleep, plenty of it." Stifling Peter's protests, he produced pills, ground two of them into a glass of water and made Peter drink.

After that, Peter slept again. When consciousness returned, the room was dark and a clock downstairs was chiming eleven.

Peter was hungry. It was a strange, savage hunger. When he lit the light and looked at himself in a mirror, his face startled him; the eyes in it

were bright as blobs of wet pitch, the cheeks gaunt and tight. Something throbbed in his skull, pounded there with the rhythmic swinging beat of a clock's pendulum. He was hungry . . . but not for food.

Something was frightfully wrong. Something inside him. He had slept all day after gulping Coleman's pills, and now it was night again, and there were important things to be done. But first—he must find Laura. Nothing else mattered.

He tugged on his clothes, walked crookedly into the hall and clung to the banister on his way down the big stair case. Behind him a door creaked open. The voice of Bernice Marnell came sharply, shrilly after him, jerking him to a halt.

"Peter!" Something in that wailing enunciation of his name struck a responsive chord within him. "Peter, where are you going?" He turned, stood at the foot of the stairs and watched her as he descended.

"Peter!" She was close to him now, panting from her rush down the stairs. "You're not going out? You mustn't!"

Suddenly conscious of her exquisite loveliness, he thrust his arms toward her, stepped jerkily forward. Then he looked down at the club foot and stiffened.

"You're not Laura," he mumbled. "I thought for a minute—"

Turning, he went staggering down the hall and jerked open the front door. And the wail of his name, flung in strange crescendo from Bernice Marnell's lips, did not stop him. He got his car out of the garage and drove into the night.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### ***Creatures Debauched***

HE DROVE through the slums, through that street where Jane Berkely had been dragged to an unknown doom and where Jack Granville had been transformed into a prowling attacker of women. That same street. Was there, perhaps, some hellish loadstone hidden there to attract those who, like him, had fallen prey to the curse?

At Laura's home, Aunt Millicent opened the door to his insistent ringing. She gaped at him,

scowled, peered closer and shrank from him in sudden fear.

"What do you want?"

"I've come for Laura," he muttered, and repeated the words with an unlovely leer twisting his mouth. "For Laura."

"She is in bed. Go away from here!"

He flung the woman aside, sent her reeling with a single savage sweep of his arm. Upstairs, the door of Laura's room was locked and he stood before it, cursing.

Locked! So Aunt Millicent had found out, had she, that Laura had become enslaved to the disease? Aunt Millicent had locked the girl in her room?

Downstairs someone was frantically using the dial telephone—Aunt Millicent, terrified, calling the police. The police! What imbeciles they had been for the past several weeks, blundering like blind men in their search for Cannadale's evil secret! Now they would come here to arrest Peter Langdon, just as they had seized Jack Granville.

Well, they would come too late!

With renewed fury he hurled himself at the door, hammered it savagely with clenched fists before discovering the key in the lock. The door made thunder against the wall as he flung it open. Laura stood facing him, stark terror in her frozen face.

"Peter!"

"You're coming with me," he croaked. "My car is outside and we're going to the hunting camp on Lost Lake, where you'll be safe. Come on, just as you are."

Just as she was? Evidently she had been dragged from bed by the clamor of his struggle with Aunt Millicent. She wore the same filmy pajamas in which he had last seen her.

"But I can't, Peter," she faltered. "We mustn't."

He knew then that the effects of her madness had worn off, while with him the disease was raging unchecked. "I'm taking you to Lost Lake!" he snarled.

Her answer came in a quavering, terror-laden voice that was barely audible. "Peter, what's wrong with you? Don't you—love me?"

The question was too difficult. He had no time for it now. Love her? No, this wasn't love; it

was something evil, something sinister which had seized him during the night.

He lurched forward. When she fell away from him, struck at his out-flung arms and screamed at him to stop, he snarled curses and gathered her off the floor, strode with her to the door and carried her, kicking and shrieking and pleading, down the staircase.

Aunt Millicent blocked his path to the door. "Stop, Peter Langdon! You don't know what you're doing!" And again, with a bull-whip slash of one arm, he sent the old woman reeling.

Outside he threw Laura into the car, clambered over her and jammed his own big body behind the wheel. A moment later, while the machine careened wildly along one of Cannadale's main streets, he leered hungrily into Laura's bloodless face and saw that she had fainted.

"We're going to the hunting camp on Lost Lake," he told her. And he was a madman mumbling words which even to himself meant nothing. "To Lost Lake...."

FROM Cannadale, the road which wound through the woods to the mile long pit of darkness known as Lost Lake wound also past the Cannadale Hospital—that huge grey hulk, once the isolated estate of some wealthy citizen, inhabited now by stricken men and women who hoped some day to find relief there from the torments of twisted limbs and shattered bodies. Peter Langdon peered at the place as he drove past. A shudder shook him; for an instant the mad lust was driven from his soul by memories of the times he had visited within those dark walls. Coleman had taken him through the place often, just as Coleman had taken Bernice Marnell and others.

Men and women entered those great gates with desperation and dead hope in their hearts. When all other cures had been taken in vain, the sufferers came here to undergo the most dreaded treatment of all—that of utter isolation which in many cases continued until death.

"Peter—"

He peered into the face that hung close to his shoulder, and the beast within him was born again. "I'm taking you to Lost Lake!"

The Cannadale Hospital was gulped behind in the night's starless gloom. The machine careened on its way. At a snail's pace it crawled

along the rutted road that snaked through deep woods to the lake shore, where a rough shack built of logs reared its bulk in darkness. No one would come here to intrude. No one would ever know what happened here.

Peter clambered out of the car, dragged Laura with him and smothered her frantic efforts to resist. The beast within him was screaming; the sounds fuming from his curled lips were animal sounds that filled Laura's wide eyes with helpless dread.

"Peter, what are you doing? Think of what it means. Think of the future!"

He dragged the door shut, flung her onto the couch that stood near the wall. While he bent above the lamp the girl made a mad, desperate attempt to hurl herself at the door, only to be slammed back again brutally by Peter's grinding fist.

He found rope, bound that sobbing, wretched shape so severely into a chair that the rope cut raw welts in the heaving flesh of her shoulders.

"Now you're mine," he muttered, "and we're alone here."

"Peter, you're mad!"

"Mad, am I?" He stood glaring at her, then stepped away, scowling, and continued to stare while the word rang in his twisted brain. Mad? Somehow a realization of what he was about to do wormed its fevered way into him and stuck there.

Mad? Of course he was mad! This whole thing was hellishly, awfully wrong. It meant the end of everything, of their love for each other, their plans for the future. Why then was he creeping toward her, his mind fastened on the one consuming thought of seizing her? What devilish power was driving him?

"I can't help myself, Laura," he muttered brokenly. "God forgive me, *I can't help myself!*"

And suddenly he was staring not at the cringing, sobbing girl before him but at something in the gloom beyond!

It came gliding out of darkness, through the ochre pool of light cast by the lamp. A face. A face that was a mask of shadows with eyes that gleamed like the orbs of a leaping cat. The man with the stone face!

Peter made no outcry. Breath jammed in his throat and he took a slow, fearful step backward as the whole of that sinister shape materialized



before him. It advanced with ghastly lack of haste, seemed to glide rather than walk. Straight past the chair where Laura was bound the monster moved—straight toward Peter's stiff body.

"For you, Peter Langdon—and for her—this is the end." The granite lips were intoning that and the words were low, vibrant, clearly audible through the gasping cry of terror that choked from Laura's throat.

"Be careful, Peter! He'll hurt you!"

"No, I shall not hurt him more than is necessary. I have come to take you both into slavery...."

And then Peter was fighting. Had he been saner he might have seized some nearby object and used it for a weapon. The lamp, for instance, or one of the heavy irons from the fireplace, or a rusty, unloaded gun from the wall. But terror destroyed his reason. He lunged forward to fight with bare hands, knowing all too well that those hands had already proved themselves hopelessly impotent. He fought as a jungle beast might have battled for its mate against some prowling marauder who sought to drag her into the jungle's fastness. The Vesuvius of his fear had erupted, lifting a strange kind of mad courage from hidden depths within him.

He fought snarling—but the granite hands were at his throat and rigid arms forced him back to the wall and held him there. "You are foolish," the stone-faced man said calmly, "to struggle. If you anger me I shall kill you."

The fingers burrowed like devouring maggots in the agonized flesh of his throat. Tearing at them he could not dislodge them. The face before him was smiling; the room was filled with high brittle screams that shrilled from the girl who was powerless to come to his assistance.

Then he was on his knees, writhing, while the face leered above him. And one of the granite hands, releasing its hold, swept into the fiend's clothing . . . stabbed forward again to crush a wet, cold cloth over Peter's mouth. Chloroform....

"I shall take you with me into slavery," the man said. "Both of you."

PETER awoke and lay staring, his sprawled body cold and stiff from having lain too long on a stone floor. In his throbbing head sickness undulated like whirlpools in tide-water. Only vaguely was he sure of the fact that both he and Laura had been dragged to new surroundings—to

some chill stone cellar where twisted shapes walked in horror.

Those shapes were men, moving like bent and broken monsters in a nightmare. They peered out from behind the bars of a grille, that separated them from the rest of the room, to where beyond them loomed a platform where the nude body of a woman stood for them to feast their eyes upon.

Men? That word was mockery. These uncouth creatures *had* been men; now they were groveling slaves of the stone-faced, cowered fiend who stood watching them.

"Study her well," Stone-face was saying calmly. "She is by far the most beautiful woman who has yet been offered for your pleasure. No paltry price will purchase this one. Look at her and be prepared to bid high!" He signaled a girl who stood at his side. The girl came forward to the grille with a key in her hand. She inserted the key in a padlock and swung the door of the cage open. The drooling, gibbering forms shuffled out.

Something about those mumbling, slobbering creatures of darkness was familiar. More curious than concerned—for full consciousness had not yet penetrated the murk in his mind—Peter scowlingly sought to orient himself.

Where had he seen such men before? In some freak-show, perhaps, where human deformities were displayed for a price? Or had he encountered them on one of his frequent tours through the Cannadale Hospital?

The hospital! That was it. These pitiful creatures were some of Arnold Coleman's patients. This room—this stone vault where the light of day surely never intruded—must be some sunken chamber beneath the huge hospital itself.

Eyes wide with sudden understanding, Peter strained forward. Stone-face turned to peer at him. Then the hooded figure raised the whip Peter now saw in his hand, pointed with it at Peter. "There are women in our company who will bid high for *you*, Peter Langdon, after your loved one has been properly disposed of. Be not hasty." He turned then, raised his whip and lashed the nude, drooping form of the girl beside him. The girl flinched and straightened—but she gave no sign that she felt pain—indeed, she actually smiled!

Peter snarled, jerked savagely toward the girl who stood there less than a dozen strides distant. But that short distance might as well have been blocked by an insurmountable wall. Clanking chains jerked Peter's big body to the floor again.

Gasping, he peered down, shuddered at the sight of linked serpents of steel that encircled his legs.

There on the dais a long line of deformed men, some old, some not so old, filed in slow procession past the rigid body of Laura Welkin . . . each stopping to peer avidly into the girl's unmoving face, each reaching out with eager hands to paw and caress her.

*Deformed* men? Peter's horrified eyes saw more! Those deformities were not entirely the product of a cruel fate; not entirely were they the result of hereditary disfigurement or the indelible leftovers of devouring illnesses. Some of those hideous distortions were self-inflicted.

These pitiful creatures had suffered—perhaps were still suffering—from the same evil malady which had transformed Jane Berkely and Jack Granville and other victims into masochistic self-torturers. And those twisted hands were reaching for Laura's undraped body . . .

"Stop it!" Peter yelled hoarsely. "Stop it, I say!"

They paid him no attention. Here before their hungry eyes stood a woman. They themselves were unlovely creatures who, fearing the scorn of society, had entered this huge den of despair from which few ever departed. They were men to whom the love of normal women had been denied, men who because of their own fearsome self-mutilation and the depredations of a dark fate, would never find mates.

Now they could feast their eyes upon a woman even more lovely than perhaps they had dared yearn for. They could stare at her, touch her cringing body. And eventually one of them—if Peter had understood aright the hideous words of their stone-faced leader—would own that body, to do with it as he wished.

But why was not Laura screaming for mercy? Why, instead of striving hysterically to escape, was she standing there and allowing those out-thrust hands to caress her? She stood motionless, staring with eyes that seemed as hungry, as mad as those which so avidly drank in the sight of her!

A flash of memory seethed through Peter's brain, bringing the vision of that other time when Laura had been transformed into a woman of dark desire. She had wanted *him* then, just as he later had wanted her.

This time it was not Peter Langdon she wanted, but those deformed creatures who were

examining her as prospective buyers might inspect some valuable object of merchandise to be auctioned off to the highest bidder

THE thought maddened Peter. "Laura, don't!" he screamed. "Please don't!"

Could that walling, childish voice be his own? Was this nightmare real, or had his recent battle with the fiend of the granite features twisted his mind and made him as mad as some of the unlovely creatures who seemed to inhabit the chamber he was in? The chains that held him were real enough; he knew that! And the rest was no nightmare either. Even now those twisted horrible figures had fallen away from the platform and were crowding toward Stone-face. Whispering like eager children, leering at one another and joking among themselves, they jerked toward him who was so obviously their king.

"She is worth money, this woman," Stone-face was telling them. "Let the bidding begin at a thousand dollars. You are not paupers, any of you, Otherwise you would not be here where men pay handsomely for the treatment they receive. Begin at a thousand. I give you the usual guarantee that the girl will at all times be attentive to the man who becomes her master."

Raging at his chains, Peter heaved forward again and was again wrenched back in agony. His voice rose in lurid shrieks, incoherent. The twisted creatures turned to leer at him, and some laughed, and Stone-face said darkly: "Be quiet! Soon it will be your time and you, like her, will beg to be sold!"

"You can't do this thing!" Peter bellowed.

"Be still or I shall feed you the drug now, as it was fed to her while you lay unconscious."

They paid him no further attention, despite his wild bellowing. The auction had begun. There on a level above that sea of malshaped bodies, Stone-face was intoning words; men crowded closer, some limping, some creeping, to shout their offers. A thousand dollars? The price had leaped skyward already!

"I say three thousand!" Peter heard one man scream. "She is worth it!"

Dear God, what ghastly mockery was this? A fiend with stone features stood before his audience of masochistic beasts and called upon them to bid for an undraped girl who eagerly watched what was going on. What devilish drug

had been fed to her, and to other young men and women of Cannadale who surely had preceded her?

For what unholy purpose were those gleaming instruments of torture—horror tools of every conceivable size and shape—piled there upon a long, low table at the end of the platform?

There was an answer somewhere. Despite the madness that sent him screaming against his chains, Peter had already fathomed the biggest part of it. This fiend with features of stone had lived among the sex-starved unfortunates here in the hospital. Knowing their desires, he had supplied them with drugs, had fed them some strange stimulant which, in addition to being an aphrodisiac, had filled the souls of its users with masochistic madness.

And then, Stone-face had contrived to find mates for them—mates who, while under the influence of the same evil drug, would be willing, even eager, to be sold into slavery. Here in this chamber of horrors which certainly lay somewhere in the vast cellar of the hospital itself, Stone-face had sold those drugged young men and women to the highest bidders....

"For a woman so beautiful as this one, I offer five thousand dollars! Give her to me!" The shrill outcry stabbed through Peter's frenzy, jerked his gaze to the man who had uttered it. Surely no one would raise that bid!

The room was silent. On the platform Stone-face waited for the bidder to come forward; the others made a lane for him. Laura, untroubled by the gaze of lustful eyes, came to the edge of the platform and stood smiling. *Smiling!*

FIVE thousand dollars—and Stone-face was nodding; the deal was closed. Aghast, Peter stared at the creature who had closed it, while on hands and knees, one withered leg dragging, the man crawled laboriously to the dais.

How in the name of God could any woman look with eagerness upon a creature so repulsive? Years of physical torment, some of it surely self-inflicted, had made an agony-mask of the face that twitched forward now with anticipation. Ugly, bestial....

"No, no," Peter mumbled. "Laura, you mustn't! . . ."

If she heard his plaintive wail she was indifferent to it. The creature was crawling forward to claim his due. Men were muttering again, some

in anger at being outbid, some whining their disappointment. Stone-face smiled the same frozen smile.

Behind Peter a low voice said softly:

"Are you thinking of *her* future, Peter, or of your own?"

So soft, that voice! So gentle! Peter jerked around, stiffened with twitching muscles when his gaze fell upon the foot that had reached out of darkness to touch his shoulder. A *club* foot! Slowly he stared upward into the woman's face.

"Bernice!" The name came convulsively. "Bernice Marnell. Are you—part of this?"

"A very important part, Peter." The woman's dark eyes, pools of desire, studied him passionately. Framed there in the shadows she was a creature of the night itself, too beautiful, too sensually lovely to be real.

"Together with Carl Maignon," she said, "who stands there with his face of stone, I am the most important part of everything you see here. It was I who told Carl Maignon to bring you here."

Was it hypnotism that kept Peter's terrified gaze fastened on that hovering face when every fiber of his being shrieked at him to turn and see what might be happening to the girl he loved? Whatever the strange power that lived in those eyes, it held him, dragged him to his knees. When he would have struggled erect, the woman pushed him down again and murmured: "Not yet. First, listen."

In all that vast room there seemed to exist no sound other than the low vibration of her voice. Perhaps there was no other sound; perhaps in truth those twisted denizens of darkness and the granite-faced creature on the platform were silently awaiting the woman's commands. Peter was not sure. . .

"IN THE beginning," Bernice declared, "Carl Maignon was a scientist who came here for treatment after chemicals had eaten into his face and hands and legs, solidifying the flesh to granite hardness, destroying the facial muscles and endowing that small body with terrific strength. While here among these men and women who longed for mates, he continued his experiments in secret, in this unused part of the cellars which even Doctor Coleman and others of the hospital staff know nothing about."

She smiled. "Yes," she murmured, "Coleman and the others would delight in finding this secret rendezvous of ours! Often have they sought to discover how, and why, their patients become so strangely disfigured and so lustful!

"But here Maignon worked, perfecting a drug capable of arousing the passion of men and women to its fever pitch. Perhaps he was also slightly mad, for on one of my visits to the hospital he met me in a secluded part of the grounds and whispered his secret to me, and told me of its possibilities. And because I am less noble than you think me, Peter, I agreed to help him, for I have been a lonely woman and a cripple, and the thought of wealth and love was not unpleasant."

Had she memorized those words? Had she waited days, weeks, for this opportunity to utter them? Like a recital of some weird ritual they fell against Peter's brain, numbing him.

"From the very beginning I have loved and wanted you, Peter. Therefore I made certain that this other woman who had won your love—this Laura of yours—" her voice was suddenly bitter—"received her share of Maignon's drug, so that she might, before being brought here into slavery, disfigure herself physically and come to you as a shameless wanton whom you would despise and disown.

"But my plans went along mistaken paths. I was forced to drug *you*, hoping that in your desire you would turn to me, who lived under the same roof with you. Again something went wrong, for you went into the night seeking *her*, and left me alone with my rage. Now—"

The others *were* awaiting this woman's commands! In all that huge chamber there was no sound except the whisper of men breathing, the sledge-hammer thundering of Peter's own heart. He turned his head slowly to stare at Laura, and she was there upon the platform, staring impatiently at the woman whose low voice had begun to drone again.

"For you, Peter Langdon, your Laura exists no more, and you will do well to forget her. In a moment you must decide your own fate, whether to be drugged and sold into slavery, as she was sold, or to accept the other terms which I shall offer you. Come and see what awaits you!"

Slender hands were fumbling at Peter's ankles, thrusting a key into the padlock that secured his chains. He looked wildly around. Was he to be released? Was Bernice mad enough to

believe that her hold over him was complete and that he would follow her like a dog who no longer needed a leash?

He tensed himself, drew breath into his laboring lungs as he staggered erect. The chains lay at his feet.

"Come!" the woman commanded. And then with sinking heart Peter realized that Carl Maignon had descended from the platform and was standing beside him, one gaunt hand reaching to fasten on his shoulder.

The feeble shred of common sense that remained to him warned him to go quietly, lest those stone fingers again imbed themselves in his throat. He was stronger now, but that strength would be needed when—and if—an opportunity for escape presented itself.

He glanced at Laura. Sprawled naked on the platform, she returned his gaze without a sign of recognition. Drugged....

Slowly then, Peter allowed himself to be led from the room, along a gaslit corridor that wound into a distant part of the cellar. The journey consumed perhaps three minutes, if time meant anything in this underworld of gloom. At its end the woman drew Peter to a halt, before a closed door where, with vague lines of anticipation playing about her carmine mouth, she produced keys.

"Prepare yourself," she said softly. "In this world of mine there are sights worth the seeing!"

The door swung open.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### ***Face of Stone***

IT WAS a smaller chamber than the one Peter had come from. Being smaller it was more crowded, for the creatures who inhabited it were many. But these twisted shapes were women, not men!

*Women!* Young and old, deformed and hideous and pitiful! Like animals in a monstrous cage they turned with one accord as the door creaked open.

Peter stood rigid in the doorway, face frozen with the horror of what he looked at.

"God!" he whispered.

Seeing him there they crowded forward, snarling and fighting among themselves in their eagerness to reach him. One old hag, naked and ponderous, slithered like a fat serpent, head upraised, eyes gleaming with desire. Another, young and less hideous, stretched twisted stumps of arms toward him and made animal sounds through shapeless lips. These creatures, too, had been supplied with Carl Maignon's infernal drug! They, too, had been stimulated and aroused to a frenzy of self-torture by its frightful potency!

"You see " Bernice Marnell murmured, "how they would welcome the chance to possess you, especially if Maignon's brew made you eager to be possessed ?"

Peter shuddered back, dragged the door shut and turned on stiff legs, his body trembling. "God!" he whispered again, and Bernice was smiling at his terror.

"Now look at me, Peter Langdon," she commanded "They want you and so do I, for I have loved you always. Take me, and with your money and our undying love for each other we can go away from this place, away from Cannadale, and live together in happiness. You have your choice. Take me and swear to make me your wife, or else be drugged and carried back to the auction room where these lovely creatures will bid for your permanent adoration."

Her hands were on Peter's arms, drawing him closer. "I could have you the other way, my beloved. Remember that. I could drug you and make of you a passionate slave who would forever worship at my command. But I want you for my husband, with legal bonds to chain us. Later, perhaps, we may both make use of Maignon's drug—for our own amusement."

The words were storm waves crashing thunderously against the jagged rocks of Peter's brain. He heard them without listening, while before his bulging eyes loomed a vision of what lay beyond the door which Carl Maignon was calmly relocking.

"Why do you hesitate, Peter ?" The voice was softer now and darkly sensual. "Am I not lovelier than they? Am I not lovelier even than the woman you once hoped to wed? Look at me."

He stared—and she was naked before him as her dark garments, released by her own swift-moving hands, whispered to the floor. Her eyes, staring at him, inviting him to come closer, were

like lidless orbs in the swaying head of a serpent, their gaze focused unblinkingly on his own.

"Look at me, Peter. Am I not worthy of you?"

Peter, shaking his head, mumbled brokenly: "I love Laura. Laura—not you!" He was a drowning man clutching at one last bit of driftwood which eluded him in the storm-waters of his own dark terror. He could not resist this woman. Merciful God, why was that? Had he already been drugged?

A jerky step took him toward her out-thrust arms, while Bernice Marnell smiled a smile of triumph. In another moment the man she wanted—wanted either for love or for his money—would be crushing her against him, exquisitely hurting her in the madness of his own desire. "Come, Peter—!"

She had forgotten Carl Maignon!

Behind her, Maignon stared with the ravening hunger of a starved beast. But her attention was centered unswervingly upon the man she wanted, and she did not turn.

"So," Maignon snarled, "you would give to him what you have never givenme!"

The girl swung with a gasping cry, realized her peril too late and flung herself sideways to avoid his mad rush. Hands hard as stone stabbed from the fiend's withered body, caught her and spun her savagely into his corded arms.

AFTERWARD, Peter was never sure why he went to the woman's assistance when he might have used those precious moments in escaping, in getting Laura Welkin out of the horror-chamber at the end of the passage. Perhaps the driving force behind his rush was man's natural instinct to protect woman; perhaps the worms of his passion were still crawling.

Yet despite his madness he knew better than to strike at that granite face with his hands! Head down, he crashed with pile-driver force into Maignon's stomach. The man staggered back, bent double with a grunt of agony. Bernice Marnell whirled free of those grasping hands and fled like a pale shadow down the corridor. Like a jungle beast thwarted in the act of feeding, Maignon lunged, snarling, to destroy the man who had thwarted him.

Destroy? Not now! Not ever! From Bernice Marnell's own lips Peter had heard the secret of the man's abnormal strength! Chemicals had

solidified his face and hands and legs to granite hardness. But the rest of that withered body...

Peter met the headlong charge with a clenched fist that ground into the pit of Maignon's stomach. Again and again the fist crashed into flesh that could be hurt, while Maignon sought in vain, hysterically, to seize those flailing arms in granite fingers which could kill if they found a hold.

With the cold-blooded deliberation of a ring veteran, Peter moved on gliding feet, leaped forward, back, forward again, ever beyond reach of the groping death-hands. Then his own hands caught that twisting body and raised it, hurled it.

With a grinding thud Maignon crashed against the wall and fell—and lay silent, his stone face red with gathering blood.

Peter turned, went stumbling down the corridor. Bernice Marnell had gone this way before him, but now he mumbled the name of another woman—the girl who had been sold into the arms of a deformed monstrosity.

Wide-eyed, he flung open the chamber door—and stopped.

Little had changed in that room of evil since he had been led from it. There on the platform Laura Welkin still lay undraped, sprawled like a creature exhausted by her own passions. Twisted men turned to stare at the door, as if aroused from lethargy by the sound of the door's opening.

Standing rigid at the edge of the dais was Bernice Marnell, her dark beauty concealed now beneath a loose-wrapped shawl, as if perhaps she feared to expose herself to the creatures before her lest their lust send them lurching forward.

"You are too late, Peter Langdon!" she cried bitterly. But Peter strode forward.

Not realizing the meaning of those shrill words, Peter continued to lurch forward, his eyes fastened unswervingly on the girl he loved. Then he stopped.

What had Bernice shrieked at him? Dear God, no! "You're lying!" he bellowed. "You're not telling the truth!"

*"You are too late!"*

Horror came at Peter in a gelid wave. His eyes misted; he saw the sprawled shape on the dais through a red mist of madness. When he looked again into the triumphant face of Bernice Marnell, his madness became red rage.

"You let them do it! If it's true I'll kill you!"

Straight toward the platform he strode, hurling aside the twisted things that got in his way. Into Bernice Marnell's staring eyes came terror that stiffened the limbs of her half-draped body and drew a lurid shriek from her lips when she saw that Peter would not, could not, be stopped.

She whirled, displayed amazing strength in raising the nude body of Laura Welkin in her arms. Swaying on the platform's rim, she held the limp shape aloft, poised it as one might hold a dead carcass before hurling it into a den of wild beasts.

"Stop, Peter! If you come nearer, I'll throw this girl to the mob! Then not even madness will give you strength enough to save her!"

Bernice Marnell staggered under the weight of the body she held aloft. "You fool!" she shrieked. "You insane idiot! Think of what you are doing!"

The words had no effect. Growling his rage, Peter strode like a lurching tank leaving destruction in his wake.

And then, still shrieking, the terrified woman on the dais jerked forward, hurled Laura Welkin into space. Hurling her not into the arms of the twisted ones, but straight at Peter to stop him!

He caught the full weight of that flung body against his chest, staggered to his knees. But he was erect again, ploughing forward! The limp body of Laura Welkin was clasped in his arms, was being shifted now to one heaving shoulder as he raged to the platform steps.

Amazed at his strength, Bernice Marnell leaped backward too late to avoid his clutching fingers. The fingers caught her throat. Slowly, terribly, Peter dragged the woman toward him, forced her to her knees and strangled her. The frenzied clawing of her hands did not stop him. The gurgling cries in her throat did not penetrate his madness.

Turning, he dragged that writhing shape to the edge of the dais and flung it to the twisted things below. "Take her!" he snarled. "Take her and be damned to you!"

Then, knowing nothing of what he was doing except that he was obeying the commands of his own frenzied mind, he put both arms around the thighs of the woman who hung limply over his shoulder, and, still snarling, strode across the platform, leaving behind him a pack of slaving things that were too well occupied to think of pursuing him.

A door loomed before him. A flight of steps led upward through the darkness, and with the same heavy stride which had carried him, like an automaton fashioned of insensate iron, through the horror chamber which lay behind, Peter climbed into gloom. Traversing dark corridors he ascended other stairways and found himself at last in open air.

LATER he sat in Laura's own bedroom while Coleman, of the hospital staff, straightened from an examination of the girl and said quietly: "She will be all right. Whatever drug was given her, it has lost most of its grip and will have no permanent effect. You need sleep, Langdon. It's been hours since you had any."

Hours? Peter did not know. Vaguely he recalled that he had brought Laura here and used the telephone to call Coleman and the police. The police had gone to that gray-walled institution outside the city. They had found Carl Maignon in the gloom of an underground corridor, dead. They had found Cannadale's missing young men and women imprisoned in other parts of that vast cellar. And they had found Bernice Marnell, the clubfooted woman, wandering in a dark, wretched world of madness. Yet she had not been too mad to confess.

Strange confession! Cursing those who dragged the words out of her, she had told triumphantly how she herself, well known and well liked in Cannadale, had ingeniously fed Carl Maignon's drug to desirable victims—how Maignon had haunted the trail of each new victim, awaiting an opportunity to provide his flock with more slaves.

But Maignon was dead now, and the club-footed woman would perhaps soon join him, or go instead to some institution where escape would be impossible. There was only Laura, who with the exit of Doctor Coleman had turned now to stare into Peter's watching eyes.

Peter groped slowly toward her. "Back there," he mumbled, "Bernice Marnell said—"

"Yes, Peter?"

"She said I was too late." He held her close to him, savagely, fearing the words that might come in answer. "She said you had already given yourself to some of those creatures. Laura—*did* you?"

"I don't remember, Peter. I don't— know."

His own face paled. For an eternity he looked into the imploring eyes that were so near his own, and then his big body ceased trembling. "Bernice was lying," he said, his voice strongly low, vibrant. "Nothing happened to you. Nothing! Do you understand?"

She nodded slowly, clung to him with cold hands that trembled. "Nothing—happened to me, Peter."

Sunlight, weaving a golden pattern over her face, swept aside the shadows that hovered there and seemed somehow to make truth of Laura's whispered words—and held a golden promise for the future.

## THE END

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## ENSLAVED TO SATAN

By Hugh B. Cave

*Paul Norton thought himself a man of God. But a black-robed fiend came up from nowhere to tell him he had sold his soul to Satan, and blood-red letters flamed before his eyes to vouch the truth of his iniquity. Yet not till Satan's handmaidens had dragged him down to the foul depths of their pain-filled horror chamber did he believe that his eyes and ears had spoken truth . . .*

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THE Reverend Paul Norton reached the entrance to deserted Woodlawn Park at one-thirty a. m. Back in the road, the headlights of his small car stabbed fingers of light through the night mist, limned his tall young figure. His thin face was good-looking, though dark shadows of worry clouded his eyes.

He paced forward into the darkness of the deserted park. To his right loomed a huge sign. It was unlighted now, but the car lights reflected dimly against the glass tubing of the neon lettering. His mouth twisted a little as he read:

### NOTICE

*THIS PROPERTY HAS BEEN BE-  
QUEATHED TO THE FIRST CHURCH OF  
DENHAM AND WILL BE CONDUCTED  
HEREAFTER FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE  
CHURCH. WE ASSURE THE PUBLIC OF  
ENTERTAINING PROGRAMS AND ASK  
YOUR PATRONAGE.*

The sign told a lie. Woodlawn Park had not been left to the church, but to Paul Norton and the board of deacons. To use for the benefit of the church, yes. But if Deacon Wyman didn't upset the appletart, the owners could assign themselves good salaries out of the operating expenses. Wyman, Paul Norton thought bitterly, could afford to be sanctimonious; he had money of his own. He didn't have to struggle along on a salary so pitifully small that he couldn't marry. He wasn't in love with beautiful Ruth Winward who had waited two years now and would have to wait

indefinitely if Paul Norton didn't find some way to make more money....

Norton shook his head to clear it of bitter thoughts, turned and strode on into the darkness. Gravel crunched throatily beneath his feet, husking a slow accompaniment to his advance.

Then he stopped, stood trembling. Ahead of him and a little to the left, on a dark expanse of lawn checkerboarded with man-high shrubs, was something alien. The wind moved sibilantly, carrying a strange and sinister odor.

Slowly he slipped forward, eyes unblinkingly wide. It was too dark here for human eyes to be sure of what the gloom might spawn, but it seemed to be. . . He took four more steps, each one an effort as cold dread mounted within him. Then he stopped, caught a hoarse breath, and stood as if impaled.

The thing before him was a cross—a huge wooden cross planted *upside down* in the lawn. Upon it, with bare feet reaching into the darkness, arms extended and head grotesquely dangling, hung a shape which was human.

"Oh, God!" Paul Norton whispered.

Men weren't crucified today. They hadn't been since civilization and men's souls were as dark as this dismal night. And even then, not *upside down*!

Paul Norton lurched closer, wide eyes staring. The man's feet, pointing grotesquely at the heavens, were pierced with an iron spike, and other spikes impaled his contorted hands. His naked body was a twisted question-mark of agony. And the face—that ascetic face contorted



with suffering that had pulled each muscle out of line, was the face of Alfred Wyman.

Deacon Alfred Wyman—the man Paul Norton had been thinking of as a hypocrite, the one man who did not want the minister and the deacons of the church to make personal gain out of property which should be operated for the benefit of God's Church.

Norton gasped. The darkness around him was suddenly a black vale of horror. The blood in his veins went cold. Why had Wyman been put to death in such horrible fashion? Why was this cross *inverted*?

Hereditary fears festered in Norton's mind, gave horrible answer. This inverted cross, mockery of God and things holy, was symbolic of devil worship. In the long-dead past robed shapes had huddled over human sacrifices, knelt before uncouth shrines practicing the hell-born monstrosities of the Black Mass—*because they had sold their souls to the devil in the hope of worldly gain!*

And hadn't he and his deacons—all but Alfred Wyman—done just that? A week before prosperous old Jason Manley had sat up in his death-bed and signed a paper leaving Woodlawn Park to the minister of the Denham church and to the deacons, on the understanding that it would be used for God's work.

Paul Norton groaned in agony as he remembered how he had agreed that they feather their own pockets with the money made here. He had helped in working out some of the publicity scheme which would make the place more profitable. Well, they had their publicity now! The publicity of death and terror. And less than fifteen minutes ago, he had hated Wyman because the man had stood out against them, threatened to expose the whole scheme unless all profits from the park were turned over to the church and charity.

Then, with an effort, he wrenched his thoughts from their mad ramblings and fought for self-control. This was no work of the devil; it was murder, sinister and significant. Recent murder, for the body of Deacon Wyman was not yet cold.

Somewhere in Woodlawn Park, perhaps even now lurking nearby, would be the fiend or fiends who—

The crackling of a twig—or was it merely sudden premonition of peril?—whirled Norton in his tracks. The muscles in his legs went stiff; his

body froze with a convulsive twitch. He was no longer alone.

LESS than ten paces distant, the darkness had spawned a majestic shape that did not belong there, had not been there before. Blacker than night itself, the shape stood motionless, arms folded on a broad black chest. It moved forward, lifted one massive arm, to point a dark forefinger at Norton's bloodless face. Words came out of the darkness, and Paul Norton was aware through the cold winding-sheet of dread that enveloped him that the words were emanating from that half alive, half-spectral face which had no right to exist.

"You have done well, my servant." Crimson lips seemed to part in a mirthless smile. "You have done very well." The outstretched arm swayed sideways: the rigid finger pointed to Alfred Wyman's crucified corpse. "And here is publicity for you and your associates. Here is an obstacle removed from your path. The Prince of Darkness is ever eager to aid his servants!"

The leering smile vanished, and with a sudden rustle of dark garments the shape glided backward. It merged with another black hulk—one of the many shrubs that dotted the lawn. The monster was gone!

Seconds passed before Paul Norton found life. Breath wheezed from his lips and he lunged forward, hands outflung. The thing he had seen, the whispered words that had emanated from those spectral lips, were not real! Could not be real! And yet....

His clawing hands made contact, but touched only the hard, brittle needles of the evergreen. He stopped, let his arms fall to his sides. The air that sobbed into his lungs was tangy with a taste of dew-wet balsam. Somewhere not far away a cricket was chirping. No other sound lived in the dark.

Norton's limp hands curled into fists and he pushed forward, walked a slow circle around the man-high shrub. Man-high. . . That was what had fooled him, of course! Staring in deceptive darkness, his nerves jangled by the discovery of Deacon Wyman's corpse, he had seen the wind-bent outline of this shrub and his imagination had done the rest!

Those whispered words? They had originated in his own mind, perhaps emanated from his own lips. Overwrought nerves could do

as much as that, and more. Yet that red-glowing face—those shapeless lips curled in a soundless laugh of evil triumph . . .

Well, he had imagined that, too! If a black-robed shape had existed, where had it vanished to? There was no possible hiding-place, except in the shadows of this particular shrub. And no one was here.

Staring around, he shuddered at shadows that seemed furtively to close in on him. The erratic chirping of crickets became an ominous muttering from hidden lips of horror. He wanted suddenly, consumingly, to get out of the park and race back to the twin headlights that gleamed so far away in the road.

The whole thing had been born of his own jangled nerves—yet that premonition of evil still persisted. That feeling of not being alone....

He turned and stared at the corpse on the cross. That, at least, was real. Backing away from it, he sobbed with a realization of the agony that had preceded Wyman's death. But no dark-robed monster of hell had done that vile deed. Human beings, who could be brought to justice as soon as the police were notified....

The police! Convulsively, Norton turned, strode across the lawn, along the gravel path that led to the park's administration building. Keys jangled in his hand....

MOMENTS later, inside the small office, he lowered the telephone and knew he had done his duty. Then, with a calmness that surprised even himself, he rummaged in the office-desk, found a searchlight, and strode out again into the dark, toward the scene of the murder.

With the searchlight he studied again the torment engraved on Wyman's death-face. The frantic desire to get away from the park returned to him and he fought against it, steeled himself to investigate every angle of the horror.

Three times he paced between the inverted cross and the dark shrub where the monster with the glowing face—imaginary, perhaps—had seemingly vanished into thin air. Once, stooping to study the grass near the base of the evergreen, he thought he detected a faint sulphur-like odor that did not belong there. But that, too, might be a creation of his imagination.

But could a man's imagination conjure words? Had those whispered words been real?

He stood for a long while before the inverted body of the man who only last night had accused him and his associates of consorting with the devil. The beam of the searchlight swept the lawn beneath Wyman's dangling head. And suddenly Norton leaned forward, staring.

The thing he picked up was a button, small and oval-shaped and black. Not an ordinary button, and certainly not from the somber gray clothes of the man who hung dead. Moments passed while Norton examined it.

The squeal of a car's brakes, in the road beyond the park's entrance, aroused him. Mechanically he pocketed the button, turned and stared as shadowy figures came along the gravel path. A moment and uniformed policemen were crowding around him. And then, in slow, fretful tones he told his story....

He said nothing, though, of having heard whispered words from the glowing lips of a red-faced monster. If he told them of that, they would think him mad. Even he himself was not sure. That evil voice had seemed real at the time, terribly real, but now it was only a vague echo in his brain. Perhaps it was his brain that had spawned it.... He must wait, and be sure, before making any statements.

"You look pretty washed up, Reverend Norton. Better get on home and leave us to take care of this."

Slowly, Norton walked away. When he looked back from the road, before climbing into his own car, shadowed shapes were still gathered around the inverted cross and its ghastly victim. Searchlights winked like fireflies in the dark, and the murmur of men's voices rode the night stillness.

Half an hour later when Paul Norton let himself into the little brown cottage next to the church, on Denham's main street, that scene was still indelibly printed in his mind. A dark ominous picture, filled with vague threats of things abnormal and unholy . . .

A white-enameled clock on the bedroom dresser showed the quarter-hour past three as Paul Norton undressed and clicked off the light. Ages had passed since he had tiptoed from this room, yet the clock then had said one A. M. So much had happened. . .

Sprawled there on the bed, in darkness, he was strangely glad that he had refrained from blurting too many words to the policemen in the

park. But why? What was the sensation that gripped him? Was it relief that Alfred Wyman was out of the way and could no longer balk the plans of the deacons?

He fought to drive such thoughts out of mind, and in the gloom of the room a picture took form—a picture of the inverted cross bearing its ghastly burden. Norton stared, gripped the bedclothes with stiff fingers and choked a scream that filled his throat. The picture vanished.

He dozed, but his tortured mind invented images that made him moan and toss in his sleep. Again he saw that strange robed shape with the leering face; again he caught that faint but unmistakable odor of burning sulphur. And this time the Prince of Darkness was bent above him peering down at him with eyes loaded with threatening evil. . .

Norton awoke with a start and pushed himself up on stiff arms. That image had been no dream! Instinctively he knew it, sensed the terrible reality of it. His wide eyes stared into the room's darkness, seeking. Somewhere in that darkness other eyes were watching him, gloating over his terror, and the gaze of those eyes was a tangible force pressing in upon him

Suddenly he was rigid, unbreathing. Like a propped-up dummy he sat without motion, arms stiff as laths, shoulders bunched, head thrust forward. A sensation of unbearable cold began at his bare feet and crept through his body, stilling the beat of his heart.

Straight ahead of him on the room's rear wall, no more than twenty feet beyond the bed-end, a crimson message glared out at him!

BLURRED letters they were that made the message, swelling and contracting—yet slowly losing their bloated shape and assuming sharp outlines. Then the message glowed with hideous legibility, and he could not fail to read it. With spectral significance the words returned his stare delivering their ominous message.

*By not confiding too much in the police, you have proved yourself a good servant, Paul Norton!*

Fear sapped Norton's strength, left his face white as the face of a corpse. The pupils of his

eyes dilated. A sound, half moan and half shriek accompanied his hoarse intake of breath.

Slowly the letters faded. Then others took their place on the wall's grim blackboard.

*Take the button and go to Deacon Bingham's office tomorrow. Look in the third desk drawer. Remember, I am with thee always, my servant, so long as thou art faithful!*

As the words faded, Norton's soul-chilling numbness faded with them. His feet thumped the floor and he pushed himself erect, took a faltering step forward, hands outthrust.

But the wall before him now was bare and blank. No crimson letters marred in dark surface. No sound except the rapid wheeze of his own breathing disturbed the room's ominous stillness.

Some hidden well of fortitude gave him power to move forward, though the very walls of the room seemed closing in upon him with crushing force. His groping fingers, cold as if plunged into ice-water, found a light-switch, and as twin lamps glowed on the dresser he stood flat against the wall, staring into the chamber's every corner.

The room was empty.

Moisture formed on Norton's forehead, beaded the backs of his icy hands. His heart thumped violently. The room was empty—empty—yet the black wall before him, covered now with innocent brown paper, had twice spawned crimson words!

Had his imagination been playing mad tricks with him again?

He knew better, sobbed hoarsely with a sensation of utter helplessness. If only he could believe the thing a nightmare! But nightmares were seldom rational, seldom made sense. And those crimson letters had been so hideously significant....

Slowly he made a circuit of the room, forced himself to peer into every niche, every corner. Opening the doors of two clothes-closets took courage, but he dragged them open, stared into the dark interiors. He found nothing. Then, as terror renewed its relentless grip, he examined every inch of the wall where some invisible hand had inscribed those scarlet letters.

The brown wall-paper with its lighter brown whorls leered back at him, mocking him.

Trembling violently, he returned to the bed, sat down and put both hands to his sweat-drenched face.

*"I am with thee always, my servant, so long as thou art faithful!"*

My servant! Merciful God, what did it mean? At the meeting last night, Alfred Wyman had stood before the assembled deacons of the church and pointed an accusing forefinger into startled faces, thundered in a frenzy of sudden rage: "You have become money-changers in the temple! God is no longer in your hearts! You are servants of the devil, all of you!"

Servants—of—the—devil. Paul Norton's eyes widened, were suddenly rimmed with the whiteness of fear. He stared at the brown-papered wall and saw again the words that had glowed there. *"I am with thee always, my servant...."*

Then he laughed, laughed hoarsely and with such violence that the sound startled him as it bellowed through the room. Lunging erect, he stood wide-legged, clenched his hands. "It's not true! I'm not a servant of the devil! I've done my best to preach the word of God...."

His voice cracked, fell into a guttural mumbling. "I—I need the money. Ruth won't wait forever. If I don't get money enough to marry her soon, she'll turn to someone else. Oh God, what have I done?"

There was no answer, and those red letters, glowing now in his agonized mind, took form again and leered at him. What had they said? *"Take the button...."*

What button? Dully he remembered, turned to stare at his clothes that lay piled on a chair. He had found a button in the grass near the foot of the death cross. A black button. He had forgotten to hand it to the police.

Fumbling in his coat pockets, he found it, held it in his cupped palm. *"Take the button to Deacon Bingham's office tomorrow morning. Look in the third desk drawer...."*

Hope smoldered in Norton's glazed eyes. When daylight came, he would do as those spectral letters had ordered, but not because they had ordered it. Geoffrey Bingham would know the answer. More than once, in the past, he had offered words of advice in times of trouble, and his sober middle-aged wisdom had been of infinite help.

In the morning....

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### ***The Black Coat***

THE mirror-clock over the windshield said nine-twenty when Paul Norton parked his car next morning in front of the Denham Trust Company Building. He made his way directly to the bank's private offices on the fourth floor, nodded to Bingham's secretary and waited impatiently while the girl announced his visit.

Evidence of last night's turmoil still clung to his face. His eyes were dark-rimmed, tinged with red from staring so long into shadows; his cheeks were gaunt, pale and twitching.

In the private office of Geoffrey Bingham, President of the Denham Trust Company, Bingham gazed at him and said anxiously: "You've had a sleepless night, Paul. Wyman's terrible death—"

"You've—heard?"

Bingham nodded. "The news spread quickly. In fact, Wyman's family has already offered a five-thousand-dollar reward for the capture of the killer. What I'm curious to know is how you happened to be out there last night."

Instead of answering, Norton fumbled in his vest pocket, drew forth the small black button he had stared at so long last night, and leaned forward. The torment in his face caused Bingham to gaze at him in bewilderment.

"Last night—" Norton mouthed the words thickly—"something happened. I'm in trouble. I want to talk to you."

He spilled forth his story. It was easy to talk to Bingham. The man knew how to listen. Compassion filled his round, sallow, moon-face and he sat with one heavy leg crossed over the other, his left arm hooked on the desk-top to support the weight of his big shoulders. He was past middle age and the years had softened a face that perhaps had once been lean and hard. Soft gray hair made that face even more kindly.

Norton was interrupted only when the older man's hand reached out, at frequent intervals, to touch his hunched shoulder in a comforting gesture that seemed to say, "Take it easy, young fellow. When you're as old as I am, you'll learn to control your emotions."

In the end, Norton swayed erect, placed on the desk the black button that had come from the foot of the cross. "That's all, Mr. Bingham. There's the button, and—"

Geoffrey Bingham smiled. "And you were advised to open the third drawer of my desk. Well, let's do it." Quietly he reached down, slid open the desk drawer. His smile changed abruptly to a puzzled scowl. Slowly, very slowly, he extended a trembling hand and drew forth a folded garment.

"You knew this was here?"

"No." Paul Norton's eyes were wide. "No. How should I?"

"Neither did I. It's not mine and it wasn't here yesterday. Someone must have put it here last night." Bingham shook the garment and held it at arm's length, frowned at it. It was a long black cloak, with broad sleeves and a row of oval-shaped black buttons!

The banker's eyes narrowed ominously; with stiff fingers he reached out, took the button from the desk and held it close to those on the cloak. Paul Norton stared at him, took a sudden step backward.

That cloak! A hideous vision stabbed Norton's mind and he suppressed a desire to shriek out the truth. That cloak was all too familiar! He had seen it before, had heard whispered words emanating from the glowing face above it. The dark specter in Woodlawn Park had not been a figment of his mad imagination, after all! Here was proof!

But Geoffrey Bingham was seeing something else. Four buttons gleamed on the cloak's black breast. Four buttons—and a ragged tuft of black thread where a fifth had been torn loose. And the button in Bingham's fingers matched those that were sewn on the cloak's black satin!

The man's eyes smoldered. Violently he flung the garment from him, lurched erect and glared into Paul Norton's bloodless face. His chest rose and fell with the passion that fumed within him.

"It's a dirty lie! This coat isn't mine and never was mine! It was planted here!"

Never before had Norton seen a man change character so abruptly. But the answer came not from Norton's pale lips; it came from the far end of the room, in the sudden opening of a door that led apparently to a smaller office beyond. Bingham whirled. In the doorway stood a uniformed figure whose outthrust hand held a leveled revolver!

Geoffrey Bingham took a step backward, worked his lips soundlessly as the officer advanced. His gaze clung to the gun; color ebbed from his round face, left it limp and pasty. When he found his voice again it was a lurid shriek.

"It's not true, I tell you! It's a frame-up! The cloak doesn't belong to me!"

The officer's lips curled, formed a sarcastic sneer. With one hand he pushed the banker aside, snatched the cloak from the desk. His gun covered Bingham's every movement while he peered down at the black garment, narrowed his eyes over it.

"This isn't yours?"

"I tell you I never saw it before!"

"Maybe you can explain how your name comes to be on it, then."

Bingham swayed on spread legs, seemed glued to the floor. Slowly he came a step closer, and another, and peered down. A tiny white band inside the cloak's collar said, in the dull purple of indelible ink that had apparently been washed many times: *G. Bingham*.

A HOARSE sob croaked in the banker's throat. He gripped the desk with hands that were bloodless, wet with perspiration. Frantically he stared from the officer's face to that of Paul Norton. "Oh my God, it's not true! I swear it!"

Paul Norton shuddered, remembering the spectral shape in the park and the whispered words that had emanated from shapeless red lips.

"It's a funny thing," the officer said quietly. "Amateurs never get away with murder. Not for long." Methodically he rolled the black cloak into a crumpled wad and stuffed it into a pocket of his uniform. "In this case, we had a mysterious phone tip to come here and sort of hang around until something happened. Maybe your friend, Mr. Norton, sent it." He shrugged, made a sidewise motion with the gun. "Better not make any fuss, Bingham. Come along quietly."

Geoffrey Bingham's large body stood in the center of the small office, quivering as though made of jelly. No color remained in his face; his eyes were glassy gray buttons in danger of bursting in their sockets. He took a slow step backward, reached out both hands as if to ward off something horrible that menaced him.

"No, no! You can't take me to jail! I didn't kill Wyman! I swear I didn't!"

The officer sighed impatiently, again made movements with the gun. The gun was a lodestone for Bingham's horrified gaze. He stared at it, took another step backward, made incoherent noises in his throat.

"You'll hang for this, Bingham," the officer said indifferently. "The evidence is piled against you. After what you did to Alfred Wyman, and the way you did it. I wouldn't be surprised if the crowd took it on themselves to save the law a lot of trouble. Damn you, stop whimpering! You killed a man—"

A lurid shriek jangled from the depths of Geoffrey Bingham's soul. His trembling body spun abruptly like a monstrous top, hurtled toward the wall. Before either Paul Norton or the officer had divined his mad intent, he had reached a window.

With a wild lunge he gained the sill and hurled himself head foremost against the glass. Then, like a great black bat, he shot through the shattered pane and hurtled into space.

Broken glass cascaded to the floor as Paul Norton and the officer leaped forward with cries of horror. But Norton's outthrust hands were too late; that lunging body was already beyond reach, beyond sight. All that remained was a shattered window—and a wild shriek that ended, far below, in sudden horrible silence.

Norton was first to reach the aperture. Clawing the sill, he leaned forward and stared down. Muscles corded in his throat and a hollow sensation invaded the pit of his stomach, blurring his gaze to the sight that lay below.

A concrete sidewalk had stopped Bingham's fall. People in the street were running, shouting. The contorted shape on the sidewalk did not move, did not resemble anything human.

With a shudder Norton turned away, paced slowly to the desk and stood there, both hands gripping the desk for support. New horror had awakened the lethargic sickness in his soul; he swayed, would have fallen had not the policeman reached out a stabbing hand.

The officer's face had lost color, too. His mouth worked, made sluggish words.

"I guess he was guilty, all right. I guess he proved it."

Norton stared mutely at the black cloak on the desk, at the significant, damning black button that lay beside it. Then the officer spoke words that spiked Norton's soul with a blind, blood-chilling realization of the thing's full portent.

"You'll get a good wad of reward money for this, Mr. Norton. Maybe you don't know it, but Alfred Wyman's family offered five thousand for the capture of the murderer. And you're the man who produced the evidence...."

Norton swayed blindly, leaned against the desk and closed his eyes. He was no longer in Geoffrey Bingham's office on the fourth floor of the Denham Trust Building. He was alone in a world of darkness, a black world peopled with leering shadow-shapes that mocked him, jeered at him derisively.

Somewhere in that dark void stood a majestic black-cloaked monster whose arms were folded on an enormous chest, and whose leering face glowed red. Shapeless lips were curled in triumph, uttering soundless laughter.

Paul Norton knew the truth. Knew that it was truth. An innocent man had plunged to hideous death, fearing black shame and reprisal for a crime he had not committed. And for the blood of that innocent man, Paul Norton was to receive five thousand dollars!

A hoarse cry gurgled in his throat and his hands gripped the desk-edge, holding his trembling body erect. And then his tortured brain conjured another vision in crimson letters, crimson words, that swam in a blood-mist before his eyes.

They were the words that had glowed on the wall of the bedroom, an eternity ago. *"You have proved yourself a good servant, Paul Norton! I am with thee always...."*

THE face that stared back into Paul Norton's own, hours later, from the mirror above his bedroom dresser, was gaunt and twisted, lined with torment. Hope had gone out of it; desperation and despair had sucked life from it, leaving only a thin, bloodless shell.

It startled him. And a moment later, when he descended the stairs to answer the insistent clamor of the front doorbell, it startled someone else.

Ruth Winward, standing there on the stoop, stared at him and took a quick step backward, as if seeing some strange cadaver risen from its grave. Her own face had been aglow with a happy smile; the smile faded as if wiped away with a wet rag. She said, "Oh!" in a sharp, quick voice. Then she reached out a trembling hand, gripped Norton's arm and cried anxiously: "Paul! You're ill!"

He shook his head. "I suppose you're wondering why I sent for you."

"What—what's happened, Paul?"

He made no answer. Mechanically she closed the door, followed him into the living-room. There she sat down in a straight-backed chair, stared at him intently and repeated her anxious question, "What's—happened?"

A feeling of utter hopelessness seized Norton's heart as he returned that anxious gaze. This was the end; dully he realized it, and the truth was a throbbing, relentless pain within him, more acute than physical agony.

This girl had loved him, promised to be his. She would know now that the dream was finished. She would realize that another allegiance had claimed him, had crept from some dark antechamber of hell to suck him into servitude. He was no longer free.

"Paul, what is it?" the girl whispered "What's wrong?"

He wet his lips, forced words from his throat. "You've heard about Wyman?"

"Yes, Paul," she answered. "I've heard."

"And about Bingham?"

"Yes, but—"

"In a little while," he muttered, "the other deacons will be here. Mowry, Dwight, Miller, Shaw—all of them. I called a meeting. I'm going to tell them the truth, a truth even you don't know. And I'm going to make them give up the whole deal. They've *got* to give it up!"

"I'm glad," Ruth Winward said simply.

His answer was a mirthless laugh. Glad? Yes, she would be. From the very beginning she had been against the scheme to which he had pledged allegiance. But even she did not know how far that pledge had carried him, into what black hell it had led him.

"I want you to stay here when they come," he begged. "God knows I'll need your help!"

She sat on the arm of his chair and tried to comfort him. "I'm sure they'll see how wrong the whole thing is, dear." Her voice was soft, soothing, as if she were talking to a child afraid of the dark. "They're not wicked. Remember, they are all rather poor; they need money. Under the circumstances, almost any group of men would have been tempted."

Norton looked up into her face and found courage. He murmured half-audible words that sounded like "God bless you!"

How long he sat there with his head cradled in her warm arms, his face against the soft satin of her throat, he did not know. The drone of the doorbell aroused him, prepared him for the ordeal that was to come.

He stood up, dragged a deep breath as he paced into the hall. When he returned to the living-room, accompanied by the men who had come in answer to his summons, his fists were clenched as his courage bolstered for the impending battle.

They were an assorted group, these men who seated themselves in the living-room and gazed at him expectantly, waiting for him to speak. Clinton Miller and Mark Shaw, the two youngest, were bachelors, leaders of the Young Peoples' Club at the church. Edwin Dwight, blimp-bodied and shabbily dressed, owned a small shoe store on Main Street. Erwin Mowry, wearing horn-rimmed glasses too large for his wedge-shaped face, had a shrewish wife and three small children at home. Alexander Pierson, short, fat and dumpy, was a florist.

Deacons of the church, all of them. Brought together by the similarity of their spiritual beliefs, but otherwise having little in common.

Yet they had one common desire which would make them fight bitterly the suggestion on Norton's lips. They were men of average means, perhaps even less than average, and had already, in their minds, spent the fortune that Woodlawn Park would bring them. They would not give up that added income without a fight!

PASSIONATELY, Norton began to talk, and the touch of Ruth Winward's hand on his arm gave him courage. But he dared not tell them of all the things he had seen, and he knew the answer before he had spoken a dozen sentences. The expression on every face was against him.

It was Alexander Pierson, the florist, who put that answer into words. Hunched forward in a chair too big for his dumpy body, he scowled blackly, fingered an outthrust chin and snorted "Are you mad, Norton? Good Lord, man, we can't give up now! That—er—crucifixion at the park has drawn thousands of people there. The place is mobbed; the restaurant's doing a thriving business; all the concessions are booming—"

"We've laid our plans carefully, Norton." It was Clinton Miller who interrupted. "It's too late to back out. We've gone to a good deal of expense. Tonight the first two of our Biblical dramas go on—*Daniel in the Lion's Den* and the one about the Flaming Furnace. We've rehearsed our parts, bought stage settings and equipment that cost money. We can't quit now."

"Then—you're determined to go on with this unholy business?"

"Who said it was unholy? We're working in the interests of the church, aren't we? These dramas are Biblical plays, even if they are a bit sensational. You've got to give the public what they want, or they won't come to see it. And if they don't come, how can you tell them about God's work?"

Norton shut his eyes and groaned. The word "God" linked with such mad scheming, was blasphemy.

"As for this stuff you've been telling us about—" Miller shrugged—"this business of being disciples of the devil—it's sheer nonsense, Norton. You've been having nightmares!"

Norton knew that further argument would be futile. These men were poor; the sudden vision of wealth had burned itself into their souls to the exclusion of all else. He turned away, walked stiffly from the room, shuddered as he slowly climbed the staircase to his bedroom.

Later, when the deacons had gone, Ruth Winward found him there, sitting disconsolately on the bed. She sat beside him, put an arm about his shoulders.

"You mustn't take it so hard, Paul."

He laughed. The laugh was a hoarse, throaty cackle that made her stare at him with sudden apprehension. And if she heard the muttered words that came half-audibly from his curled lips, she surely did not understand their meaning.

For Paul Norton, staring dully at the floor, growled out incoherently: *"You have proved yourself a good servant. The Master takes care of his own...."*

THAT night, alone, he sat in an overstuffed chair in the living-room and watched in torment the crawling hands of the clock that leered at him from the mantel. Eighty-twenty. Shadows filled the room's corners and a lamp on the table glowed

yellow. In half an hour or so, the program at Woodlawn Park would begin.

For hours he had paced the floor, trying to think. But thinking had not driven the black doubts from his mind or made him indifferent to his failure. Thinking, brooding, had merely brought mental visions of horrible things better forgotten.

In the shadows of the room a ghastly, featureless face had taken form, glowing with crimson significance—a majestic, dark-robed shape, standing with arms folded. And a cross, planted upside down and bearing its crucified victim. A shattered window, three stories above a concrete sidewalk where lay a broken human body. And carmine letters glowing through a blood-mist. . .

Terror stalked the room. Beads of cold sweat glistened on Norton's forehead. He had wanted to be alone, had sent Ruth Winward away; now he dreaded loneliness and was afraid of what the room's crawling shadows might spawn.

The clock struck once. Eight-thirty. . . Norton rose from his chair, walked slowly up the stairs, closed the bedroom door behind him. Mind and body were exhausted from waging a futile battle against intangible foes; yet he dreaded sleep. Sleep would bring a parade of new horrors.

Without undressing he sprawled on the bed and lay there, staring mutely at the ceiling. Through an unshaded window beside him a thin shaft of ocher, from gas-burning street-light outside, angled down to yellow the floor. The rest of the room was in darkness.

Somewhere in the hall beyond the closed door, a clock was ticking—and the sound clucked hollowly, maddeningly, in a silence otherwise unbroken.

And then, with a sudden sucking intake of breath, Paul Norton jerked erect and gaped with bulging eyes at the room's rear wall!

Red letters were forming there in carmine blur that extended the length of the wall's brown surface. Slowly letters moved into focus, became legible. And the crimson message glared back at him as if inscribed with a brush dipped in blood.

*You have served me well and have been rewarded, Paul Norton. But think not that you will be allowed to cancel your bargain! Your soul belongs to the Master, and the Master retains his servants through all eternity.*



A shriek jangled in Norton's throat and he flung himself from the bed, staggered forward with both arms extended.

Terror had sapped the color from his face and numbed him. Yet the same terror had brought his courage—mad courage.

He lunged toward the wall then jerked to a stop and stood stiff, his mouth open and drooling saliva. The wall was blank! The crimson message had been wiped away as if swept by a blackboard eraser!

Then, sobbing, Paul Norton did what he had done before—blundered blindly about the room, peering fearfully into every shadowed corner, every dark niche and closet. He found nothing.

Failure angered him. He stood wide-legged, shook a clenched fist and snarled with the fury of a trapped animal. Fear brought a dull red flush to his gaunt feet and hooked his drooling mouth. Lurid words husked from his throat.

"I've not made any bargain, damn you! I'm not a servant of the devil!"

The words bounded back from the blank wall mocking him. A shudder shook his body; moments passed while fear and madness fought for supremacy in his tortured mind. Then he thrust a clammy hand to his face, mopped the sweat that gleamed there.

"By God, I'll show you whose servant I am! I'll put a stop to the whole rotten affair! Right now!"

He stormed to the door, flung it open with such violence that it thunder-clapped against the corridor wall. Breathing in great gulps, he strode down the stairs, snatched hat and coat from a rack in the lower hall and slammed the front door behind him.

Not until he was pushing open the sliding doors of the garage, a moment later, did the fury go out of his heart and leave him prey to renewed terror. But desperation urged him on. Hunched behind the wheel, he drove the small coupe at reckless speed out of the yard, and turned its blunt nose toward the maze of lonely roads that led to Woodlawn.

Rain spattered the windshield. The clock on the instrument board showed five minutes past nine. Occasional lighted homes swept past, and then Norton strained his eyes to see into a misty darkness broken only by the car's headlights.

By now, the crowd at the park would be watching the curtain rise on the first of the sensational Biblical dramas which would stuff the pockets of the deacons with unholy profits. But the dramas would not go on! He, Paul Norton, would demand a showdown!

He wondered dully if he would have courage enough to go through with it. The ordeal of the past two days had done things to his mind; his head throbbed and he found it hard to think, hard even to concentrate on the immediate task of driving. The darkness around him was a wet winding-sheet, closing in relentlessly....

He groaned, took one hand from the wheel and brought the flat of his palm against his cheek. The shock stiffened him, cleared his blurred vision. But the shadows came back; his head spawned a dull droning sound that weighted his brain. The road was an ill-defined aisle of misty gloom that refused to be still.

It was a treacherous road, too, that would like a wet black serpent between walls of massed trees. Rain made it slippery; rain dripped from the car's windshield and the heat of Paul Norton's laboring breath fogged the glass on the inside.

Again and again he wiped it clean with the palm of his hand, but new mist formed and the effort of fighting it only added to his exhaustion, fed on his remaining strength and brought moaning sounds from his lips. And the fog in his mind could not be wiped out; it grew thicker, more impenetrable. Driving was an effort. Thinking was an effort even greater.

He knew then that his mind was no longer his own. Out of the darkness around him, some malignant power had extended sucking tentacles to claim him. Bloody words formed in his brain, swam in a red mist before his staring eyes.

*"Your soul belongs to me, Paul Norton...."*

Black fear clawed at him, blinding him to the tangible perils ahead. His hands were white, clutching the wheel. His foot trembled on the accelerator. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to apply the brakes, pull the car to the side of the road and wait for that numbing, nerve-tearing sensation to depart. But his muscles refused to obey. The car roared through darkness, careening madly from side to side.

Ahead, the mammoth neon sign of Woodlawn Park blazed in darkness, and a sob of relief welled in Norton's throat. In another moment....

Sudden rain swept the windshield, blinding him. Frantically he wrenched his foot from the gas-pedal, jammed it on the brake; but sluggish muscles responded too slowly. The car swerved; the wheel spun from his numbed hands. With a sickening lunge the machine careened sideways, roared off the road-shoulder into sodden sand.

Gaunt trees loomed in the glare of the headlights and Norton's hands clawed madly at the window. A scream spewed from his lips. Abruptly, the bole of a huge pine rushed toward the leaping lights of the machine.

Creation upended. Sudden agony stabbed Paul Norton's rigid body. A roar of deafening thunder burst in his brain.

His last conscious sensation was of flying through space—hurtling in a contorted, battered heap, at express-train speed, into a black void of horror whence mocking laughter accompanied him into oblivion.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **SWORN TO SATAN**

ALL about Paul Norton the world was in motion—a jet-black world that flowed over and through him, filled him with a strange buoyancy as of gliding through deep dark water with the light of day far above and death terribly close.

Death—terribly—close. The thought grew in the laboring agony of his mind until now he was running in nightmare terror—running with every ounce of strength, spurred on by stark fear and desperation—yet unable to escape the cruel chains that bound him.

His eyes opened and he knew now that actually he was being carried, but darkness hung all about him and his blurred gaze failed to make out the forms of his bearers. A taste of blood was in' his mouth and a crushing pain pressed his skull. He heard the tread of slow-moving feet, many of them, and knew that he had been borne from the scene of the accident and lugged deep into the woods.

The sandy ruts beneath him were part of an old tote-road. Somewhere in here, about half a mile from the main highway, lay a crooked body of

water called Fletcher's pond, with an abandoned icehouse looming at the road's end....

He fought the hands that had him. Oblivion returned. Yet through agony-racked darkness he was aware of the passing of time, felt new torment as his bearers occasionally stumbled, jarring his limp body.

He knew at last that his captors stopped and were talking in low whispers. A door creaked; he was carried over a wooden floor that groaned protestingly. Ungently he was dumped to the floor. Warm hands tore his bloody shirt, stripped him to the waist. He was push backward until his naked shoulders made contact with a wall.

Then a light glowed, and with an effort Norton forced his eyes open, stared until his dazed brain recorded his surroundings.

This was a room somewhere in the old ice-house. He had been here before while hunting small game in the thickets around Fletcher's Pond. But why had he been brought here? What earthly reason...

*And who had brought him?*

Torment surged through him when he turned his head. Blood had run from a throbbing gash above his eyes, a gash probably inflicted by broken windshield glass. The cords of his neck were stiff, leathery, and seemed to creak their protest at being stretched.

The room was empty. A worm-eaten floor ran crookedly into bare walls that bulged upward in gloom. Some kind of ice-chute angled downward in the far corner, extending apparently from a chamber above this one to a chamber below. A soot-blackened lantern was the room's sole source of light.

In a daze he looked down at his feet, saw that his ankles were roped together. For the first time he realized that he could not move his hands; they were fastened behind him. Dully, without much ambition, he tried to pull his wrists free; and the creaking of a door interrupted him, caused the muscles of his aching body to go suddenly rigid.

Then, staring at the sight before him, he doubted for a moment his own sanity.

THE door in the wall opposite him had groaned open, and across that timeworn threshold came a company so strange, so utterly out of place in such surroundings, that he shook

his head violently, hoping to clear his brain of what must surely be a vision born of suffering and pain. But the strange creatures came slowly toward him, and they were real!

Women! Young women, half naked, their sensuous bodies gleaming in the pulsing light of the lantern! With an effort Norton closed his eyes, blinked them open again, yet though his mind was still dazed and his vision blurred, the creatures before him did not fade!

Yet something about those near-naked bodies and gloating faces was unreal, unholy! Every pair of eyes was filled with hunger. Every one of those too-beautiful faces was pale with a paleness as of death!

A scream welled in Norton's throat, died there unuttered. He stared with enormous eyes at the leader of the strange procession. Stared, and leaned forward as that sensuous body came nearer.

The bloodless face was terribly familiar. It—no, no, it could not be! His overwrought nerves were playing tricks upon him. He stared, held his breath as the girl came closer with a slow gliding motion that seemed inhuman. Then at last his lips writhed open to utter a hoarse babble of sound.

"Ruth! Oh, God, no! No! . . ."

For the leader of that mad company was indeed the girl who but a few hours hence had tried to comfort him. The girl who had promised to be his wife!

As she advanced, she drew her naked right arm from behind her back, and the slender too-white fingers of her hand gripped a thing that glowed dark red. That glowing thing was a heated iron rod, its tapered point pulsing as if alive!

As the members of the unholy clan closed about their terrified victim, Ruth Winward stood rigid, stared down into Paul Norton's face and said in a low monotone: "The Master punishes those who plot to disobey him. Prepare yourself, Paul Norton—for the punishment will not be light!"

Norton felt his eyes leaving their sockets, felt the blood in his stiff body run hot, then cold with terror. He knew that his face was a mask, gaunt and horrible.

As from a great distance he heard more words issuing from the lips in the blurred face before him. "The mark of the Master, Paul Norton...." The misted face swayed closer. Norton's gaze focused on the glowing tip of the iron rod, as the red needle-point made contact.

A nerve-numbing horror was his soul, and the touch of the hot iron seemed ice-cold. Somehow it did not hurt. He stared down at it, saw the flesh of his bare chest turn black as the iron burned a deep design that was vaguely familiar.

Where had he seen that mark before? It was a cross—an inverted cross. Years ago, in darkness, he had wandered into a place called Woodlawn Park and seen the same kind of cross, with a man crucified on it. Yes . . . a crucified man . . . and the unpleasant odor that was choking his nostrils now was a stench of burning flesh. His own flesh....

Wearily he raised his head. He knew now that he was in pain yet the pain was not acute; it was like a dull headache, days old. One got used to such pain. It was like being drugged, doped. The agony was there, but the brain was too dead to heed it. Too tired....

"You are a servant of the Master, Paul Norton, just as we are." That was Ruth speaking. His head lolled on his neck as he tried to look up at her. The iron bar still glowed in her hand, and its dull radiation made a carmine statue of her half-naked body. But that body was like something in a diffused photograph, with no definite outline. It had soft white breasts and a sloping bare abdomen, but he could not see it clearly....

"You are a servant of the Master." The girl's words came slowly, ominously. "At first you served well and were rewarded. Then, foolishly, you planned to disobey the Master's commands."

STRANGE words to be issuing from the lips of Ruth Winward! In mild amazement Norton gazed into her blurred face, frowned at her. She seemed to be waiting for an answer. When he made none she stepped back, muttered something to one of her companions. Then, taking a small vial from the companion's hand, she leaned forward, forced Norton's mouth open and upended the vial's liquid contents in his gaping mouth. He was too weak to resist.

The stuff trickled down, forced him to swallow. It had a bitter burning taste. Slowly then, he became more aware of the agony that stabbed his branded chest.

"Listen to me, Paul Norton!" his torturer said. "You are a minister, a man of your word. The

Master demands your solemn promise that never again will you try to interfere with his plans!"

Paul Norton's reply was a moan of pain. Impatience filled the corpse-face of the woman before him. She took a short step forward, and the glowing iron bar hung within inches of his face.

"Would you care to lose your eyes, Paul Norton?"

He stared, and the red end of the rod became a mammoth blur, menacing his bulging eyeballs. Abruptly, then, he knew the truth. The liquid which had been poured down his throat was an antidote for some unholy drug that had long gripped his mind. A drug-deadened mind would not suit the purpose of these fiends. They wanted him to feel the agony they were about to inflict!

Agony was already in him. His burned chest throbbed viciously. Terror was a living, crawling thing upon him.

"I give you ten seconds," the girl rasped. "Either you give your word of honor to obey the Master's every wish, or...." The glowing rod moved nearer, searing Norton's eyes with its heat. "*What is your answer?*"

Somewhere, Paul Norton found courage and defiance. "I won't do it! I won't!"

An evil smile curled the lips of the girl he loved. As if moved by some hypnotic power that claimed her soul, she swayed closer. A scream jangled in Norton's throat as he cringed from the menacing iron bar. The wall stopped him.

The glowing rod inched forward to make black wells of agony of his eyes. Stark terror seized him, left him limp. Incoherent words babbled from his lips.

"I promise! Oh, God, leave me alone! I can't stand any more...."

The bar receded. Once again Ruth Winward stood over him. Vaguely he was aware that the ropes on his ankles were loosened, and he was being set free.

Warm arms gripped his armpits, helped him to his feet. The same hands pushed him toward the doorway through which those half-naked mistresses of hell had entered. And a low, triumphant voice was saying: "Go, Paul Norton. And remember that the Master is all-powerful. If you break your promise, your torment will be greater than that of a lost soul in Purgatory!"

Norton's feet stumbled on the threshold; the door rasped shut behind him. Alone, half-naked and branded with a mark that would live with him through eternity, he stumbled into the night, sobbing with a realization that he had pledged his soul to some dark monster who would watch over him, checking his every word, his every movement, even the thoughts that festered in his tortured brain.

WHAT time it was when he emerged from the woods, Paul Norton could not tell. Ages of agony and bewilderment had passed since the car had crashed. His brain had wandered in darkness. He had been drugged, then given a restorative.

He stood in the road and peered around him, saw a black contorted shape which was the wreck of his own car. Helplessly he stared at it, then trudged toward the mammoth neon sign of Woodlawn Park, a few hundred yards distant.

The sign was a blazing red emblem in the dark. The hour, then, could not be so very late. The park was still open.

Only half aware of his near-nakedness, of the sinister hell-sign branded on his bare chest, he passed beneath the crimson letters and trudged along the park's main path, toward lighted buildings. This end of the park was deserted; a wave of sound rolled toward him from the huge dance-hall where Mowry and the others had planned to put on a double bill of sensational entertainment.

People were massed about the hall's entrance, apparently clamoring for admission. The deacons had been right. This place would coin money. If tonight's crowd were any indication of what would follow, it was obvious that the park would be a gold-mine. But the church would see little of that money. And old Jason Manley from his death-bed had demanded solemn promises that the church would benefit.

Mechanically, Norton plodded on, staring at the milling mob of people under the floodlights that blazed from the dancehall's roof. It was a young crowd, the type of crowd that ordinarily would have come to dance to the jangling jazz of some popular orchestra. Good-looking girls, attractive young men, happy, noisy, eager for the thrills that had been promised them. They paid no attention to the solitary figure of Paul Norton.

And Norton, peering ahead, did not see the dark shape that stood in the doorway of the office as he went past.

That shape suddenly stiffened, gaped, then strode forward. An outthrust hand seized Norton's arm.

"Norton! Good Lord, man, what's happened to you?"

He turned slowly and peered into the fat, dumpy face of Alexander Pierson. Fear had leaped into Norton's eyes, but now went sluggishly out of them. He mumbled thickly, "Oh. It's you! I thought—"

Pierson's searching gaze darkened with suspicion. His grip on Norton's arm tightened and he said softly: "Better come into the office and I'll fix you up. Dwight and Miller and the others are in costume for the Fiery Furnace number. They left their clothes here." With significant patience he ushered Norton over the sill, led him to a chair.

A moment later, when he returned to the chair after taking a shirt and coat from a peg in the wall, he peered darkly at the mark on Paul Norton's chest, caught a slow, noisy breath and said: "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"It's nothing. Just—a burn."

"A *what*?"

"I don't feel like talking, Pierson. I—I'm tired." Sluggishly, Norton thrust his aching arms into the shirt, stood up and put on the coat that Pierson held for him. "You said Dwight and Miller and the others are taking part in—what?"

"The big sensation of the evening." Pierson's wet mouth curled in a grin. "The casting of black-souled sinners into a fiery furnace. The furnace is the real thing, and so are the victims. A great little act. Miller's the man who doped it out."

"But—"

"Oh, it's perfectly safe. No one'll get hurt. Miller himself is one of the lost souls. On the floor of the dance-hall, right next to the orchestra platform, we've got a big iron tank about six feet deep. The victims will be herded across the platform and forced to leap down into the flames, to the accompaniment of much screaming and wailing for mercy. And if you don't think Miller and the others can do a good job of wailing, you should have heard them in here half an hour ago, rehearsing!"

NO ANSWERING smile touched Norton's gaunt face. He said slowly: "How can they be thrown into the flames without being hurt?"

"Easy. Miller got all the dope from Houdini's book on magic and we tried it out beforehand. All it takes is a little careful anointing."

"And this is the second act of the evening?"

"Second and last. The first was *Daniel in the Lions' Den* and yours truly himself played the part of Daniel." Pierson's thick neck pulsed with a triumphant chuckle. "We had a big cage rigged up with sandbags and painted canvas to look like a den, and the French Brothers Circus gave us the loan of four ferocious looking lions. It looked like the real thing, I'm telling you!"

Norton paced to the door, stared out across the park. An unreasonable sensation of terror crawled through him; his hands were white on the door-frame, his face pale. Hesitantly he said: "I—I want to see this." Then he strode forward, with Pierson behind him.

The thing happened as Paul Norton reached the edge of the crowd and began pushing his way toward the entrance. Happened as though timed to his arrival. On the stage the Fiery Furnace scene was in progress. From the interior of the dance-hall, an interior choked to the very walls with a sea of sensation-seeking humanity, came a vibrant scream of horror—from the throat of a young woman who realized the truth before those about her were aware that anything had gone wrong.

Then as others realized what was happening up there on the stage, countless hundreds of human voices took up the terror-cry. The milling mob went mad. A shrill storm-wind of sound poured against walls and roof, shook the wooden frame-building to its foundations and went wailing across the park in soul-searing crescendo.

Paul Norton's blood ran cold as he battered his way forward. How he got through that terror-crazed mob and reached the scene of horror, he was never sure. The borrowed coat and shirt were torn from his body; reeling, staggering, sobbing for breath, he fought through to the huge tank that stood near the platform.

Heat blasted his face and a roaring wall of scarlet flame blinded him, but he saw what was happening. Saw a group of flame-reddened shapes struggling frantically to pull a shrieking, burning thing over the tank's iron rim.

Blasted by the fury of the flames, they dragged that writhing shape clear, lowered it to the floor and beat desperately at the crimson hell that enshrouded it. Other men were staring with horror-wide eyes into the tank's inferno, and one of them—Clinton Miller—was screaming lurid words that toccined above the din of the mob.

"Mowry and Shaw! They're still in there! Oh, God—!"

After that, Paul Norton was not sure of what happened. A blackness filled his brain and the torturing heat sent streaks of fiery agony through his already weakened body. Dully he was aware that he tried to help, tried to stumble forward and take a pitifully small fire-extinguisher from a gibbering idiot who had no notion of how to use it. But someone else pulled the thing from Norton's grasp and pushed him away. He stumbled, went down.

People were screaming the names of Mowry and Shaw. Frantic men were stumbling in one another's way in their blind efforts to help; yet none knew what to do or how to be of assistance. The writhing shape on the floor, the blazing human torch that had been dragged from the tank, was moaning in agony as fevered hands tore the smoldering clothes from his body. His face was a blackened, distorted gargoyle of pain, and it was the face of Edmund Dwight.

Half-dazed, Paul Norton pushed himself up on hands and knees, tried to gain his feet. But lunging shapes crashed against him and tumbled him off balance again. A tidal wave of darkness blotted out his last conscious vision—that of a seething, surging mass of flame-reddened humanity gone mad.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### ***Blood Message***

ANXIOUS-FACED men were standing around him when he came to. They had carried him across the park to the administration office and lowered him into a chair. Peering into their faces, Paul Norton read the horror that was engraved there. His hand went out to clutch the arm of Alexander Pierson.

"Mowry—Shaw—" he said. "Are they—?"

Pierson nodded and his lips formed the word "dead," but no sound came. Clinton Miller stood like a propped-up corpse, his large, shabbily dressed body trembling from head to foot, his face drained of color. It was Miller who had invented the fatal fiery furnace and prepared the victims....

"You've been unconscious nearly an hour," Pierson said dully. "We're the last ones here. Dwight's been taken to the hospital, and they've carried Shaw and Mowry away. If you're strong enough to go home...."

He did break, on the long ride home. Sobs shook his big body and incoherent words blubbered on his lips. "Oh, my God, it was all my fault! But I didn't know! I thought I'd taken every precaution against accidents. Something must have been wrong with the solutions I used...."

His companions were grimly silent. Pierson's dark eyes watched Miller's every move and were clouded with suspicion. Suspicion burned in other eyes, too, but Paul Norton was too tired to notice. When at last the car stopped before the rectory, he climbed wearily out, let himself into the house and went straight upstairs to the bedroom.

The events of the past few hours were strangely jumbled in his mind. They seemed diffused, blurred, as if spawned in the distorted ramblings of a nightmare.

The wreck of his car, the torments inflicted on him by those death-faced women in the old ice-house near Fletcher's Pond—those things could not have happened! They were unreal. So, too, was the hideous accident that had claimed the lives of two of the deacons, Mowry and Shaw, and injured Edmund Dwight.

Yet those things were real and he knew it. Horror had stalked the night; devil's laughter had triumphantly ridden the darkness. And he, Paul Norton, minister of the word of God, was branded with a hell-mark that would disfigure him until death.

Standing naked before a mirror, he gazed at the inverted cross and saw again the living-dead face of the girl who had tortured him. Her name whispered in torment from his lips. "Ruth! Ruth—"

How he got downstairs to the telephone, he was not sure. When he gripped the instrument and called Ruth's number his face and neck were drenched with cold sweat and his body shook as with the ague. Breath wheezed in his throat as he

waited. Merciful God, would they never answer? Would they never come? . . .

A voice droned through the receiver, the voice of Ruth's mother. The woman was vexed at being roused out of bed at such an hour.

"I—I want to speak to Ruth," Norton mumbled. "It's important. Please—"

"Is this Paul Norton?"

"Yes. Yes, it's Paul."

"But Ruth's in bed. She went to her room hours ago and I don't like to wake her. She wasn't feeling well, Paul."

"In—bed—hours ago?" Norton said weakly.

"Why, yes. Is something wrong?"

"No. It's all right, Mrs. Winward. I'm sorry...." The receiver slipped from Norton's fingers. Slowly he climbed the stairs again, closed the bedroom door behind him. Ruth, in bed hours ago? Then how—?

His brain refused to think any more. Groaning, he threw himself on the bed, buried his face in a pillow. Everything now was blurred by a dark mist of torment that would not dissolve.

He dozed. A sensation of impending peril aroused him, dragged him out of a half-sleep that was loaded with evil forebodings. Instinctively he sat up, stared at the wall.

Crimson letters glowed there, as they had glowed twice before!

*Tonight's torment was merely a warning, my servant! If you again dare to disobey me, I shall drag your soul to the torment-pits of hell! I shall come as the woman you love, and destroy you!*

Snarling, Norton surged erect. But the sinister message faded before his eyes; he sagged back again. He had come to realize now the futility of fighting intangible evils. Moaning dully, he closed his eyes, lay in a cold sweat until sleep came mercifully to relieve him.

SUNLIGHT was in the room when he awoke. A clock on the dresser said eight a. m. and he remembered dully that the day was Sunday. The first Sunday in the month, and he must give Holy Communion.

Downstairs, he called Ruth. This time it was Ruth, not her mother, who answered the phone.

"You—you were home last night?" Norton demanded.

She seemed to hesitate. Then: "Yes, Paul. I went to bed early because I didn't feel well. I must have slept soundly, because I woke up only half an hour ago. But—but it was a queer sleep, full of the strangest dreams—"

"You'll be at church?"

"Yes, of course."

"I'll see you there, then. I must talk to you."

Scowling, he hung up, tried to think.

So she had not slept well. She had dreamed strange dreams. . .

Black doubt festered in Norton's mind and stayed with him, filled him with uneasiness as he shaved and showered. Standing in the shower he again fingered the hell-mark on his chest, and shuddered. With the brand of the devil upon him, he must go now to administer the Holy Sacrament....

It was late when he reached the church, and he knew by the lifeless tone of people's voices as they greeted him, and by the fixed, dead expressions of their faces, that the news of last night's horrible disaster had traveled through town. Alone, he went to the vestry, closed the door on himself and approached the linen-covered table near the wall. He would barely have time to prepare the wine . . .

He froze in his tracks, stood staring. A dark brown bottle lay on its side on the linen-covered table—the same dark brown bottle that should be standing upright, filled with wine. But the red liquid that had run from the bottle's mouth, forming a scarlet pool on the tablecloth, did not look like wine. It was too red, too thick.

On leaden feet Norton moved forward, stared down. Like thick red paint the liquid from the overturned bottle flooded the cloth. And it was not wine. Even before extending a trembling hand to touch that viscous pool he knew the truth It was *blood!*

And on the only portion of the cloth not stained by the pool itself, some fiendish forefinger had traced a *bloody inverted cross, symbol of sin!*

Blood! The red liquid—the wine he was supposed to serve to those who took

Communion—was blood! They would be damned, all of them, just as he was damned!

But no one had seen him come in here! He stared frantically around, reeled backward. There was a side door by which he could escape without encountering any of the congregation. He had to go!

Frenzy seized him and darkness beat in his brain as he wrenched the door open. Then he ran. Ran with terror sapping the strength from his legs and his half-crouched body a shuddering, stumbling thing that refused to obey his will. Thank God, the distance home was short, through the back yard of the church and across his own back yard to the rear door! If it were any longer....

The back steps of the rectory tripped him; he sprawled against the door, reeled inside and slammed the barrier behind him. The thud of his footsteps along the hall beat a jangling sing-song. *Blood—blood—blood—blood!* A red mist of madness swam before his eyes as he lurched into the living-room and slumped, sobbing, into a chair....

How long he sat there, frantically gripping the chair-arms and staring straight ahead of him with eyes that saw only blackness, he was not sure. Someone was insistently ringing the front doorbell.

He went to the door and opened it mechanically, stared into the bewildered face of Alexander Pierson. Pierson gaped at him, pushed over the sill and began talking in a quick, harsh voice.

"Norton! For Heaven's sake, man, don't you know this is Communion Sunday? We've been holding up the service, waiting for you. You—"

"I don't feel well," Norton mumbled.

"Then why didn't you let us know? We've been frantic! Dwight and Miller and I have looked all over for you?"

"Dwight? I—I thought he—"

"He's up and around, in bandages. Wasn't hurt as badly as we thought. But look here, Norton, if you're sick, let me get a doctor. You can't just stand there and say you're ill without doing something about it!"

"I—I'll lie down for a while," Norton said slowly. "Yes, that's the best thing. Come back later."

He closed the door, turned wearily and climbed the stairs to the bedroom. It took a long

while and the stairs seemed endless, reaching upward into infinity. Something was wrong with his brain; it was an effort to think, even to concentrate on such a simple task as climbing a flight of stairs. Things were blurred and unreal, just as they had been before he had driven the car off the road.

He was conscious of closing the bedroom door behind him, and of walking slowly toward the bed. The shades were down and the room was filled with a pale half-light that confused him.

Then he saw something and his feet stopped their sluggish advance; his hand went out, cold as ice, to grip the bedpost. A shriek climbed from the depths of his rigid body and came in a weak chatter from his lips.

Words were on the wall. Crimson words glaring out at him. Like a drunken man he stood gaping at them, struggling to make his brain decipher them. In a daze he moved forward, reached out to see if they were real.

And this time the words did not vanish when his stiff fingers made contact. The tips of his fingers smeared through a line of crimson letters and came away wet and sticky. The words were written in blood!

*You are to murder three men—Miller, Pierson, and Dwight—within the next twenty-four hours! It is the Master's command! Do not fail, or terrible punishment will be meted out to you by the hand of the woman you love!*

NORTON stared until the crimson words blurred before him, became a red mist of horror. He stumbled back, sank shuddering to the bed. Moments passed; the clock on the dresser ticked on. Still he sat staring, while black terror mounted within him.

"By the hand of the woman you love!" What did that mean? Was it a hideous confirmation of the dark belief that had shadowed his mind ever since the brand of sin had been burned on his body?

What else could it mean? The half-naked girl who had burned that brand on him had acted abnormally, as if under some strange influence. And Ruth Winward had admitted not feeling well, had confessed to strange nightmares....



In a daze he made his way downstairs, closed the door of the living-room behind him and sat down stiffly at the Governor Winthrop desk. For the best part of an hour he used pen and paper, filling many sheets with a complete, truthful account of everything that had happened to him. When his task was at last completed, he folded the sheets, pushed them into an envelope and stuffed the envelope into his coat pocket. Then, bareheaded, he left the house.

The Winward home was less than half a mile distant, but he used thirty minutes getting there. Time meant nothing now. Walking slowly, he looked around with wide eyes that were anxious to miss none of the day's beauty.

It would be the last time. In a little while sunlight and green trees and the sound of birds twittering would no longer be of his world. His world would be a deep chasm of darkness peopled with sinister shapes and prowling specters: a place of everlasting torment and agony.

When he climbed the steps of the Winward home and hesitantly rang the bell, Mrs. Winward opened the door to him. She, at least, had not changed. White-haired and motherly, she gazed at him with worried eyes. "Paul, you're not well," she said anxiously. "What has happened?"

He followed her inside and saw that Ruth was not at home. "She is at church," Mrs. Winward said in answer to his question. "She should be here soon."

An aroma of burning food came from the kitchen and Mrs. Winward hurried away. Alone, Norton sat in the parlor, amid dark shapes of Colonial furniture that seemed solid and comforting.

Then—Ruth came.

She stood motionless in the doorway, staring at him. A single anxious word left her lips—"Paul!" and then her hands gripped his shoulders and she gazed down into his face, trying to read what lay there. "Paul, what's wrong?"

"I want to talk to you, alone."

She seemed to understand. Quietly she closed the door leading to the kitchen, then came back, sat facing him. "Yes? Her voice was lower, pleading. "Yes, Paul?"

With trembling fingers he pulled from his pocket the envelope he had stuffed there. "Read this. Read every word of it. Then you'll understand."

It took her a long while. He had written a full account of everything, beginning with the discovery of Deacon Wyman's body on the inverted cross in the park, and the appearance of the nameless dark shape that had so inexplicably vanished; and ending with an account of the final command that he commit murder.

Color seeped from her face as she read the written lines. Long before she had finished, her breast was rising and falling as if in danger of bursting, and her hands shook as they tried to hold the pages steady. In the end she looked up, said in a hesitant whisper: "Oh, God, Paul, what does it *mean*?"

"It means I can't stand any more of it. It's the end." He stood over her, reached down and took her hands. "There's only one way out, dearest. A week ago, if anyone had told me that the devil had power to enslave human beings, I would have laughed and accused him of living in the Dark Ages. Now I know better. There's only one way out and I am taking it."

"Oh, God, no! *No*, Paul!"

"It won't be hard, dear." Strange, that he should be trying to console her, at a time when his own soul was black with torment.

She stared at him as if hearing her own death-sentence. Loveliness had vanished from her face, leaving it bloodless. Abruptly her hand gripped Norton's wrist.

"Paul, promise me you'll wait! I know something—something that you don't. I'll go with you to the park tonight and show you!"

"It's no use, dear."

"I tell you I know something!" Desperation blazed in her eyes and the grip of her hand was so savage that it purpled his wrist. "I've lived in Denham longer than you have! I was here when the park site was cleared and the buildings were put up. You've written here—" She stabbed a trembling finger at the letter—"that a dark shape seemed to vanish into thin air. I'll show you how it was done!"

"You—know?"

"I think so, Paul. Oh, God, I hope I'm right!"

"Then we'll go out there now, and—"

"No." Her voice was suddenly low, almost a whisper. "Wait for darkness, Paul. Then no one will see us. Promise me you'll wait."

His answer was slow in coming, came at last as if forcefully dragged from his lips. "I'll wait. We'll go tonight...."

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### ***Into the Pit***

THERE was no moon and the road through the woods was an ink-black aisle of crawling shadows, evilly dark on both sides. The big neon sign at the park's entrance was unlighted. This was Sunday, and the park was closed.

Norton had spoken but a few words to the girl beside him since the start of the journey. He stared at her now, and a feeling of uneasiness wriggled inside him, filling him with apprehension. The blood words of that last message were in his mind and seemed to blaze luridly across the road ahead, warning him. " . . . By the hand of the woman you love!" He shuddered. Something about Ruth was strange.

Her face was abnormally pale, just as the face of the merciless creature who had branded him had been pale. He didn't remember much about that particular interlude. It had been a dark blur of agony even at the time, and he had been drugged, dazed.

The neon sign loomed overhead and Norton braked the car to a stop, climbed out. The sudden sharp glance that Ruth Winward threw at him startled him; he took an involuntary step backward as she climbed from the car. Something was wrong, dead wrong! But he had to trust her. Had to believe in her!

Her hand found his arm and clung there. Whispered words left her lips as she stared fearfully into the dark. "I— I'm afraid, Paul. I feel so—so numb—the way I felt last night."

He scowled. So she felt "strange" again. Sudden terror clutched him. He, too, had felt "strange" the last time he had driven out here. Had been unable to think. Some hellish power had owned his mind, bending his will to another will possessed of fiendish strength. Now it was Ruth....

"Let's get out of here!" he said sharply.

"No, Paul. I've got to show you." She broke from his restraining grip and almost ran toward

the gate. When he caught up with her she was striding resolutely along the gravel path toward the administration office and the dark expanse of lawn beyond it, where that inverted cross had loomed blackly in the dark.

The cross was not there now. Miller, Pierson, Dwight and the others—the others who were now dead!—had removed it. Only the dark man-high hulks of evergreen shrubs rose above the lawn's level. And Ruth was striding toward them.

Passing the ragged hole where the death cross had been planted, she shuddered but did not stop. Straight to the nearest shrub she went, and it was the same shrub that Norton had examined so carefully, eternities ago.

She stood motionless and her face in the dark was ghastly pale, stiff as a plaster-mask. "When this park was originally laid out," she said harshly—so harshly that the metallic rasp of her voice made him gape at her in amazement—"the administration building was to be right here. They laid the foundations, then changed their plans. They filled the hole up again but left a tunnel, planning to use it later for some kind of amusement device—an underground boat-ride or railway or something. Anyway, the idea was abandoned and the entrance blocked up. I never would have remembered it if you hadn't said in your letter that a—a dark shape disappeared without leaving a trace."

She forced a mirthless laugh, reached out and pushed against the shrub. Norton's eyes widened, filled with sudden comprehension. He stepped forward. When he stooped, put both arms around the evergreen and hauled, the shrub came up, dragging with it the big wooden tub in which it was planted.

At Norton's feet a rectangular pit of blackness extended downward. He leaned downward, cupped a glowing match in his hands. Matchlight disclosed a flight of concrete steps.

He sucked a deep breath, straightened again. "So that's where the killer went to!" Triumph blinded him to the strange glint in the eyes of the girl who stood watching him. "I'm going down there! Going to see what's at the end of that tunnel!"

Even before his declaration had died to silence he had one foot on the top step. Here at last was something tangible, that might lead somewhere! These steps were real, not spawned in a hideous nightmare. Eagerly he descended,

then remembered that he was not alone. Abruptly he stopped, looked up.

At the rim of the pit Ruth Winward seemed to hesitate, and her slender body, silhouetted against the dark of the sky, seemed for a fleeting instant to sway on stiff legs. "Wait, Paul!" Even her voice was abnormal, queerly inflexible. "Wait for me. Don't leave me alone!"

Then the tunnel narrowed; Norton dropped the girl's hand, went more slowly. The scrape of his boot-soles on hard concrete was like thunder. In his eagerness he widened the distance between Ruth and himself.

Her low cry pulled him up short. He turned, could see nothing in the solid blackness. A sudden premonition of danger stabbed through him. The girl's scuffing footsteps came nearer.

In that lampblack gloom he neither saw nor heard the thing that crashed down on him. It came from nowhere, grinding against his head. Blazing lights of agony roared in his brain and a giant cannon cracker exploded in his skull.

THE blazing lights that had accompanied his plunge were again in his brain when consciousness began slowly to filter back, lifting him up through a swirling world of blood-rimmed shadows.

No, the lights were not in his brain. They were out in front of his eyes—deep, vivid blotches of scarlet mist that lunged, twisted, leapt like frantic flames. And he was still in the tunnel, but not alone.

The agony in his head did things to his eyes, so that the tunnel walls, glowing dark red now through the blood-mist, seemed to move and sway as he stared at them. He knew he must be delirious. The strange half-naked shapes that stood around him could not be real!

Yet they were real. Vaguely he remembered having encountered them before, after the smash-up of his car. These were the same chalk-faced women, the mistresses of hell who had tortured him!

He groaned, flattened his hands on the stone floor and tried to push himself up, but other hands clamped on his shoulders and forced him down again. A face swam toward him through the red mist and hung above him, peering down. He stared into it, opened his mouth to scream, but no scream came. The face was twisted in a mirthless smile. It was her face. Ruth's....

His black fears had come true, then. He had made no mistake about that other occasion *Ruth, too, was one of the devil's disciples*. Oh, God!

But why did that crimson glare still fill the tunnel? He had regained full consciousness now; the agony-mist in his brain should be clearing and the tunnel should be dark. Yet that red glow persisted, and the passage was unbearably hot, bringing sweat to his face and to the near-naked bodies that crowded around him....

Strong hands seized his ankles and yanked his legs clear of the floor. The jolt rocked his shoulders back and his head cracked against solid stone. New agony coursed through him.

Now he was being dragged along the tunnel. Every irregularity in the floor inflicted torment but his captors did not stop. Relentlessly they pulled him along, and the crimson glow brightened around him as they hauled him deeper into the earth's bowels. The heat grew more intense, more unbearable.

Suddenly the walls fell away on either side; the passage widened, became a subterranean chamber—a hell-chamber filled with roaring redness and savage heat that was like a breath from some mighty blast furnace. Half-naked shapes bent above him. His clothes were being ripped from his body.

Always, above him, hung the living dead face of Ruth Winward, gloating over his helplessness....

Then, as savage hands jerked his naked body to a sitting position and propped him against the wall, he saw something else, and terror crawled like a monstrous maggot through his veins. A scream burst from his lips.

The floor before him sloped gently downward; the far end of the room was a roaring hell-pit of flame. And now clutching hands had taken hold of him, gripping his armpits, thighs, ankles, and were hauling him forward toward the pit!

This was a torment-chamber of hell's inferno. These near-naked women were slaves of the Black Master. *And he, Paul Norton, was to be the victim!*

Stark terror gave him strength to struggle; he fought with mad fury, raking with both hands at the hot, bare flesh of his captors. But they outnumbered him, swarmed over him and pinned his arms, held him helpless. Step by step they dragged him forward, down that sloping floor of

stone. And with each forward step the heat grew more devouring, the crimson glare burned more viciously against his seared eyeballs.

Then there was something else, something he had not seen since that first black night in the park. As if spawned by the flames themselves, the monster himself stood like some huge statue, arms folded, shapeless face staring triumphantly through the red hell. Norton shuddered.

Paul Norton, stark naked and racked with a thousand agonies of flesh and spirit, had no strength left for fighting. The mouth of hell was waiting, the roaring furnace hungry for its victim. This was the end....

And above his terror-frozen face, as he was dragged relentlessly forward, hung the leering face of the girl who had loved him. *She* was the ring-leader, the chief handmaiden of the Black One! When his naked body was flung to the flames, *she* would revel in his dying shrieks of agony!

"Ruth!" The name croaked from his throat. "Ruth! Oh, my God—!"

His cry brought strange results. Behind him, sounds of conflict came from the tunnel's entrance, and an answering scream in a girl's terror-laden voice shrilled through the rock-walled chamber. "Paul! Paul! Oh, my dear, my dear—"

He stiffened, managed somehow to jerk his head around. Dark horror welled over him in a viscous wave. In the doorway that led from the tunnel, a second group of hell's mistresses were parading forward, dragging a second victim. And like himself, the other victim was stark naked.

The glare of the fire made a glowing thing of her struggling body, crimsoned her heaving breasts. Flame-glow reddened her writhing thighs, made a carmine gargoyle of her twisted face. But he knew that face, knew the voice that shrilled from the girls fear-torn mouth!

He had been wrong! Horribly wrong! The face he had seen above him was not Ruth's. This second victim, being dragged behind him into the same fiery mouth of hell that would devour his own body, *was the girl he loved!*

MADNESS tore at Norton's soul and the shriek that ripped his throat was an inhuman sound filling the room with wild echoes. His own life had not mattered; he had not dreaded death itself but the manner of it. But Ruth! . . .

His soul shrieked a prayer and the prayer jangled from his drooling mouth, to tocsin above the roar of the flames. "Oh, God, give me strength! Help me!"

But he had more than a prayer. He had arms and legs, fists and feet, teeth that could tear flesh! Madness showed him how to use them.

With mad-dog fury he fought free of the clutching hands that frantically sought to subdue him. Near-naked bodies reeled away from him, battered and bloody from the raking blows of his fists. He staggered forward, flung himself upon the hell-born demons who had the girl he loved.

And he knew now that they were not hell-born. They were human. Human enough to shriek out in terror and scatter as any group of women would have scattered before the murderous charge of a madman. Some of them went down, battered to unconsciousness by his blind blows. The others staggered clear, choked the tunnel mouth in their frantic anxiety to escape.

Like a great white ape gone amuck, he stood straddling the sobbing form of their abandoned victim. Sweat poured from his body; his chest rose and fell with great gulps of breath. He stared down; madness died in his eyes, and words mumbled from his mouth. "Ruth! Thank God—"

Her arm shot out and her answering cry was a scream of terror. "Behind you! Look out!"

Norton whirled, jerked rigidly to his toes. Facing him across a distance of less than ten paces, not behind the flames now but in front of them, stood the Black Master himself!

That shapeless, red-glowing face was an unholy mask of hate. The fiend's robed body, huge and bloated and smoldering with flame, stood darkly silhouetted against the red mouth of hell. And in one of those blackened hands, rising slowly to a levy with Paul Norton's branded chest, was balanced a revolver!

Norton lunged sideways, crashed against the wall as the gun roared. The sound of the bullet past his cheek was a dull sob, so close that he heard it above the echoing thunder of the gun. The gun roared again as he hurtled forward, head down, shoulders hunched.

Hot pain seared his arm, spun him off balance. Then he made contact with the fiend's legs.

Madness was in his soul again and he pistoned erect, with crushing force, inside the monster's outflung arms. The gun rose, fell, but

Norton's teeth sank savagely in the demon's wrist and the clubbed weapon spilled from paralyzed fingers. Above the roar of the flame-pit the Master's howl of pain rose in lurid crescendo, and he stumbled back.

But strength was going out of Paul Norton's body, going fast. He felt sickness writhing in the pit of his stomach, crawling up into his chest. And the black-clad arms of the Master were locked around him, crushing with savage power.

Norton's knees went limp, gave way under him. Behind him, miles away, Ruth Winward screamed wildly, "Oh, God, help him! Give him strength!" But her voice was only a mocking echo. Hooked fingers had found Norton's throat; his face purpled, he gasped for breath.

Above him, the Master's unholy countenance was twisted with hate. Creation was slowly turning black, and through the blackness came livid streaks of scarlet lightning that were shafts of agony, piercing Norton's soul. The world was a roaring abyss....

Suddenly then, close beside him in that black chaos, someone else was fighting! A naked girl, sobbing with terror, was using her small hard fists to batter at the hideous face of the Master!

But not for long. Throttling fingers whipped clear of Norton's throat, balled themselves into fists and leaped toward the girl. Savagely they hurled her aside. She crashed against the wall, fell, lay moaning.

Then Paul Norton went mad. Animal growls jarred his throat as he hurled himself on the girl's assailant. His hands shot out, ripped and clawed at the glowing hell-face. His hooked fingers smeared through greasy make-up, tore loose a layer of putty-like plaster.

With strength that amazed even himself, he buried a clenched fist in the fiend's uncovered face, and the sound of the blow was a sickening, thudding crash.

The face reeled backward. No longer did that unholy red glow emanate from it. The red stuff was on Norton's fingers instead. The face was a shrieking, sobbing lump of terror, and as it shot backward it was human and ghastly white against the red hell of the flame-pit.

Norton stood swaying, staring, breathing fire and heat. Horror choked him as the black-robed body staggered back, failed to regain balance. The room was full of a soul-rending shriek of terror.

For a moment only, the black-clad Master rocked on the brink of his own lurid hell, his face a flaming horror. That face belonged to Edmund Dwight.

Then the hell-pit claimed its victim.

PAUL NORTON was not sure what happened after that. For an eternity he stood staring, mumbling over and over: "It was Dwight! It was Dwight who did all those terrible things. . ."

Madness had given him strength, but now the madness was gone, taking the strength with it. In a daze, he stumbled to the naked form that lay against the wall. Stooping, he tried to gather it in his arms, only to realize that the task was beyond his ability. The girl was unconscious. In another moment he, too, would give way to exhaustion, and—

He heard voices, low voices that came muttering through the tunnel, but they meant little to him. And when, moments later, the tunnel vomited forth a group of uniformed men, Paul Norton was unconscious on the floor, his arms around the unclad form of his sweetheart.

He did not know that the policemen covered her body and his with their coats and carried both limp bodies through the tunnel, into cool clean air....

Hours passed before Norton's fear-blackened brain reacted to restoratives and he wandered back through a world of darkness into consciousness. He was lying on his own bed, at home, and Ruth Winward sat beside him gently massaging his face and throat. Staring past her, Norton saw Alexander Pierson, Clinton Miller, and a third man who was a stranger. The other man must be a doctor....

Miller came forward, stared down. "Miss Winward owes her life to you, Norton. For that matter, Pierson and I do, too, for we surely would have been next on Dwight's death-list."

Norton tried to think, but was too tired. Later he would be able to reason the whole thing out. And right now, Miller wanted to talk.

"Ruth has shown us the detailed report you made out," he blurted "I think I can clear up a lot of things, Norton. In the first place, Dwight's big motive was to kill us all off so the park would belong exclusively to him. He murdered Wyman because Wyman opposed the park business in the first place and might have prevented the deal from going through.

"He committed that murder sensationally for the sake of publicity. Then he saw a way to get rid of Bingham, by framing Bingham for the murder. It worked; Bingham committed suicide—maybe because he was in with Dwight on the earlier deed and feared exposure. After that, Dwight murdered Mark Shaw and Erwin Mowry by doctoring the preparation that I made to protect them from the flames in our Fiery Furnace act. He threw suspicion off himself by letting himself get slightly burned at the same time."

Miller's fists were clenched, his eyes blazing. "Dwight picked on you from the very beginning," he rasped, "because he thought he could terrorize you into murdering the rest of us, and so save himself the dirty work. That's why you received those messages on the wall of the room here, and why the sacramental wine was turned to blood. Maybe you'll be interested in knowing how the messages were put on your wall. Here!"

He snatched a small, box-shaped object from the table and thrust it forward. "This is what's known as a mirrorscope, a magic lantern. Small, yes, but big enough for Dwight's purpose. We found it in the attic upstairs, and there's a neat round hole drilled in the ceiling, with a wooden plug to be used in masking the hole when not in use. The crimson messages were printed on lantern-slides and projected through the hole onto the wall here. A damned clever arrangement and hard to detect, because this machine is too small to throw a noticeable light-beam.

"All I can say is," Miller finished hoarsely, "that Pierson and I owe our lives to you. We'd have been the next to be lured into that hell-hole and flung into the flame-pit."

"As it is—" The interruption came quietly from Pierson—"Dwight is now very dead, thanks to Norton. And you—" He peered at Norton—"are due to stay in bed for at least a day or two. Both you and Miss Winward were somehow doped, drugged, many times. And we have a problem on our hands as to what must be done with the group of unwholesome women who were working with Dwight. One of those girls looked remarkably like you, Miss Winward—which is probably why Dwight gave her the leading role in his fanatical program.

"The girls were part of his wild publicity scheme and undoubtedly he promised them a great deal of money. Now they are in jail, terrified of the consequences. They might have escaped, if Miller and I had not phoned the police and

followed you two to the park, thinking you were—" He forced an apologetic smile—"acting suspiciously."

Ruth Winward did not answer. And when Miller began again to speak, he stopped abruptly, let his voice sputter to silence. For the girl and Paul Norton were oblivious to what was going on around them.

Norton's head was cradled in Ruth's arms and he was asleep with his lips pressed against the warm satin of her throat. And she was murmuring soft, intimate words, so personal that Miller, Pierson and the doctor glanced meaningfully at one another and tiptoed silently from the room, closing the door behind them.

## THE END

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## THE TWISTED MEN

By Hugh B. Cave

*The Virus of Idiocy was in that Vile Potion Clutched in a Dead Man's Hand*

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### CHAPTER ONE *Mad Laughter*

I COULD make this story very personal, but I'm not going to. That would be the easiest way, but when I got through you'd be apt to look me up—just for the satisfaction of calling me some kind of liar. So we'll call the fellow Peter Smith and name his wife Jo, which will make it easier and perhaps keep it on the rational side of that thin fence between sanity and madness.

If Peter Smith had been driving his car alone on the Mendon Road that night when the gods of disaster screamed their opening chorus, he probably would have kept right on going. But he happened to be with Jo, and he'd been married to Jo, then, for just three weeks. And when that wail of terror ripped through the rain, Jo put a trembling hand on her husband's arm and gasped out, thickly: "Peter! What was that?"

So Peter braked the car to a stop.

It was a lonely road, a winding black trail of patched macadam in the heavily wooded mountain region of northern New England. Midnight had gone half an hour ago. Since the slumbering town of Courtney had slipped past, some eight miles back, the machine's headlights hadn't picked out a single sign of human habitation.

Now there was a light winking in the murk, through a fringe of windbent trees, and the light was screaming.

At least, something or someone in the rambling farmhouse there was screaming, and the voice was bellowing like a mad thing through the rain and the dark. And Jo was saying again, in a frightened whisper: "Peter, what is it? Someone is in trouble!"

Peter Smith looked into his wife's face and saw that she was scared. He himself had no yen to go ploughing out into the rain, or to investigate queer things that didn't concern him in the least.

But something about that ghastly voice in the night was terrifying. Something abnormal hung in it. The voice seemed to be laughing and shrieking at the same time, and the laughter was blood-curdling.

"You sit tight," Peter said. "I'll go see what's wrong."

He got out of the car and slopped through the dark. The shrieking had stopped then. It began again while he was striding up the boardwalk to the veranda. When he got that far, he stopped and looked behind him, wondering if he were doing an unwise thing in leaving Jo alone in the car. If something really were wrong here....

But the yammering voice lured him forward. He thumped on the veranda steps and knocked on the half-open door. The sound of his big knuckles against wet door-panels was gulped by a peal of unholy laughter which came yowling from the house. Laughter? Peter wasn't sure of that. Whatever the ghastly sound was, it had passed beyond the bounds of sanity.

And a woman was making it.

Peter Smith sucked damp air into his big chest and went over the threshold, went slowly down the narrow corridor that yellowed away before him. He got to an open doorway and stopped there, and stared into an old-fashioned living-room.

His legs hardened under him. His mouth jerked open and his teeth dug into his twisted lower lip. He said aloud, "My God!"—but the words were lost in a new crescendo of mad laughter from the gargoyle face of the woman who sat there before him.

SHE was a young woman, not as young as Jo, perhaps, but not over thirty either. That is, her body was young. Her face was something out of a wax museum, pale and dirty and horrible, with a gluey mass of black hair twisting down one side of it.

She had enormous eyes that looked at Peter Smith and bored through him, and her discolored lips were curled out of shape from screaming. But she wasn't screaming now. She was laughing. There are many kinds of laughter.

The woman sat on an old hair sofa with her arms wrapped around her knees and her head lolling grotesquely with every lurching movement of her shoulders. She sat and laughed. The room was full of the wail of her voice, and Peter Smith cringed from the din. Then he heard something else—a door opening to one side. He jerked around and uttered a guttural scream of his own. Of horror.

The door creaked back against withered wallpaper, and over the threshold twisted a thing that looked like a crippled dog. Peter's brain registered the word "dog" before jerking to the truth. The crawling thing was human.

The woman stared at it and went off on another frightful splurge of insane mirth. The man wriggled into the room and stopped, and looked at Peter.

Peter wanted suddenly to shriek and run. His numbed legs wouldn't let him.

The woman stopped laughing and screamed luridly: "Look at him! Take a good look at him, mister! That's Bert Crandall—that's my husband—that's the man I married—look at him! I told him not to go out of this house tonight! I warned him. Now look at him! He's twisted like the others!"

The woman was mad. Any woman would have gone mad, seeing her husband like that. Peter Smith, who was a stranger and had no personal interest in the man, felt things cracking in his own brain and had to hang onto himself, had to smother his terror under the frantic thought that this thing was not real. It couldn't be real!

The man on the floor was twisted horribly, his back humped, his head curled under one lumpy shoulder. He crawled sluggishly on one knee, one ankle, the flat of his hands. His eyes were lumps of pale glass gaping piteously at the mad woman who was his wife. His face was the sagging putty

mask of an idiot. No coordination of muscles. No control.

Maybe he'd been good-looking once. Maybe he'd been straight and strong and normal. Not now.

"Someone ought to kill him," Peter kept thinking.

The house was cold, damp, and Peter shuddered. The twisted man had stopped crawling; he swayed there with the upper half of his body propped on stiff arms, his head lurching, a wet lump of tongue slobbering in his mouth. He made animal sounds, and then there was another sound out in the corridor. Jo—calling Peter's name.

Peter didn't want her to see. Once you saw that frightful thing you might never forget it. He jerked around, pawing the side of the door frame.

But Jo was already beside him, entering.

The mad woman was staring, too. She pushed herself off the sofa and twisted forward, glaring. Glaring savagely, as if blaming Jo for what had happened to the pitiful creature on the floor. Jo stood transfixed.

The woman pushed Peter aside and put a clawing hand on Jo's arm. Her eyes glittered in sunken shadow-pits of madness. "Who are you? What'd you come here for?" she snarled.

Jo, pale and afraid, stood there rigid, with one arm caught in the fierce grip of the woman's fingers. Those fingers were powerful; they dug deep into Jo's smooth skin and made white blotches. But Jo couldn't answer. Her lips twitched, tried to make words, but no words were audible.

"Klinger sent you!" the mad woman shrieked. "Klinger sent you here to spy on me, to see what his filthy curse did to my man! I'll kill you, same as I'll kill him if I ever get my hands on him! Sure as my name's Nora Crandall—"

SHE hurled herself at Jo and stabbed both hands up to get hold of Jo's gaping eyes. Peter Smith intervened just in time. The mad woman would have torn the tongue out of Jo's screaming mouth.

Peter's flailing arm caught the woman across the throat and slammed her in a shrieking heap to the floor. "Run!" he bellowed at Jo. "For God's sake get out of here!"



He pushed her and stood swaying on wide-spread legs in the doorway, facing Nora Crandall. The mad woman scrambled to her feet, snarled toward him and jerked back again, retching, when the flat of his hand caught her across the face.

She didn't charge again. She stood gasping, her chest heaving enormously under the drenched cotton of her dress. Her eyes narrowed and drank in a long look at Peter's face, cataloging that face for the future.

"I'll kill you," she gritted. "I'll kill both of you—and Klinger, too, even if it takes me years. You turned my man into one of the twisted ones, and you'll pay for it!"

She didn't scream those words. They were uttered with a cold-blooded deliberation that burned its way into Peter's soul and seared his brain. He backed away slowly. Jo was calling to him, pleading with him to hurry. He pushed the door shut and went staggering down the hall toward her.

A peal of mad laughter pursued him into the night.

When he got into the car his face was drenched with sweat and his hands were slimy on the wheel. Jo, huddled beside him, was sobbing wretchedly.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### ***A Message***

THE village of Greendon was Jo's birthplace. Born here, she had lived with an old maid aunt after the death of her parents. Had attended Greendon's rural schools, gone to Durham to college, gone from there to Boston to become secretary to a Beacon Street physician. Met Peter and married him.

"Some day, Peter, if you go for the idea, we'll buy a summer home back in Greendon."

"Think so, sweet?"

"You'll love it there!"

Her desires were Peter's Bible. "Sure thing, Jo. We'll do it."

Jo had written letters one to her aunt, another to Josiah Deemer who owned and ran the Greendon Inn, another to young Russell Polk, Greendon lawyer. A reply from Polk was in her

chamois handbag now. Could she come to Greendon right away? If so, there might be a possibility of buying the Klinger estate at a ludicrously low price. Mr. Klinger had expressed a desire to sell....

Peter remembered the letter as he braked the machine in front of the Greendon Inn. *Klinger* had expressed a desire to sell! And in that house of the twisted thing two miles behind them, a mad woman had shrieked: "Klinger sent you here to see what his filthy curse did to my man!"

He helped his wife out of the car and dragged luggage out after her. The hour was late now; one-thirty at least. Back in Portland Jo had said: "We'll get to Greendon too late to go to Aunt Mary's. But Mr. Deemer will have room for us at the inn."

Deemer, he thought, would probably be in bed. He slung a bag under each arm and climbed the steps slowly. You couldn't see much in the dark but the inn had a long veranda, had half a dozen crazy roof-angles from which rain-water dribbled in a hollow dirge.

Jo pulled the agate bell-knob, put a hand on Peter's arm. "That woman, Peter. If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget." As if in answer, the jingle of the old-fashioned bell came like mocking laughter from within the building. Peter was silent, thinking of the name Klinger.

"He's a recluse, sort of," Jo had said. "A retired professor. Lives alone in that lovely house."

The door creaked, swung open. Peter peered into a weak-lipped face under whitish hair. A pleasant enough face, twisted now into a frown which indicated bewilderment at the arrival of guests at such an hour.

DEEMER blinked near-sighted eyes. "Well, for heaven's sake, it's Miss Jo!"

"Mrs. Peter Smith now, Josiah. This is my husband."

Deemer stuck out his bony hand and hung onto Peter's big fist. He grinned, kept on grinning while Jo and Peter followed him inside, into a kitchen where a lamp glowed warmly on a table cluttered with newspapers. A thin, parchment-faced man stood up jerkily and did some staring.

"I reckon you remember Tom Unwin, the postmaster," Deemer said.

"Why, of course I do!"

"Funny thing, We were just talkin' about you, Jo. Lawyer Polk was tellin' us you were aimin' to buy up some property. He acted mighty pleased to think you'd be comin' back, and I reckon that's natural enough, ain't it, him havin' been so sweet on you all these years? Uh-huh!"

Peter stiffened a little. Jo flushed. Tom Unwin said, "I'll be gettin' on home, I reckon," and walked to the door—a small, stiff man, perhaps fifty years of age.

Peter took a long look at Josiah Deemer and felt uneasy. There was something about Deemer. Something queer, distasteful. His long white hair, perhaps, or the continuous twitching of his bony hands. Those hands kept pawing at Jo's arms as if seeking to clutch warm flesh.

Jo was saying: "There's a house up the road about two miles, Josiah. A small farmhouse, set back behind some trees. The woman's name is Nora. Nora Crandall." She shuddered, as if hearing that name again from the shrieking lips of the woman herself. "Do you know those people?"

He blinked his near-sighted eyes. "Nora and Bert Crandall? Sure! Bert was over here tonight, talkin' to Lawyer Polk about buyin' the Klinger place."

Jo didn't get that. It didn't register. "Something terrible—at that house," she said queerly. "A doctor should be sent there."

"Huh? What for?"

"I'll tell you what for!" Peter said grimly. "Nora Crandall is insane and her husband is ill. He's"—he used the mad woman's words without realizing it—"one of the twisted men, if that means anything to you!"

It meant much. Josiah Deemer stiffened convulsively and put a trembling hand out to clutch at the table. A slow, creeping wave of terror undulated through him, forcing his eyes from their sockets. "One of the twisted men!" he croaked. "Oh, my God, no! Not Bert Crandal! Not another!"

"Easy now. Easy." Peter put an arm around him and helped him to a chair. Jo went to the big iron sink and brought water, and made Deemer drink. The man sat with his head forward, long arms dangling. He was breathing dangerously hard for one no longer young.

"Klinger's doin' it. He said he'd do it, when they ran him out of town. Said he'd be back—"

"What is this about Klinger?" Jo demanded.

"It's him turnin' Greendon into a village of death. Crandall's the third—the third of the twisted men—"

"What are you talking about?"

He jerked his head up and blinked into Jo's stare. "It begun when they ran Endren Klinger out of town," he mumbled. "Some of the women folk was complainin' about him sneakin' out of his house late o' nights and prowlin' around the village starin' at people and scarin' 'em. They claimed he was part crazy. So the men folk ordered him to leave—and he left—swearing he'd return to get even.

"Three weeks to a month ago, that was. Last week Cap'n Whaley died, all twisted and broken an'—an' mad. Doctor Glending done all that was possible, but it wasn't no kind of disease Glending ever seen before. Then Moley Anderson was took, and he left a wife and two grown-up daughters, and they near went crazy along with him. Now Bert Crandall—" Deemer pushed the heel of one hand against his eyes and rubbed tears out of them. "I better go for Doctor Glending. Maybe this time he'll be able to do somethin'. You two can take a room upstairs."

Peter and Jo stared hard while the old man hunched himself erect and scuffed to the door. Jo said: "We'll go upstairs, Peter." Her voice was low; her hand on Peter's arm was cold as a lump of ice.

He scooped up the luggage and trailed her along a musty corridor up a flight of uncarpeted stairs that creaked under his weight. His first impression of this house had been correct; the building was a farmhouse made over, huge and rambling, built to no standard pattern. "Gloomy joint," he muttered.

"Yes, it is," Jo said, "but—"

She stopped with a jerk. A shut door loomed in shadows beside her, and from beyond it came a voice, a shrill voice, thin as a child's. "Josiah! You, Josiah! Is that you?"

Peter scowled in bewilderment as the door opened, spilling yellow light into the hall. He stared at the young fellow who stood there. Stared at a thin sallow face, a mop of untrimmed hair above eyes none too intelligent.

"Oh," the fellow said. "I thought you was Josiah."

Jo smiled "You remember me, Dommy? I'm Josephine Lawlor. Remember?"

The young fellow gaped, astonished. "Jo! Why, Jo Lawlor!"

Jo introduced Peter. "This is Dommy Laughton, Peter. He and I grew up together in this town." And Peter nodded, frowning.

Later Peter said: "Dommy Laughton, eh? Who is he?"

"He's Josiah's orphaned nephew." Jo had reached the end of the hall, opened a door, now, and stood on the threshold, sniffing. "This is one of Josiah's best rooms. It's kind of musty, but with the windows opened . . ."

Peter closed the door behind him.

It was a small room, but it had a couple of chairs and a bed, and would do for the night. Tomorrow night they'd be at the home of Jo's Aunt Mary. Peter was glad of that.

While Jo was undressing he went to a window and stared out into drooling darkness. There wasn't much you could like about Jo's home town on a night like this. Well, he needed sleep. Maybe in the morning—

Outside, someone was screaming.

It came like that, came suddenly, without warning, grinding into Peter's morbid thoughts and jerking him back as he started sluggishly away from the window. Someone was screaming. The sound belched up from the street in front of the inn and knifed through rain and darkness and pulled Peter's eyes forward in their sockets.

Jo cried thickly: "What is it, Peter?" Jo was naked except for the bottom half of a pair of pajamas, and she ran around the bed in her bare feet and pounded to the window. Peter put an arm around her.

It was dark down there and something was moving. Something was running toward the hotel, screaming and shouting incoherently. Jo said: "It's Josiah!"

"You stay here," Peter growled. "Get some clothes on!" Then he went ploughing to the door.

He raced past Dommy Laughton's room and went down the stairs two at a time. It was dark there, and he cursed the darkness as he blundered through it. When he got near the front door the door quivered open and a screeching shape staggered out.

Peter got both hands on the man's shoulders and stopped him, straight-armed him against the wall. Enough light blurred through the open door to lessen the murk in the corridor and reveal

Deemer's face, convulsed with terror and shiny wet with rain. The eyes were enormous, and the gaping mouth struggled horribly to empty itself of sound.

"What's the matter?" Peter bellowed. "What happened?"

Deemer spewed terror-noises that weren't words, didn't make sense. But the name Unwin was among them, and Peter remembered that a man by that name had been in the kitchen of the inn when he and Jo had first arrived.

"Out there!" Deemer wailed. "Out there in the street! He's all twisted and—"

Peter didn't get the rest. His pounding feet made thunder to the doorway and he charged down the veranda steps. Gulping cold, damp air into his lungs, he rushed into the street, ploughed through the misty yellow glow under a street lamp and went past looming shadow-shapes that were stores, and saw something crawling.

Crawling . . .

IT was dark here, and the shape was a human thing wriggling sluggishly along the ground. Moaning. Moaning horribly. And crawling in agony toward the hotel.

Dark, but not so dark that Peter's horrified eyes missed any of the ghastly details. Not so dark that those twisted arms and legs, that contorted body, were hidden from his gaping eyes. Swaying on stiff legs, he stared and then jerked forward slowly, fighting a frantic desire to turn and run. And the thing kept crawling, without seeing him.

Tom Unwin. A little while ago the man had been sitting in the kitchen of the inn. Normal then. Now he was like the husband of that mad woman in the farmhouse. Now he was one of the twisted ones.

Peter hunched over him and hooked both arms under him and picked him up. It took courage to do that. This hellish disease might be contagious.

Peter picked him up and carried him and went stumbling back to the veranda where Josiah Deemer stood staring in abject terror. Peter lurched up the steps and went past Deemer and lugged that moaning, twisted shape inside. Deemer blundered after him.

Terror was a vile, monstrous, devouring parasite in Deemer's brain, glazing his eyes and pushing uncouth sounds out of his wet mouth.

Jo, coming downstairs, looked at the thing in Peter's arms and tried to stifle a shriek. Peter carried that twisted thing into the kitchen and lowered it onto a couch. "Damn you, Deemer, snap out of it! Go for a doctor!"

"I sent the doctor out to Bert Crandall's house," Deemer blubbered. "He'll be gone there now, I was comin' back from his place when I seen Tom in the street crawlin' . . ." The words trailed off "It won't do no good to get the doctor. He couldn't help the others. Tom's the fourth now..."

Peter groaned. God, what could you do? It was wrong to stand there staring while a human being writhed in such fearsome agony, but what could you do? No medicine could straighten those crooked limbs or make that brain normal again. The merciful thing would be a bullet.

Jo did things. Got water and towels and bathed the man's face, wiping away blood and dirt. Peter sat down and looked at the floor and raised his head after a long while to say dully: "How did it happen, Deemer?"

"I don't know. I was comin' back from the doctor's place and I seen him crawlin' in the street."

"That's all you know?"

"I know who's responsible for it! Klinger!"

"Peter, come here," Jo said from the couch. "I think he—I think it's all over. He's not breathing."

A little while later, Jo and Peter went silently upstairs again, and the thing in the kitchen lay with a blanket pulled over it. Jo's face was white and drawn; her eyes burned too brightly in sunken sockets.

Rain drummed hollowly on a creaking roof, and there were other night-noises accompanied by the wheeze of Peter's labored breathing. The door of Dommy Laughton's room was closed; the door of their own room hung ajar, and Jo had left a light burning. Something white gleamed on the threshold.

Jo picked it up, frowning. It was an oblong of paper with words on it. She handed it to Peter and he held it in a big, stiff hand that twitched a little. The penciled words said:

*The twisted ones are now four in number. If you are fools enough to buy the Klinger estate, two more will join the brotherhood of broken men! Leave here before it is too late! It is death to defy Endren Klinger!*

Peter read the words and made growling sounds in his throat and crumpled the paper savagely. A mistake, that note. Jo, knowing Peter as only a wife can know her husband, could have told the writer that her man was the kind who could be coaxed but not commanded.

Peter narrowed his eyes ominously and glared at his wife. "So we're to be added to the list, are we? We're being ordered out of here. All right, pal, we'll stay. And tomorrow we'll get a look at this Klinger place, and maybe we'll buy it. Maybe we'll even do that!"

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### ***The Thing in the Box***

MR. RUSSELL POLK, the lawyer, said in his purring voice: "And this is the house itself."

The rain of last night had let up an hour ago. Sunlight was struggling to eat through a sky filled with sluggish low-hanging clouds. In that murky light, half mist and half sun, the home of Endren Klinger seemed strangely dark and aloof and repelling. It looked, Peter thought, like some kind of asylum.

He and Jo had left the inn without waiting for Deemer to get breakfast. The man had been in no condition to get breakfast anyway, after a sleepless night of terror. Peter and Jo had gone to Polk's house. And now, three miles out of town on the old back road that twisted through the valley, Polk was fumbling with keys and opening the front door of the abandoned Klinger place, and was standing aside with that waxen smile on his face.

Peter, eyeing him critically, wondered how Jo could ever have been a close friend of the man. Jo had been. "Yes," she had admitted, when Peter had spoken to her about the tactless outburst of Josiah Deemer, "he—he wanted to marry me."

Maybe Polk hadn't grown that waxen smile then. It hung on the man's face like something smeared on the face of a subway poster, ugly and artificial. Other than that, Polk would probably be considered good-looking. But the smile worked on Peter's nerves.

Or perhaps it was the atmosphere of this gloomy house, where rain-swelled timbers creaked to every footstep, and great hulks of furniture devoured all the space in low-ceilinged rooms.

"A remarkable house in some ways," Polk was saying. "Klinger admired antiques. These carpets, you'll notice, are ancient Persians..."

"It gives me the creeps!" Jo said.

"But you do like the house itself?"

"Of course!"

Later, Peter signed papers and wrote out a check. And when that was done, Polk said quietly: "I imagine you're rather curious about the man who lived here."

Jo nodded.

"The story that is going the rounds," Polk shrugged, "is largely an exaggeration. Of course, Klinger was disliked because of his eccentricities, and the villagers did order him to leave Greendon. But he really left because of the treatment he was receiving. When he had stood all he could, he put his affairs into my hands and gave me full authority to sell this house and all in it, just as it stands.

"He named his price and promised to return at some later date to collect it. The villagers"—again that waxen smile came out of Polk's pale cheeks—"seem to think he has returned already, for evil reasons. That's nonsense, of course."

"Yes," Jo said. "That's nonsense—of course."

"You and your husband will live here?"

"We'll live here"—Jo's voice was strangely vibrant, stirring echoes in the shadowed corners of the room—"while we make arrangements to have the place renovated. Yes."

The waxen smile was still on Polk's face when he left.

Peter stretched himself in a musty chair and peered around him, scowling. It would take a long while, he thought, to take the morgue-like atmosphere out of this place. All this hoary furniture would have to be heaved out; the

grotesque lighting fixtures would have to come down. A thousand and one things....

"Peter—"

"Yes, Jo?"

"You're not angry with me?"

His scowl vanished. "Angry? If the joint's okay with you, honey, it suits me."

They went from room to room, he and Jo, together. They explored musty closets, small, damp chambers which contained enormous collections of junk. Upstairs and down, even to attic and cellar. In one room Peter stood, hands on hips, before a portrait of Endren Klinger and peered critically into close-set eyes that seemed to stare back at him.

"Not a bad-looking cuss," he mused. "About sixty, maybe a bit more. Intelligent, sort of aloof, probably a man who never made friends easily."

"I wonder," Jo said queerly, "where he is now and what he's doing."

Peter glanced sharply at her, but the worried look went out of her face before he was even certain it had existed. "I'm going upstairs," Jo said, "and do what I can to make one of the bedrooms less cobwebby. Coming?"

He shook his head. When she had left him, he went through the kitchen and down a crooked flight of stairs to the cellar. It was dark down there. Something on four legs scurried across the concrete floor and made whispering sounds along the wall. Peter stood stiff, listening, then went forward again.

Someone—or something—was watching him. Watching every move he made. He felt it. "Nerves," he muttered.

But he knew better. His nerves had never gone back on him before. This was a tangible, unpleasant sensation that crept into him and festered in his brain. He wasn't afraid of it, exactly. It angered him.

HE stopped again and made fists of his big hands and glared around him, silently challenging the owner of those invisible, malignant eyes to step out of the gloom and make a fight of it. Rage pushed a snarl to his lips. But there was no movement in the shadows, no vaguest sound....

Sullenly alert, he paced into deeper darkness, past the looming hulk of a huge furnace, past the high wooden wall of a coal-bin. It

was a big cellar. Too big. And like the rooms in the house above, it was a weird world of twilight and unsavory silence. A morgue.

Those invisible eyes were still watching.

Twice he jerked around, positive that someone was dogging his steps. Then, grimly defiant, he struck matches and explored the gloomy recesses on both sides of him, and invaded storerooms choked with furniture.

Standing in the doorway of one storeroom, he held a sputtering match between thumb and forefinger and stared at a long, pinewood box that resembled a coffin. It wasn't a coffin; it was a packing-case, probably had held some of Klinger's antiques. But he went stiffly toward it, scowling, and dragged a couple of other boxes off the top of it, and stooped to lift the cover.

The match scorched the ball of his thumb and he dropped it, grumbling. Straightening, he fumbled for another and found one, and reached down to scratch it on the cover of the packing case that resembled a coffin.

Behind him in the doorway a low voice said softly: "It is death to touch that. Be careful!"

Peter Smith used a lot of time in turning. The muscles of his big body had stiffened; his heart was pounding and he was holding his breath. Like a stuffed dummy on a store-window turntable he swayed around, and straightened. And stared.

Because he was a man whose emotions worked slowly, he didn't cry out. He just stood there, both arms hooked in front of him. After a while he said grimly:

"Klinger!"

"Yes, I am Endren Klinger."

Peter put a twitching hand to his face and pawed the bulging muscles of his jaw. Like a drunken man gaping at something inconceivable, he was slow to believe in the reality of what he stared at. The doorway was dark. The intruder was a gaunt black shape standing in the murk.

Only the face was really visible. The face was dead. It belonged on a corpse.

Peter took a faltering step backward, stopped when his left foot made a hollow thumping sound against the packing-case. His hands were fists. He sucked breath through his teeth and not once did he shift his gaze from the cadaverous face in the doorway.

Not once did the eyes in that spectral death-mask cease studying him.

The man who stood there was Endren Klinger. There was no mistake about that. Death had caused those blackened cheeks to recede against a protruding framework of bone, and decay had eaten the flesh-pits in which those glowing eyes were imbedded. Death had made a thin, gaunt, skeletal shape of the dangling body under that black shroud. But the man was surely Endren Klinger. "So you've come back," Peter said slowly, pulling the words through a bloated thickness in his throat, "for revenge . . ."

There was no answer. He hadn't expected an answer. For that matter he wasn't conscious of the words that croaked from his own lips. He took a heavy step forward, and another. From out of the voluminous folds of the black robe a rotted, shrunken hand stabbed toward him.

"Stand where you are."

Peter's thick legs stiffened under him.

"Now hear what I have to say," Klinger commanded. "This house is mine, and I have returned to dwell in it. With you and your wife I have no quarrel, but you must leave here at once and forever. Do you understand?"

Dead lips, talking. But they were uttering words, and that was proof enough that they could feel the crushing impact of a clenched fist. "I'll see you in hell!" Peter Smith snarled.

HE lunged. The distance was not great, and he went in a headlong rush, shoulders hunched, legs driving. The thing in the doorway moved sideward with the gliding rapidity of a monstrous snake. Head down, Peter hurtled through the aperture, through the space where that macabre monster had loomed.

A grinding weight met the side of his head, hurled him sprawling. Agony roared through him, eating its way through skull and brain and burning down into his big chest. He crashed to the floor with both arms doubled under him, one knee hooked into the pit of his stomach.

Blood was gushing from his face.

Hot blood, burning as it ran into his eyes. And the spectral face above him was receding slowly into darkness, into a pulsing, screaming darkness that descended amid grinding thunder to engulf him....

He wondered, some time later, how long he had laid unconscious. It was hard to tell. Blood was still warm and wet on his face, and there was

a vast, throbbing ache that went on and on, relentlessly.

"Jo!" he mumbled. "Please—Jo—" But Jo would be upstairs in one of the bedrooms. She wouldn't know what had happened. He had to get on his feet and go up there and tell her. She mustn't stay in this house any longer. Not with Klinger come back from the dead....

She mustn't stay here. . . Strange, the pictures his warped brain dragged into being. There was Josiah Deemer talking in a shrill voice, about Russel Polk having once been sweet on Jo. And twisted men crawling, and a mad woman screeching curses. And an oblong box that looked like a coffin..

Jo mustn't stay here. It was dangerous.

He went upstairs and found her in one of the bedrooms. "We're getting out of here," he said. And she stared at him, her eyes wide with sudden terror.

"Peter! What's happened to you? There's blood—!"

"Tell you later. We haven't time now. Come!"

When she saw the grim, hard scowl on his face she did not protest. Together they walked out of the room and down the hall to the head of the stairs, Peter striding stiff and straight, Jo stumbling a little, clinging to her husband's arm.

Man and woman, abandoning their home because a macabre monster from the grave had threatened them with annihilation. But there was nothing ignoble in that exodus. Peter's head was high, his eyes smoldering. When he had removed his wife to a place of safety he would come back.

He opened the door. In the driveway a dust-covered sedan was disgorging muttering men, and the men were tramping toward the veranda steps. Josiah Deemer led the procession. Behind him came Russel Polk, the lawyer who had once wanted Jo's hand in marriage.

Peter stood scowling.

"What are they coming here for?" Jo said in bewilderment. And then the muttering men ascended the steps and pushed forward, and Josiah Deemer said in a shrill, nervous voice: "We've found out something, Mr. Smith! We've discovered the truth about Endren Klinger!"

Peter's hand went out and gripped Jo's arm. He peered into the grim determined faces before him.

"So have I," he said in a voice that barely crept beyond his curled lips. "Come in—and we'll talk."

It was a strange gathering. Men sat in ugly overstuffed chairs and peered uneasily about them, fearing the shadows that hung beyond the ochre glow of dusty lamps. Men stared at Jo, because a woman in that grim gathering seemed out of place.

"THIS is Furstin Adams," Josiah Deemer said. "He runs the Adams Huntin' Camps over to Moon Lake."

Peter gazed with narrowed eyes at the man indicated by Deemer's jerking thumb. A small man, garbed in woodsman's breeches, hunting boots, a man with furtive, restless eyes that roamed like frightened beetles in their sockets. Adams was afraid of something.

"You tell Smith what you told us," Russel Polk said.

Adams wriggled in his chair. "Well, it goes back a couple of months. Back to a day when Endren Klinger wrote me and four other men to come here to this house and talk with him about something. I'm the only one of that group still living. The others are all—dead."

"The twisted ones," Deemer muttered. "Crandall and Unwin and the others."

"Klinger got us here that night and he says: 'Gentlemen, as you know, I am a retired professor of physics and I have lived here alone with my studies for a good many years. During that time,' he says, 'I have worked on a formula for poison-gas control which will revolutionize all current theories of war defense. My invention is worth money. But,' he says, 'I need money to perfect it before I can bargain with the government.' "

Adams put out a thick, coated tongue and lapped at his lips. "Well, Klinger had it all worked out. If we was interested in making a good-size fortune for ourselves, we had to each give him a thousand dollars. In return he'd give us each a copy of this formula of his which was a long mess of figures that used up 'most ten typewritten pages.

"We was each to get a copy, and the copies would be all alike. Mind you, the stuff he gave us wasn't complete. He himself was the only man in possession of the whole formula. But he done it that way so none of us could go ahead and cheat the others, or cheat him. On the other hand, he

wouldn't be able to cheat us, because if he tried it, we'd be in possession of enough of his data to ruin him.

"Well, he left us alone in this room and we talked it over, and we figured it was a pretty fair investment."

"And"—Josiah Deemer was leaning forward, peering into Adams' face—"you gave him the money?"

"Yes, we done that. And then the people of Greendon got down on Klinger and run him out of town. And then"—Adams made a rattling noise with his teeth—"the five men who gave Klinger that money begun to die off, one by one. . . ."

No one answered. Peter glanced at his wife and curled his lips in a hard scowl. Russell Polk put a cigarette to his mouth and scratched a match on the uplifted sole of his shoe. The crackling of the match was sudden thunder in the room's strained silence.

"So you're the last of the five," Peter said grimly, peering at Adams "and you're afraid."

"Of course I'm afraid! Who wouldn't be?"

"And you believe that Klinger, after bargaining for the money he needed, deliberately murdered four men to get back the papers he gave for security?"

"That's what I believe," Adams mumbled.

"Then why did you come here and tell me?" demanded Peter Smith. "We didn't come to tell you," Polk said quietly. "We came to find Klinger. It stands to reason that if the man returned to carry out his murder-campaign, he is hiding here somewhere in this house which he built himself."

"And you want to search the place?"

"We do."

Peter pushed himself up. "It's a big house. A man could easily hide himself here." He could have said more. Could have told them that this house of evil was the hiding-place of the man they sought. But that would have called for detailed explanations, and there were things that could not rationally be explained away.

The men of Greendon, muttering among themselves, were already moving from the room. Russell Polk led the search, and a look of fear was smeared now on Polk's face. These men were afraid. They feared the thing they were seeking.

They went plodding through musty rooms and gloomy corridors, upstairs first, then through the labyrinth of chambers on the lower level, grimly probing every shadowed retreat, every possible place of concealment. Then the cellar. The cellar where a corpse-faced creature, walking in decay, had clubbed Peter Smith unconscious.

"There's a storeroom here," Peter said, "with a box in it."

This time he would open that box and learn the truth.

They trailed him to the storeroom, Polk scowling unpleasantly because the leadership of the party had fallen suddenly on Peter Smith's shoulders.

Already the gloom of the cellar had worked on the men's nerves. Josiah Deemer was peering fearfully into murky corners. Furstin Adams, who perhaps had more reason to be afraid than did any of the others, kept dabbing a drenched handkerchief at his wet face.

Peter, scowling with memories of what had happened here, strode ahead of the group and stood beside the pinewood box that so resembled a coffin. Jo came to his side, frowning, Furstin Adams, terrified, moved back to the doorway.

"There's something in this box," Peter muttered. "Something that Klinger doesn't want us to find." His big hand, reaching down, was stiff and white in the gleam of a searchlight held by Deemer. His fingers fastened on the lid.

The lid was nailed down. Peter braced a foot against the box and used both hands, pulled steadily. Nails groaned in the fibrous wood. The cover cracked back.

PETER gaped with horror-filled eyes and stepped back, slowly, against the men who crowded forward. Deemer screamed. Jo screamed, too, and bottled the sound in her throat before it could pursue the echoes of Deemer's shrill outburst through the cellar.

The thing in the pinewood box was dead. It had been dead for days, perhaps weeks. A strangling odor of decay rose from it like swamp-mist, gagging the men who stared.

Angular features, rotted and disintegrating, leered horribly in the glow of Deemer's searchlight. A cavernous maw of mouth was grinning. In those staring, eyeless sockets alien white things were crawling and feeding.



Yet the features were recognizable. The dead thing in the box was Endren Klinger!

Belief in the supernatural comes hard to some men. It sledged its way remorselessly into Peter's sluggish brain and gnawed there, eating deeper, battering down his resistance. He stood swaying, his big hands opening and closing convulsively.

Endren Klinger, *here*? No! This rotted horror in the box must be the corpse of someone else. It *couldn't* be Klinger! But—

He stopped thinking. Down through floors and ceiling in the house above shrilled a mad clamor that wailed eerily into the death chamber. Up there someone was shrieking in terror and torment. The men of Greendon stopped muttering among themselves, stiffened and stood listening. One of them cried hoarsely: "My God, what's that?"

"It must be Adams!" Jo said fearfully. "He's not here with us!"

Peter was first to make thunder on the cellar stairs. The others followed, leaving behind the pinewood box and its grisly occupant. Bellowing Adams' name, Peter fumed through the kitchen, along the dim corridor to the front of the house. Headlong he charged into the living-room, and stopped.

Furstin Adams was no longer screaming.

Adams would never scream again. He lay across the legs of an antique table, his arms twined around the table-legs, his body humped and contorted and horrible.

An expression of intense agony still lingered on the man's frozen face. But he was not in agony now. He never would be again.

The curse had caught him. "He came up here alone," Peter mumbled, pacing forward. "He was afraid of what we might find when we opened the box...." And it was as though giant hands had seized Adams' body and crushed it, bent it out of shape.

Jo clung to Peter's arm and the men of Greendon pushed forward to stare. Terrified, all of them.

"But who did it?" Deemer whimpered. "Who could have done it? Klinger is dead...."

Peter shook his head. "Klinger's not dead."

They gaped at him. Was he going mad now?

"Klinger's not dead!" Peter roared. "I know what I'm saying. That thing down there has the power to come prowling out of its coffin! It's horribly alive!"

The men of Greendon shrank from him, and Jo's eyes widened with amazement. But he stood there, fists clenched at his sides, and defied them. "The corpse of Endren Klinger is not dead!"

They were afraid of him then. Even Jo moved away, trembling. Jo said, "No, dear God, no!" and Peter growled his defiance. Somehow Jo found courage enough to come forward and put a hand on his arm. "Peter, dear, you mustn't—"

That was a mistake. Had she stood with him in his sullen rage, she might later have soothed him into submission, led him out of this house where danger lurked. But to plead with him and show that she too was afraid—that was wrong.

"Get out!" he roared. "This is my house and I'm ordering you out of it, the whole damned muttering lot of you! Take Furstin Adams with you and take my wife back to the village where she'll be safe. I'm staying here!"

"No, Peter. I won't go!"

He glared at her. The first time in his life he had ever done that, or ever became angry with her. "You'll go if I have to throw you out!" he snarled.

And Jo went with the others. Sobbing wretchedly, not knowing what best to do, she let them lead her over the threshold. Peter stood in the hall, cursing them as the door thudded shut.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### ***Liquid Death***

HIS rage was a long time subsiding, and then, realizing what he had done, he was bewildered. Why had he been so angry?

He sat in the living-room and stared around him. Funny, how much emptier the place seemed with Jo gone. Why had he lost his temper?

But there was something he had to do now, something he *must* do in order to prove to the others, and to himself, that he was not mad. The thing downstairs in the coffin....

He paced slowly down the hall. Rain was whispering again at shut windows, pounding a

dirge on the roof. The house itself was strangely still. Too still. The shadows were deeper.

Vaguely afraid, he descended in the cellar and entered the storeroom where the corpse of Endren Klinger lay rotting. Josiah Deemer's searchlight lay there on the floor where Deemer had dropped it. Peter scooped it up. And the corpse still lay in its coffin, with white, wriggling things feeding in blackened flesh.

He looked down on it. "It's still here. It has been dead a long time, and yet I saw it walking and heard the sound of its voice." Thoughts like that, gnawing at a man's brain, can devour his reason. And those thoughts spawned others.

"Before I search the house I'll make sure he stays here. I'll nail the coffin shut again!"

Later he went back upstairs, muttering: "They think I'm mad, but by God, I'll show them! I'll *make* them believe!"

Rain drummed against shut windows as he went wandering through musty chambers which had already been explored by the men of Greendon. Damp timbers creaked underfoot, mocking him, and he was a strange, stiff figure, sometimes silent, sometimes mumbling to himself, always staring with dark, smoldering eyes in which anger still burned.

Downstairs the front door groaned open, swung shut with a reverberating thud. Peter stood stiff, listening.

Someone had come into the house. Someone down there was walking with quick, nervous steps along the corridor. Then: "Peter, where are you?" And it was Jo's voice, laden with anxiety. Jo had returned!

Peter strode over to the bedroom threshold and along the hall to the head of the stairs. Jo's voice came again, shrilly, calling his name—and suddenly the voice was strangled in a scream of terror that shrilled wildly up the stair-well. Peter again heard sounds of conflict!

He went stumbling forward, both arms pushed out ahead of him. The sounds ceased before he got to the stairhead. He blundered down, bellowing Jo's name, went off balance and caught himself, lurched blindly along the lower hall.

Jo wasn't there. Nothing was there.

He stood swaying, pawing the wall. "Jo! Oh God, Jo!" No answer to that. Nothing but the rattling sob of his own breathing and the mutter of

the rain. And an empty corridor where Jo had screamed and fought and been dragged away.

She had come back, seeking him, and that death faced monster of darkness had been lying in wait to seize her. Now she was gone!

Peter blundered forward. Life had seeped out of his body, left him a stumbling, half-animate clod without a brain. He couldn't think now. His skull was full of a single annihilating thought, and the thought numbed him. Jo....

He went through the labyrinth of rooms, sobbing her name, peering hopelessly into shadows. When he came at last to the dark stairs leading down into the cellar he might not have descended, might have turned and lumbered back to the front of the house if the cellar's gloom had not vomited forth a wailing cry of anguish that jerked him forward.

He lurched down the stairs and stood swaying at the bottom. The scream came again, from the end of the cellar where that nailed coffin lay in a musty storeroom. He went toward it. No searchlight now. Nothing to show him the way. Only Jo's voice, moaning, and another voice snarling unintelligible words.

The storeroom door was closed. He thudded against it, got his hands on the knob and strove in vain to wrench the barrier open. Locked. "Jo! The door's locked!" He hurled himself against it, and when he fell back, gasping for breath, the sounds from within had ceased. There was another sound in the murk behind him. A whisper of stalking feet.

He lurched around, jammed his back hard against the door as the darkness rushed toward him. No, it wasn't darkness, it was something black and horrible *in* the dark. Something with a rotted, cadaverous face and twisted hands, and the hands were curled around a bludgeon, and the bludgeon was whining down through space.

Peter had no time even to push his arms under the blow. The weapon crashed with the force of a swung sledge. He groaned, and the groan went with him, gutturally, into a world of darkness....

"SO you won't tell. You'd rather die and take your secret to the grave." Funny how thin and shrill that voice was. How like a knife reaching into the core of his twisted soul. "Very well, I'll force you to tell!"

The voice came through crowding darkness, and the darkness itself was sluggishly breaking

apart, thinning to a dull gray mist of pain. Through it came shafts of yellow lantern light.

"I warn you, you'll talk before I'm finished. There are ways of making a woman talk!"

"But I don't know! How can I tell you what I don't *know*?"

The voices echoed in his brain, as though riding the shafts of ochre light that burned against his eyes. Something had happened a little while ago. A descending bludgeon....

The agony-mist cleared slowly and Peter Smith groaned, opened his bloodshot eyes. This was the storeroom, and he lay with his shoulders jammed against the coffin which had contained Klinger's corpse. The door was closed and a dangling lantern glowed against the opposite wall. And the corpse wasn't in the coffin. It stood there, dark and evil and hideous, near the door. Endren Klinger, risen from the dead...

Peter turned his head toward the voices. It hurt him to move, hurt him even to hunch himself higher against the box. Blood was hot against his swollen lips. But he stared.

A woman stood there against the wall, in the glare of the lantern. Peter Smith's wife, bound in a tangle of ropes, her face white and rigid. Only in the eyes was there life left. The eyes stared—not at Peter, but at a creature who crouched there before her.

"Think, my dear," the creature was saying. "For the sake of a few filthy dollars you are condemning yourself and your husband to death. You are a fool!"

Jo shook her head. "No, no! I don't *know* where Klinger's papers are!"

"But I am sure you do. That's why you bought Klinger's house—returned to Greendon." The voice had purring qualities now, as if striving to drug her terrified brain. "Listen to me. With the help of my noble assistant I have slain six men—Klinger and his five associates. I have been put to a great deal of trouble. It was necessary, first of all, to turn the people of Greendon against Klinger, so that they would order him out of town—so that he, in turn, would become violently angry and threaten them. Then it was necessary to destroy him, and to do it in such a manner that the people of Greendon would think he had quietly left town.

"All this trouble I have been through, in order to gain possession of Klinger's formula and to destroy those men with whom he partially shared

his secret, and to commit those murders in such a manner that Klinger would be blamed for them. You must realize, my dear, that your life and that of your husband mean very little to me after what I have already accomplished!"

Strange, how familiar that purring voice was! Peter, struggling to remember many things, knew that he had heard it before and tried hard to put a name to it. But this was no time to gnaw at details. Jo was in trouble!

Painfully he pushed himself higher and sucked breath into his aching chest. Strength was dribbling back into his battered body. If he could stand up....

"Be careful, Peter Smith! If you move too much, it means death!"

He jerked his head toward the threat. *That* voice was familiar, too. Once before it had snarled at him in this same dark room of madness. He glared into the cadaverous face of the corpse-creature who stood near the door, watching him. Klinger's corpse. And one of those rotted hands held a pistol. This monster was the other man's assistant....

Peter turned again to peer at the creature who stood near Jo. "So you see," the fellow was saying viciously, "I have destroyed many lives in order to acquire Klinger's secret. And I *have* acquired it, all except the part which Klinger himself retained. Those papers were hidden somewhere in this house when he met his death. I looked for them in vain.

"At first I thought that your interest in this house was a mere coincidence. I ordered my assistant to frighten you into leaving. But now I realize the truth. You know where the papers are!"

"Dear God," Jo moaned, "I tell you I know nothing about it!"

"I am convinced that you do." The gaze of those narrowed eyes fastened evilly on Jo's frozen features. "And I am giving you one last chance to talk, before I use *this*!"

A glass-bellied hypodermic needle darted toward Jo's stomach. Peter, staring with eyes that threatened to burst in their sockets, saw a white liquid lapping the inner walls of the tube.

"This, my dear, is what turned Greendon into a place of twisted men. My good assistant, Doctor Glending, invented it." The evil face swung slowly to leer at the monster near the door. "You see, when I planned this campaign of mine I went to Glending and demanded his help. And he gave it

to me because he feared to do otherwise. If I were to uncover his past, I could solve an ugly mystery for the police and send him to prison for life, for murder."

THERE was something druglike in that droning voice. Something vile that crept into Peter's brain and numbed him. He stared, could do nothing else. "The serum in this syringe, my dear, will take you to hell. If I give you enough of it, it will destroy you almost instantly, as it destroyed Furstin Adams. Now will you tell me what I want to know? Choose. Either tell me, or—"

"I don't *know*! My God, Dommy, I swear it!"

Dommy. The name stuck in Peter's brain, meant something. He had heard it before, at the Greendon Inn. Dommy. Dommy Laughton, Josiah Deemer's orphaned nephew!

And now Dommy's voice was shrill with menace. "So you refuse to talk. Very well, perhaps your tongue will loosen a little when you see your husband writhing in agony. We'll see."

He paced forward, and Peter Smith stared at him in sudden horror. The thing had not been real before. It had been some strange drama in which he, Peter Smith, had been only a bewildered spectator. Now the drama had spilled over into the audience and was hellishly personal.

The twisted men! He, Peter Smith, was to become one of them, was to shriek in agony as the serum in that glass ran through his veins.

"Get back!" he bellowed. "By God, you can't do it! You can't!"

The leering face of Dommy Laughton grew larger as it floated toward him. "Oh, yes, I can. If he moves, Glending, shoot him. Shoot to kill "

Terror fumed in Peter's big body, strangling him. This was the end. Dear God, it mustn't be! Jo was over there, staring with enormous eyes and moaning in a voice that welled from the depths of a soul torn with anguish. His Jo! What would become of her?

Dommy Laughton came closer. Near the door his assistant stood stiff, holding a gun that would belch death. Peter stared wildly from one to the other, from Dommy's twisted face to the death-mask of the man who under Dommy's direction had masqueraded as the resurrected corpse of Endren Klinger, so that the superstitious folk of Greendon, if they encountered him, would

still blame Klinger—or the thing which had been Klinger—for the horrors in their midst

Doctor Glending had entered into this thing unwillingly. Men had died in agony from the effects of the hellish serum he had created, but he had not wanted to create that serum. If Glending were faced now with the task of murdering a man, would he hesitate?

It was Peter Smith's only hope. He tensed himself. Hands flat on the floor, legs stiffened for a superhuman effort, he waited—and then hurled himself headlong at his advancing assailant.

GLENDING uttered a cry of dismay and jerked the gun higher, but fired a fraction of a second too late. The bullet missed its mark

Peter Smith stormed head-foremost into the creature before him. With all the strength in his big arms he lifted Dommy Laughton from the floor and hurled him, flung him straight at Glending's rigid body. The gun in Glending's fist roared again, and Dommy Laughton screamed. And then, snarling, Peter fell upon the cringing form of Dommy's assistant and dragged the man down.

It was no battle. On his knees, with Glending's writhing body beneath him, Peter leaned on corded arms and seized the doctor's throat. Rage had doubled the strength in his big hands, and the hands retained their grip until Glending's writhing body became still. They didn't kill. They could have, but didn't.

Suddenly, behind Peter, a woman was screaming.

He lurched sideward just in time, whirled and spun clear of the glass-bellied syringe that stabbed toward him. The hand holding the syringe was bloody; the retching face behind it was a mask of bubbling crimson. Glending's second bullet had done that. Aimed at Peter, the bullet had buried itself in Dommy Laughton's face. This murderous threat of the needle was a final effort to turn the tables.

It failed. Peter's fist crashed with sledge-hammer force, and Dommy collapsed, rolled over in a twisted hideous heap. The bullet had done its work.

"We're getting out of here, Jo." Peter said that twice and was mumbling it a third time as he released his wife. "Come on—we're leaving." He picked up the death-syringe as he led her to the door.

The death-syringe. The creator of twisted men....

AS I said before, I could have made this more personal. I could have given Peter Smith his right name and Jo hers. But some of you might start at me and—well, some of you might not try to understand.

But there are newspaper stories of those frightful days when Greendon was a place of twisted men. There are men in Greendon, today, who will tell you what they know. There are newspaper records of the trial and conviction and hanging of Doctor Paul Glending for a murder committed in 1907, to which he confessed.

The serum in that glass-bellied syringe was analyzed by a State expert, whose report went something like this:

*This serum seems to be one hitherto unknown. I would say that its basic content is a pathogenic virus capable of producing effects paralleling the symptoms of acute poliomyelitis. Glending, having entry, to several large hospitals may have obtained the basic ingredient for his serum from the spinal fluid of persons afflicted with acute and complicated forms of paralysis.*

*I am quite certain that this serum, if injected into the blood stream in even a minute quantity, would produce not only instantaneous imbecility, thus rendering the victim incapable of remembering what had happened to him, but would result also in rapid macromelus of the organs, malformation of the bones, and ultimate death. The speed of death would depend on the amount of virus injected.*

The same State expert, after assisting at an autopsy of Dommy Laughton's bullet-shattered corpse, reported, if I remember correctly:

*It is apparent that Laughton suffered from periodic mental incapacity, or ideophrenic insanity, caused perhaps by chronic melancholy....*

As for Klinger's secret, you may believe what you like. His house was searched; most of it was dismantled in the process. Perhaps there are papers hidden somewhere which, if combined with those for which Dommy Laughton committed murder, might be worth a vast amount of money. Perhaps and I think this more probable—those undiscovered formulae remained locked in Klinger's brain when he went to his death. I don't particularly care. Jo and Peter Smith have each other. . .

THE END



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