

DR. VARSAG'S EXPERIMENT

BY CRAIG ELLIS

**A striking cobra was slow motion in
comparison to the speed of Dexter Montrex.**

TODAY I went to the funeral of Dr. Arnold Varsag and Dexter Montrex. I watched their simple black coffins lowered into the grave and shovelfuls of earth thrown down over them. I stood there until the boxes had been completely buried, then I turned away. Yes, Dexter Montrex and Dr. Arnold Varsag are dead, and how they died makes one of the strangest stories I have ever heard.

It all started one evening when I was sitting alone in my study reading the proofs of my new book. The telephone rang and I went to answer it. It was Dr. Varsag speaking with a voice of unusual tenseness. "I want you to come over right away, Bert," he said. "It's extremely important."

I knew Varsag was excited about something, but he was usually in that state. But my proofs had to be in to the publisher within a week, and I told him so.

"Curse those proofs!" Varsag exclaimed. "This is something that will make all your inane books out of date!" His voice rose to a high pitch.

I was still reluctant to leave my work. "What's this all about?" I insisted. "You can't forever expect me to leave my work and come traipsing over to your place every time you get another one of your crazy notions."

Varsag's voice was a whisper. "All I can tell you is that it's about the Mongoose," he said. "You've got to come right over." And then he had hung up.

After that, and probably according to Varsag's expectations, it was impossible for me to continue with my own work. For weeks Varsag and Montrex had been talking about the Mongoose and all I had gleaned from their

whispered conversation was that another one of Varsag's amazing experiments was under way. And this one it seemed concerned a human life—and a Mongoose. Only one thing more I knew, and that at least partially explained the reason for secrecy. The Mongoose was an extremely dangerous animal in spite of its size, and it was illegal to import them or keep them anywhere in the country because they were so destructive to bird-life. I knew that Varsag had received his specimen illegally.

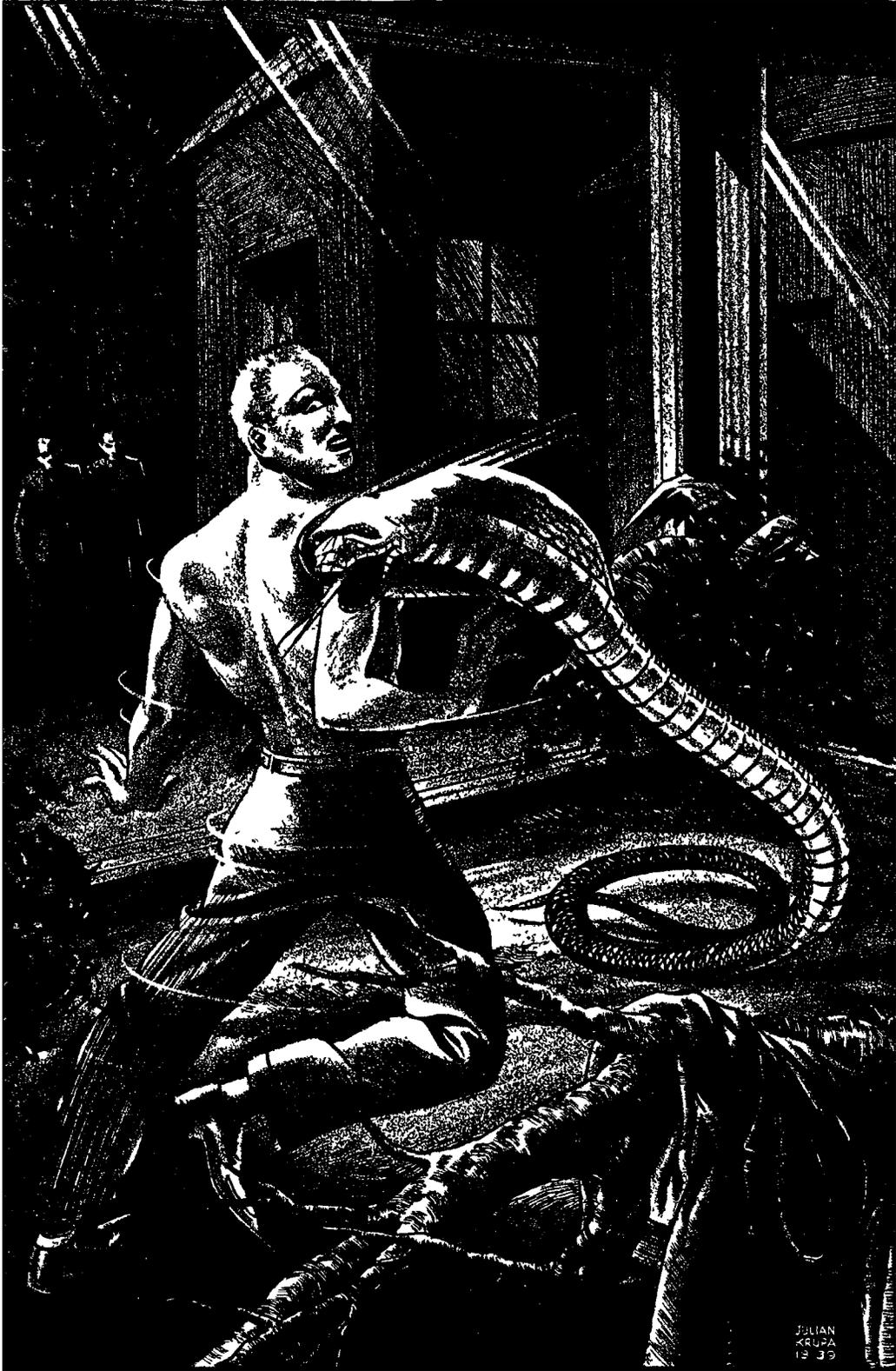
I dressed hurriedly and drove over to Varsag's laboratory. His work rooms were cleverly located in a section of the city that was devoted to chemists' and physicists' laboratories, so that any late work he would be doing would not arouse any comment.

When I rang the bell the doctor himself answered it, almost immediately. His little intelligent black eyes were snapping with excitement. "I see you've got here, Bert," he said, evidently pleased. "Follow me, quietly."

He led me quickly into his lab and closed the door. The room was high-ceilinged and very well lit. As always, it was filled with polished apparatus and tall and short and odd-shaped shining bottles full of queer liquids and potions, and as always, I had not the slightest idea as to what any of this equipment meant. The whole scene was so familiar and orderly that I forgot my mistrust.

Just then I saw the apparatus table in the center of the room, and on it a recumbent form covered by a white sheet—

Suddenly I heard a vicious animal snarl and a short burst of high-pitched humming come from a



There was a blur of moving bodies as the cobra struck and Montrex dodged

corner of the room. As I recoiled with surprise Varsag laughed indulgently, his black eyes watching me intently. "No cause for alarm," he said. "I'll show you the harmless little animal."

HE led me to a corner of the room that had been curtained off and drew away the heavy cover from an ordinary case such as he used for experimental animals. There was nothing inside that case but a little black and white guinea pig.

But what a guinea pig! Instead of the placid fat ball which never does anything but eat and sleep, the creature was fast and tricky as a fox. The animal was standing close to the front of the cage near the netting. Varsag slapped at it with a stick. Before the stick had reached halfway, the little thing was across the cage, crouched near the back, gazing at us out of its penetrating, shoe-button eyes. It was humming that high-pitched note which had first startled me.

I looked to Varsag, but he had turned away toward a small, slanting table whose face was a maze of dials. On the largest dial a long red hand was revolving swiftly. Varsag was evidently studying it, and now he turned and faced me. "I think it's time."

"Time for what? What the hell's going on here?"

Varsag smiled briefly. "You'll find out in just about a minute," he said. "Sit down here while I get my instruments together."

He went to a sterilizer and began to remove surgical instruments from it. Then he looked at me, and was smiling again. "You'd like to ask me about it, wouldn't you?" he said.

"Damned right I would. Who or what is that lying on that table under the white sheet?"

The doctor exclaimed as one of the heated instruments slipped from the towel and burned his finger. Without looking up, he said quietly, "The object of your curiosity is our old and mutual friend, Dexter Montrex."

For a minute I was too stunned to speak. I simply sat there with my hands clenched and my mouth tightly shut, determined not to make any outbreak. And then by the time I had recovered sufficient composure to say something, it was unnecessary.

I sat there watching Varsag prepare for something. . . .

Perhaps if you knew something of our past lives and relationships, it would be easier to understand what I felt.

We three, Montrex, Varsag and I, had gone to college together, in one of those ivy-covered New England campuses. Our friendship had come about naturally, for in those early days we had all been students in the scientific departments; neurology, bio and zoology. In time we became inseparable, and when we were graduated, we went out together to lick the world.

I did all right. Got myself a fair job in a research lab, then went out on my own as a consultant and kept going. The book I had on the presses right then was my third, and the others were almost standard texts.

Arnold Varsag had done a good deal better. He was much the most brilliant of our group, and even in his early days he had blazed with the fire of fanaticism, a restless, never-satisfied thirst for experimentation. He had gone on to medicine, specialized in several fields, and became an extremely good surgeon; even then he went on, deeper always into science. He might have been one of the great scientists of this day, if his passion for work had not taken forms too strange for most men. Recently he had passed up a chance to make a barrel of money because he was deep in some cockeyed experiments on the neural systems of small mammals.

Montrex followed the most bizarre career of all, for a scientist. After one or two bad breaks, and because he wanted to keep eating, he became a heavyweight prizefighter. Possibly to some extent this was conditioned by his love of physical activity and direct combat, which he had shown in college football days. He was a magnificently formed man. Life rushed through that fellow.

AND now he was lying under a white sheet, while Varsag wheeled over a high table with his tools on it. Then he came over to me and sat down. "You're upset, Bert," he said, simply.

"That shouldn't be so hard to understand," I answered. "You call me away from work by mentioning that damned Mongoose that I know is around here somewhere—and then you tell me this. Why is Dexter lying there? What are you up to, Arnold?"

"Hold on now," said Varsag calmly. "There's

nothing to be excited about. There isn't much time, but I think I can tell you something about this."

"It's very decent of you," I said.

"Save your sarcasm, Bert." There was a trace of bitterness and impatience in Varsag's voice as he continued. "Some moments ago I showed you a guinea pig. I think it must have looked a little odd to you. I am sure you must have some idea of what I've done to that guinea pig."

"Only a vague one. I think you've worked out some insane scheme of cross-breeding between little animals and your infernal Mongoose."

"Cross-breeding?" There was real amusement in Varsag's laughter. "Hardly that. I made it."

"You . . . made it?"

"Exactly. I made that guinea pig so fast by giving him the eyes and nervous system of a Mongoose! Here—"

He rose abruptly from his chair and crossed the room. He slid open the door of one of the compartments under a laboratory table.

There were several small cages inside, and as the door slid open, the blended humming of several animals' voices filled the room. I followed Varsag and looked down. There were three Mongooses in the cages. Nasty looking little things they were, even for a man who had had cause to become familiar with all kinds of strange rodents. They couldn't have been more than sixteen or eighteen inches long, with thin bodies which were made to look larger because their hair was standing on end. Now they were motionless, their beady little eyes taking everything in, watching us with a curious awareness.

I felt Varsag's hand on my arm and for the moment it was as if I had been in a trance. "If we can do all that for a guinea pig," Varsag said. "Think what we could do for a human being."

"Arnold!" I began—

He was walking toward the apparatus table. I followed him and grabbed him by the arm. With his free arm, Varsag reached out and pulled the white sheet away from Dexter Montrex's face. I saw Montrex lying there on the table, breathing slowly and peacefully, but imperceptibly.

"Look at him," said Varsag. "What a magnificent specimen! He sleeps beautifully

anywhere."

"What are you saying?" I said fiercely.

Varsag looked at me for a moment before he said a word. "You and I have known Dexter a long time, haven't we, Bert?" he said. "We stood by helplessly while he fought to make a place for himself in a highly competitive world, and as much as he tried, we haven't helped him much." Varsag walked away as he continued speaking. He stood by one of the large windows and looked down into the dark street below. "Have you ever watched the way he holds his head shoulders when he walks? He has what one calls a regal air about him. Or what other people call the—look of an animal. That hasn't helped him much either."

IKNEW what Varsag meant. In spite of every physical endowment, Dexter Montrex hadn't done especially well as a prize fighter. You had to be more of a killer than he was to get by with plug-uglies. He had taken several bad beatings after doing well in his early years in the ring. His beautiful physique might have been pounded into a derelict shell after kicking around the fight clubs. All of us knew what lay at the end of that kind of road.

"What are you leading up to?"

"Imagine a creature so fast that it could dodge a snake—a snake as swift as a Cobra, which strikes so swiftly that it is only a blur to the human eye!" Varsag was standing there, almost talking to himself now, carried away by his own words. "Think what a nervous system such a being would have, think what marvelous speed of sight, what control and precision of muscular movement, what lightning reflexes!"

He turned and looked at me. "There is such an animal—the Mongoose. For some purposes, of all the living things on earth, the Mongoose has the best developed of all possible nervous systems. A human being with that equipment would be invincible in personal combat. You couldn't possibly put a finger on him. He could strike a dozen blows before you realized he had started to move." *

* I might enlarge a bit here on what Vargas meant. In the course of subsequent days, I learned a great deal from him.

The reason that the movement of a snake, or a similarly rapid motion, is seen only as a blur by the

I was shouting before Varsag had finished speaking. "You're not going to experiment on Montrex!"

Very quietly Varsag answered me. "You saw what I did with the guinea pig? This isn't an experiment any longer. I know what I can do, and I've shown it to Dexter. We've both made our minds up."

I stood there for a minute helpless with confusion and rage, and for a half a moment I was almost tempted into violence. Standing there, watching him carefully, Varsag must have known what was going on in my mind. He smiled faintly.

"I hardly think so, Bert," he said. "Not two such old friends as we. Not when Dexter himself, as well as I, think that this is the best thing to do." He held out a hand shortly, knowing I would take it, and I did. "I am almost sorry I told you about this," he went on. "I anticipated your reactions

human eye, is due to the phenomenon known as retention of vision. This means that the retina of the eye preserves the image upon it for a fraction of a second. So that when we look at a moving picture, for example, we do not see individual frames of film succeeding each other, but only a continuous movement. A movement like the snake's is too fast for our slow retina to record. The retina of the Mongoose must have less retentiveness of vision than does that of the human being, since it obviously perceives the snake's motion clearly enough to dodge it. This is also partly due to the quick focusing powers of the lens in its eye, which must change focus instantaneously if it is to perceive the snake's darting motion. (There is another possibility: the Mongoose retina may have sufficient depth of focus to make unnecessary any change of focal length.)

Another important characteristic the Mongoose possesses is a lightning quick reaction time. Once decided, consciously or unconsciously, upon an action, there is no appreciable interval between the decision and its execution. In humans this reaction time is comparatively snail-paced, often taking as long as three-quarters of a second where rapid action is necessary.

The third necessary characteristic is muscular coordination, since the Mongoose must be able to change direction almost immediately, and control action with a precision to gradations involving a fraction of an inch. Indeed, a fraction of an inch is an extremely large margin, when we are concerned with the striking of a snake like the cobra, the Mongoose's traditional enemy.—Author.

weeks ago, that's why I kept quiet. Then, when I remembered the early direction of your work, and realizing that I would need help, I thought we could take the chance. I hope you won't make me sorry."

And so, the battle that had loomed suddenly and irresistibly in my mind, was quite as suddenly over. There were times when it was impossible to fight Varsag. I nodded slowly in agreement....

I will not describe for you the details of that operation, for the same reason that I destroyed all notes on observations and experiments, and destroyed with my own hands Varsag's experimental animals. In spite of everything that happened, at least I knew from the beginning that Arnold Varsag was an extremely competent man, and more than that—he was honest. If his studies and notes had ever gotten into other hands....

I watched and helped as well as I could that night, half fearful, half fascinated, while Varsag grafted sections of Mongoose eye on Montrex's eyes, and made some extremely minute changes in the optic nerve. During this time he worked from a series of very detailed models he had constructed from dissections of Mongooses. I might add that there was some variation made in the dendrites around the nerve center of the brain. Nothing, however, could induce me to go into the matter any further.

MONTREX was convalescent for almost ten days. During that time Varsag fed him on food mixed with a brown paste. He would not tell even me what this paste consisted of, but gave me to believe it was manufactured—unbelievable as it sounds—from some of the vital organs of the Mongoose.

Such was the splendid body of our patient that he was on his feet in less than half the time it would have taken an ordinary man after the terrific beating he took on that operating table. It is a wonder to me that he survived at all.

During this period of ten days Varsag checked over his notes again and again to be sure he had made no mistake. He made careful and detailed notes on all his observations of the patient's condition. As for me, the nervous strain of that period was almost beyond endurance. The proofs of my book lay where I had left them that night Varsag had called, and I ignored a dozen

cajoling and threatening letters from my publisher.

And then Montrex was on his feet again. The operation, it appeared, was a success. Our first impressions were that a glorious man had been created, faster and more potent than any man that had ever lived. At first I never doubted a striking contribution to humanity had been made, except when I sometimes would accidentally see one of the Varsag Mongooses slinking around in a cage, looking at everything with that horribly penetrating, furtive look. Then I shook as if with a strange fever that might have come from the Asiatic home of the damned creatures.

I will never forget the first display of Montrex's new power. It was his first day out of doors. Varsag and I were walking with him through a nearby park. We passed a little boy playing with a large brown dog. For some reason the animal suddenly growled deep in its throat and a slightly mad look came into its eyes. It flung itself at Montrex's legs! Montrex moved easily aside and the dog's rush carried it past him. It turned and came at him again, jaws slavering. Again Montrex dodged without effort.

While Varsag and I stood by, watching the queer scene intently, a burly policeman rushed up, his gun half out of its holster. "Whose dog is that?" he shouted. "It's gone mad!"

"Rubbish!" said Varsag.

The officer spun around. "Who the hell are you?"

Varsag looked coolly at the speechless officer and turned to Montrex and me. "The dog will be all right. Let's be on our way."

Someone grabbed the animal and we walked quickly off. As soon as Montrex had walked out of its range the animal quieted and stopped struggling with its captor, though continuing its hoarse growl. Montrex laughed loudly. It was one of the few times he laughed after the operation.

"We must be careful of such minor accidents," said Varsag, "or we'll be creating a sensation everywhere we go."

He solved the problem neatly, I must say. After that, whenever a dog grew angry in Montrex's presence, and they did every time he passed, Varsag would throw a small bit of meat he carried about with him. Instead of rushing Montrex, the dog would stand guarding the meat

until we were out of range. In this way we avoided further difficulty.

In a few weeks, Montrex's dodging powers increased tremendously. We used to make quite a game out of trying them. He would walk unharmed through the wildest automobile traffic, scaring motorists out of their wits, crossing through the streams of whizzing cars while the drivers looked at him foolishly.

AS his health returned completely, we decided it was time for him to resume prizefighting. There was some difficulty getting him a match, but we finally contracted for him to meet a fighter named Walloping Wharton in a small local club. Wharton was good. He had knocked out many of the big names in the ring, but he was old and could be worn down after taking a few rounds of punishment; his legs would begin to fail as the fight progressed. The usual method of fighting him was to stay away from him for as long as possible and try to get him after he had tired. Wharton was clever and a deadly puncher when fresh.

By the time the night of the fight came, I didn't know whether Varsag or I was the more excited: certainly Montrex was exceedingly calm. We watched him carefully. He seemed very quiet except for his eyes, which, though they seemed to have grown smaller, looked everywhere. When the time came to enter the ring, he suddenly adopted a curious shuffling gait, and his shoulders became slightly hunched, with his head bent forward. It was a startling change from his former free stride and high-held head.

The bell rang and Montrex just walked out to meet Wharton with his hands at his sides. Wharton, obviously perplexed, threw a raking, though hesitant, left jab squarely at Montrex. Montrex moved his head slightly and the blow went harmlessly past his head. Wharton led again with his left, this time more quickly. Again Montrex dodged.

The crowd became restless, sensing a strange situation. Suddenly Wharton started to close in on Montrex with a furious barrage of fast right and left hand blows.

Montrex did not move backwards. He merely stood still, moving his head and body slightly, almost twitching, just enough to miss the blows,

until Wharton had come in too close to do anything but clinch. Not once did Montrex's hands come up from his sides.

Wharton's face twisted into a curious expression of savagery and bewilderment. He had never before struck so surely and with less effect. And still Montrex stood completely passive. We in his corner could see the rapid darting of his eyes. Wharton came toward Montrex again, his arms well up in a close guarding position. The crowd roared for him to knock out this strange creature who could not be touched, and yet would not hit back.

But all his efforts to land a blow on Montrex's strong body were futile. The weird spectacle lasted almost to the end of the round. Not once had Montrex raised a hand in his own defense. Not once did Wharton manage to touch Montrex with a blow. With about fifteen seconds to go, I noticed Montrex's cheek twitch slightly. He stepped in quickly and Wharton went down. He was out cold.

Yet all that Montrex had done—seemingly—was to slip forward, flash down, and send a hand forward with a single light punch. *One*, no more.

"Fake!" The massed cry roared through the hall, furiously. Momentarily we expected violence. But Montrex seemed composed even as he was roundly jeered, climbing through the ropes and walking back to the dressing room. His face was still completely expressionless, but his eyes were in every corner of that hall.

The next morning the fight drew comment in the papers only to be condemned as a "tank show." Only one sports writer commented briefly on Montrex's amazing exhibition of his ability to avoid punishment. The consensus, what there was of it, was that the whole thing had been framed.

WE bided our time. Only the manager of the local fight club, who had booked our first fight, was certain there had been no fraud. He called at Varsag's home while I was there two days later. He sat uneasily on the edge of a chair, his eyes traveling about the room, as if he were afraid of something happening.

It didn't take long to understand what was troubling him. He had had a long talk with Walloping Wharton, it seems, and what he had heard.... "Well," as he put it, "the long and short

of it, Doc, is that I'd like yer fighter to show his stuff at my club again."

There was something curious, something roundabout and underhanded, in the way he proposed the whole deal. Evidently he had some plan in mind, and was hoping we wouldn't see through it. I wagged my head for Varsag to leave the room with me, and we stepped into the adjoining library.

"You know what he's up to, don't you, Arnold?" I said.

"I think so. I think it's rather a good thing."

"Fine. My reaction, exactly. I hope we're correct."

We were correct. When our fight came up, I looked carefully all about the house, and in a corner of the balcony, I saw the evidence, Montrex was fighting another has-been named Sailor Darrel, but looking around at the names in the sporting world who had managed to find their way to this little club, I knew that the word had gone out. It hadn't taken as long as we'd thought.

I sat tensely the first few rounds. The fight was almost a replica of the first one. Montrex came in with his hands loosely at his sides and weaved easily away from everything Sailor Darrel threw at him. In the fourth around Darrel began to look frightened. It was evident he had been warned of what to expect, but even the warning had not prepared him for anything like this. After throwing a series of punches, he would back away and look to his seconds in their corner, not knowing what to do.

It was just about then that Montrex came in slowly, ducked for an instant and flicked his right hand out.

The Sailor went down as if he had been hit by a steam hammer. The fight was over. A lone voice cried out, angrily, "Phony!" but no one took up the cry. More than one pair of eyes looked up at that balcony, and when Montrex left the arena, he walked up an aisle that was strangely silent.

It broke the next morning.

There had been a slow-motion moving-picture camera secreted in the balcony—and they had photographed the whole fight! Now they knew. Where they had seen one light punch strike Sailor Darrel, *the camera showed the delivery of nine lightning thrusts*—and behind those blows was the perfect timing and muscular coordination

of the fastest animal on earth!

The story was a newspaper sensation. It was ballyhooed all over the United States and every foreign country. Offers for bouts poured in by the dozens. Some bright sports writer christened Montrex "The Human Cobra," and "The Human Cobra" he remained to the American public. Varsag and Montrex and I chuckled at that. We could still laugh about it then, about the ironical way that Montrex's speed, taken from the Mongoose, the deadly enemy of the Cobra, had given him that name. We did not dare to reveal, however, how it was that Montrex acquired his speed. After all, it was against every law of society and nature.

Then something happened that stopped Varsag and me cold for a time. In Montrex's third fight, he revealed two new habits. As he moved around his helpless opponent, he began to hum in a peculiar high pitch—and his hair bristled and stood on end. The habits of the mongoose in battle!

We cropped Montrex's hair close so its bristling would not be noticed. The sports writers did notice the new habit of humming, but they put it down to the fighter's efforts to maintain body rhythm, and some of them actually compared the habit to one exhibited by Jack Dempsey, who apparently used to hum as he moved about the ring.

The habits did not give us much trouble, but the development they were a sign of did. In six weeks Montrex had defeated seven fighters including Young Michael, Terry Burns, Foxy Gottlieb, Cannonball Martin Pollock, and some of the toughest opponents in the ring. Varsag and I lived in an increasing state of fear, apprehensive lest someone discover our secret, and more and more concerned with the strange developments of Montrex's habits. He was turning into a morose and sly brute. He had almost killed the last three men he had fought, paralyzing them with the incredible swiftness and mounting savagery of his attacks.

IT was with a sharp shock that I realized he was beginning to be bored with fighting in the prize ring!

Neither Varsag nor I realized the transformation in him until the night we signed

the contracts for the fight with Big Bo Porter, the giant Negro champion. For the past week or more, we had become concerned with evidences of a strange fatigue that came over Montrex at night. He couldn't rise as early in the morning as he had, and he was often tired for half a day. On this night, Varsag and I and "The Human Cobra" were preparing for sleep and Montrex had just been showing us how he had learned a new way to shave himself. Using a razor blade somewhat smaller than the usual size, microscopically sharp, and a magnifying mirror which enlarged his face many times, he cut off each whisker individually, moving his hand so quickly that it could not be followed, and still finishing his shave in half the time it took an average man shaving the regular way.

But when he put down the razor he seemed unusually morose and nervous. The recently ever-present twitch returned in his cheek. I attempted to lighten the tension by jocularly. "Well, Dexter," I said, "if everything else fails you can always be a barber."

Montrex was not listening. He put down his razor and his face dropped its lively expression, resuming that quiet, yet furiously nervous look. He began to pace about the room, turning quickly, shoulders slightly hunched. I realized forcibly that Montrex was looking and acting more like an animal every day. That quiet expression, with its nervous searching glance, was like that of an animal in a cage! Montrex was getting restless. I feared we could no longer hold him in check. I looked at Varsag and caught his glance. Was Montrex's fatigue a psychological one?

Later, I spoke to Varsag and resolved to stay awake that night and stand a sort of guard.

How futile a gesture! I could not have kept Montrex in that room unless I chained him. At about two in the morning I began to doze slightly.

A slight click roused me instantly, in time to see Montrex, fully dressed, going out the door! He had gotten out of bed and dressed without making the slightest sound. Only the clicking of the doorlatch had given him away.

I ran to follow and realized I was not dressed. Quickly I shook Varsag awake and we pulled on some clothes. By the time we were ready to pick up his trail, it was impossible to trace him. We returned to the apartment.

Back in the room I turned suddenly to Varsag and said, "Montrex is becoming an animal." My voice was challenging. Varsag nodded. His face looked misshapen. His eyes were hard and black as coal.

"Our glorious man," he said bitterly. "Our gift to himself and to humanity!"

It relieved me a little to see that Varsag realized the menace of Montrex in his present form. "We must find a way to change him back," I said.

"Change him back!" Varsag almost leaped at me. A fanatical fire burned from his eyes. "Destroy the experiment?"

I looked directly at him. He saw my resolution and for once he was on the defensive. "What good would changing him back do?" he said. "This may be only a temporary development. Dexter would never submit to another operation now. I'm not sure it can be performed. Bert, you're not being reasonable."

"We must change him back," I said. "Dexter is our friend."

"If he is our friend, why destroy him?" Varsag cried. "I am the only man in the world who could have made this operation and I am the only man in the world who can undo it!" He held himself erect, the lamp making grotesque light and shade patterns of his features, and his eyes shone. "I'll see this experiment through or die," he said. "And you'll see it through or Dexter dies! I swear it!"

I knew he meant it. There was nothing I could do but hope—hope that events would convince Varsag I was right. I had to stay. These men, the strange human-being-animal and the doctor who had made him, were my two best friends.

Montrex came in about dawn. He came in noiselessly. Apparently he had already learned how to open the door without clicking the latch. Varsag and I pretended to be asleep, but we watched him covertly. Fatigue lay heavily on him. His eyes were half-closed, his graceful body sagged. Sleep came quickly to him.

THE next evening we were ready to follow Montrex when he got up and left. Shortly past midnight he slipped out again.

We followed him in Varsag's car at a

distance of about two hundred yards. At that distance the sensitivity of his vision did not seem to be so effective. He walked rapidly for about ten blocks, until he came to the great Bronx Zoological Gardens, and walked without hesitation toward the zoo—and then he disappeared into what appeared to be the reptile house!

"Arnold!" I said, fiercely, "do you know where he's going?"

Varsag nodded grimly. We got out of the car and followed Montrex. We did not know then how he had effected an entrance through the iron fence that surrounded the snakehouse. I learned later he had stolen a key from the guard during the day. Such an act would be extraordinarily simple for a man of his speed and precision of movement.

There was an almost full moon that evening. It shone through the huge plate windows of the snakehouse and illumined the scene slightly.

As we looked on, Montrex appeared, *and entered the cage of a solitary cobra*, a huge creature of the breed named *Sadu*. He had stripped to the waist and thrown his clothes carelessly on the limbs of a felled tree lying in the glass house.

The reptile was awake. As Montrex came into the cage it lifted its head, with the great hood spreading out behind it. The moonlight gleamed on scaly sides as the snake coiled swiftly. In the quiet we could hear Montrex's peculiar high-pitched humming as he moved quickly back and forth in front of the swaying head of the reptile. He was only a foot away from its head—

There was a blur as the cobra struck! Montrex must have eluded the lancing movement, for he resumed his weaving before the snake's head. The whole movement and recoil had been too swift for us to follow. The flat head whipped forward again, and again Montrex danced aside precisely the right distance.

Sadu struck again and again. Each time Montrex was untouched, coming back to the duel with his expression unchanged. It was impossible to follow the action. All we knew was that when the snake returned to position after striking, there was Montrex, elusive, imperturbable, tantalizing.

A cloud passed from the moon and we got a glimpse of Montrex's face. It was flatly immobile, but we knew that under the shadow of the brows the beady mongoose eyes were completely alive. His tongue lolled slightly out of his half-open

mouth.

The bizarre combat continued. Although it took place without a sound save for Montrex's humming and a slithering noise from the coils of the snake, the whole zoo somehow sensed a fight was in progress, and mysteriously, the howls of the giant cats and chattering of the monkeys began to be heard. A vast rustling filled the snake house as every reptile in it came alive. It seemed as if the life of an entire jungle were ringed about the combatants in the tiny cell.

The battle in the patch of moonlight was nearing its end. The giant *Sadu* seemed to be tiring. Its hood dropped slightly and it relaxed its coil for a moment. The moment was enough. When we could make out the action again the snake was away in a corner where Montrex seemed to have kicked it. It was still alive, though apparently exhausted.

I was suddenly aware of Varsag's hand tightly clutched around my arm, his fingers digging fiercely into my flesh.

Montrex left the cage quickly and disappeared. The noises of the animals in the zoo subsided almost instantly. Varsag and I found the car and sped home, in order to be in bed when Montrex returned.

For a time neither of us said anything. At length as we covered the few blocks to the apartment Varsag said, "You know, Bert, Dexter Montrex is still human."

"You can still say that after tonight?"

"If he were completely animal," Varsag said, in a voice that was utterly calm, "he would have killed and eaten that cobra."

"What little human is left in him," I said, "is quickly disappearing. In a month...we've got to stop—"

"Bert!" Varsag said sharply. "We've been over this before. Understand me, now. I'm seeing it through no matter what happens!"

AND so matters continued as the time of the fight approached. We spent most of our waking hours devising ways to keep Montrex away from the snake-house. Partly by tiring him as much as we could in the daytime so he would not prowl at night, partly by giving him a doped drink before he went to bed whenever we had the opportunity, we managed to avoid further visits to

the zoo. On one occasion, however, nothing we did was of any avail, and we were forced to creep out into the night and once more watch Montrex go through his amazing contest with *Sadu*, the giant cobra. Again he tired it completely, but did not kill it, ending the fight by kicking it into a corner.

We trained Montrex strictly for this fight, although there was no more need of it than there was for any of the other battles. Even the power and strength of Big Bo Porter would be useless against Montrex. We only went through the routine so that he would be too tired at night to indulge his monstrous passion for those bouts with *Sadu*.

On the evening of the battle with Big Bo Porter it was of course impossible to dope Montrex or tire him out, since he had to fight a battle for the heavyweight championship of the world.

But as night drew on he became more and more restless. It was only by watching him continually and exercising almost main force that we could get him into the stadium, dress him in his fighting trunks and put the protective bandages on his hands. And then he stopped speaking to us. He continued pacing about the dressing room.

Upstairs a noisy crowd waited for the fight it had paid from fifteen to fifty dollars to see, thousands of people who had made "The Human Cobra" a 10-1 favorite in the betting to win the heavyweight championship of the world. A great shouting warned that the last preliminary was over and that the championship fight was next on the program.

Varsag and I observed Montrex closely. His face was absolutely impassive.

A boy stuck his head in the door and called, "Ready!"

Varsag and I each moved to grasp one of Montrex's arms, but he evaded us easily and stepped out the door. We followed him down the aisle of the huge boxing arena. As Montrex appeared, the crowd cheered deafeningly. "Come on, Cobra!" someone screamed.

Montrex did not respond with any sign, but walked quickly up to the ring and stepped through the ropes. A muscle twitched violently in his cheek. He did not utter a word during the referee's instructions.

Big Bo Porter flexed his long, lithe arms, grinning nervously. His white teeth shone. He was a superb creature. I knew that probably he could outfight any human being in the world with his fists, but he should never have been in the same ring with Dexter Montrex. The men separated and went back to their corners. Montrex's eyes darted wildly about.

THE bell rang, and suddenly Montrex had leaped out from the corner and darted at Porter. With an overwhelming fury he lashed at the Negro, catching him squarely on the back of the neck. It looked as he had struck the champion three or four times. In reality he must have hit him twenty or thirty crushing blows at the base of the skull.

It was the back of the head attack of the Mongoose!

Porter slumped suddenly. When he hit the canvas, his head was twisted at a peculiar angle. I saw Montrex bare his teeth and look at the fallen man.

The crowd was strangely silent. The referee never began his count. He just stood there with a hand upraised, but that hand didn't come down. He could have counted to a million: Porter was dead.

In that vast and awesome silence, just as the first groan of the mob was beginning, a groan that would burst into the horrible cries of thousands, Montrex suddenly leaped from the ring. With fantastic speed he was down the aisle and out of the arena before anyone could have realized what he was doing, or raised a hand to stop him.

He had shouted only one word, just before he leaped from the ring....

"Sadu!"

And in a moment, like some huge animal awakening, the crowd was surging to life. In the midst of that overwhelming noise and confusion, with thousands streaming down to the arena, and the whole place a choked, single mass of people, we fought our way through them to the door. We knew where Montrex had gone.

It took our taxi forty minutes through heavy traffic to get to the Zoological Gardens. Through the din in the streets, and the growing shrieks of sirens, I heard Varsag, sitting beside me, cursing and moaning. The man seemed to have lost

control of himself, partly from a terrible rage, more from a great feeling of frustration....

There was Montrex! Through the yellow gleam of one of the park lights, we saw him running ahead of us, straight toward the snakehouse.

"Dexter! Stop!" I shouted, sprinting vainly behind him. It was impossible to catch him. He left me far behind, and ran the rest of the distance to the snakehouse. With Varsag running grimly behind me, we kept going.

We just caught a glimpse of Montrex as he slipped through the gate, and in his hurry, he left it open. The bandages from his hands had been unwound, and they lay on the ground like white serpents.

We ran through the gate toward the snakehouse...and a high-pitched, frenzied humming came to us. Again the sound was picked up by a hundred confined animals. Then the faint crescent of the new moon broke through the clouds, and we saw Montrex standing inside the snakehouse, standing there in nothing but his short boxing trunks. A great screaming, full of wild cries, had filled the night air, yet over it all we heard him humming—watched him begin his weaving toward that great, coiled scaly body of the cobra, shining in the moonlight. Montrex, his short hair plainly on end, crouching, moving toward the glistening scales—

Suddenly the moon was shining on two scaly bodies!

Another cobra had been put into *Sadu's* cage! The two hoods ballooned. Frantically I shouted, "Dexter—there's another!" He didn't hear me. It was as if he were not of our world. The hood behind him danced, played an instant, then shot forward until its flat head had smashed into Montrex's back.

For a moment the moonlight was full on his face. His expression softened, and he spun around, accidentally facing us. A look of childish surprise came to his little eyes. Soft lines sprang up around his mouth. The humming had stopped, and now something like a sad smile flitted over his face, and it became completely placid. Then he sank down limply into the shadows. He never knew that the great cobras had hit more than once.

Then, before I could realize what was happening, Varsag, sobbing hysterically, had

flung himself around the snake-house and inside through the door, tearing at the heads that spit at the quiet body on the floor.

I heard him scream once, horribly. The hoods whipped about his body....

TODAY I went to the funeral of Dr. Arnold Varsag and Dexter Montrex.

I have just destroyed all of our notes, and the remains of our experiment. It was a small, vicious satisfaction to kill the ratty animals, and I took it. What will happen to me now, I don't know.

I've told this story because I think it should be known. I cannot carry the whole secret within

me, nor do I think it wise. I have asked the editors of this magazine to publish my story for me, because it seemed to me that within these pages, and here alone, might I find the audience for which I sought; people who might comprehend the meaning of an experiment, and not be too harsh when I tried to give a scientific justification.

For it is men like Arnold Varsag was, who make our world move. To the average person, it might have sounded fiendish. Only the men who understand such men as Varsag and, in his own way, Montrex, can sympathize with me.

Perhaps it is better that way.

THE END