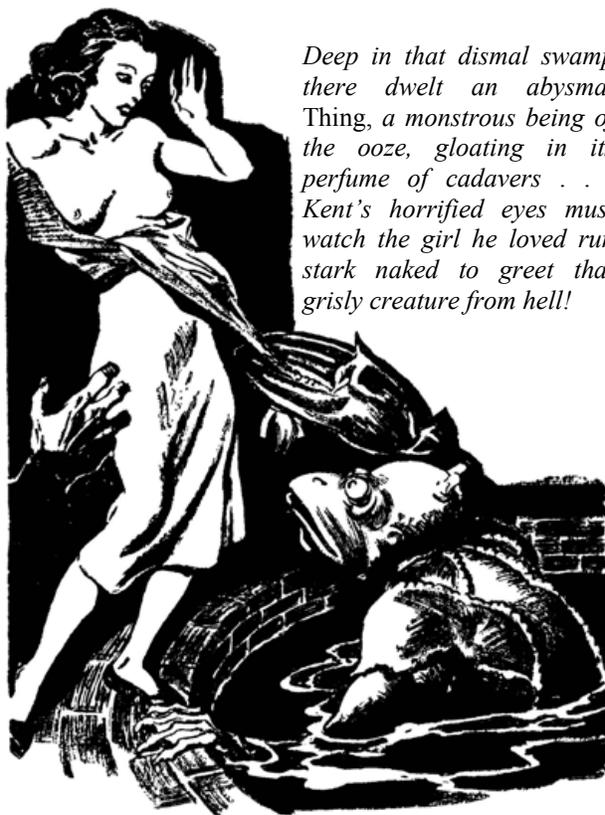


BLACK POOL FOR HELL MAIDENS

By
Hal
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"Raoul! It's Dorothy, Raoul!" she sobbed desperately, and Kent's heart went sick within him. Her pleading words had no discernible effect whatever upon the brutalized brain within the monstrous armored skull.



Deep in that dismal swamp there dwelt an abysmal Thing, a monstrous being of the ooze, gloating in its perfume of cadavers . . . Kent's horrified eyes must watch the girl he loved run stark naked to greet that grisly creature from hell!

CHAPTER I

THE CLAWED GHOUL

THE last rays of an unseen sun had faded until the wooded swamp was a fog-shrouded monochrome of somber shadows and swirling vapors. The dank chill of slime-wet air seeped coldly through the darkening gray mists. Larry Kent shivered and turned the collar of his coat higher around his neck.

Kent's deeply tanned face was grimly intent as he tried vainly to peer ahead through the murky gloom. Hidden cells deep within his sensitive brain quivered to the stimulus of a familiar and eerie warning. Somewhere in that chill curtain of twilight fog, Fear lurked, naked and abysmal!

Larry Kent had spent too many years in the dark corners of the world to ever be mistaken in that weirdly menacing aura of incarnate terror. He had felt it in the cold stone cells of North China where shuddering coolies waited wretchedly for dawn and the headman's sword. He had sensed it in the sweating midnight of an African jungle *kraal* where close-packed blacks groveled in abject fear as Om-Jok, the Devil-God, stalked thundering through the night.

But never had Kent's quivering nerves sensed the crepitant feel of Fear more strongly than they now did in the desolate heart of the Alabama swampland. It came pulsing through the shrouding vapor in unseen waves of almost tangible force. The central point from which the eerie emanations came was apparently somewhere just ahead. They subtly increased with every forward step that Kent

SINISTER, HELL-RIDDEN FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELETTE

took.

The oozing muck of the narrow path made tiny sucking noises beneath his feet. On either side, scum-filmed pools of stagnant water glowed dimly in the gray dusk. Leprous-white streamers of Spanish moss hung in spectral festoons from the gnarled limbs of trees that rose from the swampy mire.

Dread was a chill hard lump in the back of Kent's brain. Was it into the forbidding depths of this almost trackless swamp that Dorothy Lane had so mysteriously vanished? Kent had succeeded in tracing her as far as the village of Sharby, some ten miles away. She had arrived there four days ago. Soon after she registered at the village hotel she had left with a man who was a stranger to the hotel proprietor. And from that point on, all trace had vanished of the girl who was Larry Kent's fiancée.

Kent flinched as the bloated body of a swamp moccasin crossed the path ahead of him and slid sluggishly into a pool. Dorothy hated snakes, and all the other squirming horrors that swarm in the dark recesses of swampland. What possible reason could have brought her from her Chicago home to this area of stark desolation?

The brief note that Kent had found awaiting him upon his return from a business trip had told him nothing beyond the bare fact that she was leaving town for a short time. It was the intangible feeling of terror between the lines of the hastily scrawled words that had sent Kent in worried pursuit of the missing girl.

There was a faint rustling through the swamp as the ghostly white ribbons of moss stirred in the first sighing breath of the night breeze. Kent suddenly froze to a halt, his body tensely stiff.

BORNE upon the dank wings of that breeze was a new and ghastly scent—the grim, pungent smell of Death!

Ahead of him a low strip of wooded land rose several feet above the swamp level. It was from there that the nauseous odor apparently came. Kent's eyes hardened to the brilliance of blue ice. His step was the lithely silent tread of a stalking jaguar as he glided swiftly forward.

A muffled sound came faintly through the fog, a strange whimpering murmur that was certainly not human, yet was like no animal sound that Kent had ever heard. The smell of putrescence came to his nostrils in increasing waves of sickening horror. He

drifted wraith-like through the tree trunks, then abruptly halted behind the sheltering bole of a big pine. There, barely ten feet from his staring eyes, was the spot from which the dread odor came.

Two dead bodies lay obscenely exposed amid scattered heaps of fresh earth. The water-saturated subsoil had made deep digging impossible, and the graves from which the corpses had been looted were little more than shallow trenches. Crouched gibbering over them was a creature that was a blasphemous caricature of a man.

It was naked except for a loincloth. Its hairless skull tapered grotesquely to a rounded point. Its eyes protruded so far from their shallow sockets that they almost seemed to be set upon movable stalks. The hand that grew from its right wrist was weirdly deformed. The fingers were fused into a single solid mass, while the thumb was massively overdeveloped, making the member look far more like the pincer-claw of a crayfish than a human hand.

A low whimpering monotone drooled from the creature's gaping mouth as it stared with its bulging eyes down at the two exhumed bodies. The cadavers had obviously been buried for days. There was no grave-clothing to conceal the sloughing horror of their discolored flesh, already far gone in the ravages of decay. One had apparently been that of a man about fifty. The other was the powerfully built figure of a young man in his twenties. Both bodies were maimed. The older man's legs were gone between the hips and the knees. The younger man's right arm ended at the elbow.

Kent's skin crawled in repugnance at the thought that the missing members had been devoured by the deformed ghoul that crouched above them. Then Kent saw that the amputations were old, with the stumps healed long before death.

If the creature had not already fed, however, there was little doubt that it intended to feed now, and quickly. Its claw-like right hand closed avidly upon the moldering flesh of the legless body. The pointed head dropped. A wordless babble of anticipation whimpered from the slaving lips.

Revulsion surged in a black flood through Kent's brain. He stepped from behind the tree trunk with clenched fists.

"Get away from that!" he rasped through white lips.

The creature gaped up at him for a brief second with goggling eyes. Then as Kent advanced toward

it, it abruptly scrambled erect upon thin bony legs and fled whimpering into the fog. As it ran, Kent saw for the first time a steel circlet and a short length of broken chain dangling from the creature's ankle.

It did not run far. It had covered scarcely twenty feet before there was a crashing noise in the underbrush and three figures loomed dimly up through the fog in the creature's path.

THERE was a short, violent struggle that ended with the ghoulish fugitive clamped firmly in the grip of a stocky, swarthy thug with the barrel-chested build of a gorilla. The swarthy fellow's two companions paid slight attention to his brief struggle in subduing his squirming captive. Both were staring with narrowed eyes at Kent's tall figure. One of the men flashed a hand to his hip, bringing it up again with the heavy bulk of an automatic pistol leveled at Kent.

"Don't move, fellah!" he warned tersely. His eyes never left Kent as he jerked his head toward the swarthy-faced thug. "Take that fish-headed punk back to the house, Joe," he ordered. "Chain him this time so he'll stay! Doc and I'll take care of this fellah."

"O.K., Jeff," the thickset one grunted. "Come on, you!" He jerked the wiggling figure of his grotesque captive around, and they vanished into the fog. The other two men advanced toward Kent.

They were an oddly assorted pair. The one with the gun was tall, muscular, with brutish power etched in every line of his heavy-jawed face. His companion was small, wiry, with a thick shock of grayish hair. A dirty laboratory smock covered his slight figure. His gaunt, hawk-like face was nervously intense. The dilated pupils of his eyes glowed with feverish luster from far back in shadowed sockets.

They came to a halt a few steps from Kent. Their glance drifted momentarily to the exposed cadavers and looted graves beyond him, and their faces hardened in unmistakable menace.

"What are *you* doin' here, fellah?" the brute-faced man with the pistol demanded truculently.

Kent's temper flared at the arrogant insolence of the other's tone, but he choked back any thought of a heated retort when he met the man's eyes. They were the eyes of a born killer, cold, pale, utterly merciless. The lust for murder crouched like a black beast in their icily glittering depths, and it

would take very little to unleash that beast.

"I left Sharby this morning for a hike," Kent answered, his voice level. "I tried to take a short-cut through the swamp. I got lost, and I finally landed here."

"That is too bad," the gray-haired man in the smock said softly. His low-pitched voice trembled as though from excitement tightly held in check. "But you could hardly get back to Sharby tonight, even after we told you the way. The swamp is a nasty place to be wandering in after dark. You had better spend the night as our guest. Don't you think that would be best, Jeffers?"

Jeffers' thin lips smiled coldly. "Sure, he'd better flop with us tonight," he agreed grimly. The muzzle of the pistol jerked in a brief gesture of command. "Get goin', fellah! Show him the way, Doc."

They started off into the fog-shrouded dusk in single file, with the gray-haired man in the lead, then Kent, and Jeffers bringing up the rear. They walked for a few minutes in taut silence. Then abruptly there was a hail from some unseen person in the gray murk ahead of them.

"Dr. Carlin! Jeffers! Where are you?"

SHOCKED recognition flashed through Kent's started brain. The clear contralto voice was that of Dorothy Lane!

"Hold it, fellah!" Jeffers snarled, closing the gap between them. Kent felt the pressure of the pistol muzzle against his back. "Keep your mouth shut!" There was savage menace in Jeffers' whispered warning.

"Here we are, Miss Lane," the gray-haired Carlin answered.

A slender figure loomed dimly in the fog curtain, then came running into full view. Kent's breath caught in his throat as he recognized the familiar and beloved details of the girl's striking beauty. Her hair had the brilliant blackness of polished jet. The exotic loveliness of her exquisitely molded face was accentuated by the terror that made of her eyes great pools of liquid darkness.

"Dr. Carlin!" Dorothy Lane's voice broke in a muffled sob. "Did you find the one who escaped into the swamp? Was it—"

"No," Carlin broke in sharply. "*He* is still safe in the pool. This one was Bartlett. We got him all right. Joe is taking him back to the house now.

They must have passed you without your seeing them in the fog.”

Overwhelming relief suffused the girl’s softly tanned face. Then her glance drifted past Carlin and she saw Kent for the first time. For a fraction of a second amazed recognition flashed in her startled eyes. Then almost instantly her expression became as utterly impersonal as though she were facing a total stranger.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“Merely a gentleman from Sharby who lost his way in the swamp,” Carlin said softly. “He is spending the night with us.”

“But he can’t!” the girl protested sharply.

“I’m afraid he must, my dear,” Carlin insisted. “You see, he has already seen Bartlett.”

“Oh!” Dorothy Lane’s lovely face hardened. “In that case, he had better be our guest, of course.”

She turned away, as though having no further interest in Kent. The party started off again through the fog. The pistol lifted from Kent’s back, but he knew that the weapon remained menacingly ready as the brutish-faced Jeffers strode stolidly along behind him.

Kent’s brain seethed in a whirl of bewildered conjecture. What was the reason for Dorothy’s strange refusal to recognize him? And in what possible way was she connected with the sinisterly mysterious activities of Carlin and his two armed thugs?

Carlin’s name was vaguely familiar to Kent, but for the moment he could not quite place it. The man’s dilated pupils and the taut intensity of his every action indicated that he was a drug addict, with his clouded brain hovering perilously near the yawning abyss of stark insanity.

Kent was under no illusions about the probable fate awaiting him at their journey’s end. He had a cold premonition that he would never be permitted to leave the place alive. He could not believe that Dorothy, no matter how deeply she might be involved in the dark secrets of the isolated swamp retreat, would ever willingly assent to his death. But Dorothy could very easily be helpless against Carlin and his armed aides.

Kent knew that he had already seen too much to ever be allowed to go free and tell his story. The mere fact that he had seen the claw-handed creature with the pointed head had apparently been sufficient reason for Dorothy to agree that he should be kept a prisoner. Carlin had not mentioned

the looted graves to Dorothy. Kent wondered if she even knew of the two maimed corpses.

ONE thing was certain. They were heading straight for the source of the invisible emanations of crepitant fear that Kent had first sensed back in the swamp. It surged in swiftly increasing volume now with every step they took, pulsing eerily through the dusky murk in an aura of monstrous and nameless terror.

They strode silently along over ground that rose steadily until it was well above the level of the surrounding swamp. They emerged from the trees into a large grassy clearing, in the center of which yellow light glowed mistily from the windows of a sprawling one-story building. Over at one side, the throb of a gasoline motor came from a small shed, apparently the generating unit for the lights.

The main building had the grimly severe lines of a prison. The front door was massive enough to withstand the impact of a battering-ram. The small square windows were heavily barred.

There were still a dozen steps from the building when they heard muffled sounds of confusion inside. A man’s voice husked in snarls of command. Dull reports cracked like the lash of a whip. And yammering cries rose in a babbling chorus that was weirdly tinged with something utterly alien to anything human!

Carlin raced for the door. He inserted a key in the lock with nervously fumbling fingers, and swung the heavy portal open. The menacing pressure of the pistol was again solidly against Kent’s spine as they entered. They found themselves facing a nightmare scene of eldritch chaos.

CHAPTER II

HOUSE OF GRISLY FEAR

THEY stood in a large central hallway. At the end of the hall an open door gave a glimpse into a white-walled room with beds arranged in regular rows like those of a hospital ward. Crowding through the open door out into the hall was a pack of weird figures whose appearance sent cold fingers of eerie dread rippling down Kent’s spine.

There were eleven men in all in the yammering pack, ranging in age from the early thirties to late middle age. Every man was maimed. Some hopped grotesquely upon one leg. One sprawled upon the floor dragging a body that was completely legless. Others had lost an arm. One bearded giant had both hands gone at the wrist.

Their heavy faces were stolidly set masks of pure fear—not the brief flashing terror of a moment, but the grim accumulation of hours and days of a dread so overwhelmingly great that the gibbering horror of its eternal presence had driven every trace of rational thought from their numbed brains. Their mouths gaped slackly open. Their eyes had the dully staring gaze of men sunk deep in stupor.

But it was not the grisly fear written upon the faces of the maimed pack, nor their mutilated bodies, tragic though they were, that congealed the blood in Kent's veins. It was the feeling that in some nameless and hideous manner the men were different from all normal mankind!

Their only garments were loincloths. Their exposed skin was discolored and mottled, with small shiny patches that shone with a scaly luster. The ends of their maimed limbs, instead of the rounded contours of normally healed stumps, bulged in grotesquely paired lumps as though they were growing strange, new, two-digitated appendages to replace the lost members. Their yammering, almost wordless babble was weirdly suggestive of the chirring outcries of the scaly crustaceans in the black pools of the swamp.

Joe stood in front of the pack, keeping them at bay with the swishing menace of a long black whip. His swarthy face glistened with sweat as he turned.

"Give me a hand, Doc!" he gasped. "When I went into the ward after I chained Bartlett up, they ganged me. They're completely nuts! They thought you'd gone away and left 'em for good!"

Carlin strode forward, his gaunt face livid with anger. "You clumsy, blundering ape!" he snarled. "Throw that whip down! It's only making them worse."

Carlin's voice swiftly softened as he faced the pack. "Steady, men," he said reassuringly. "I wasn't leaving you. I'll never desert you until you're all right again. You ought to know that. But I can't help you unless you do your part. You must have rest, absolute quiet, to keep your strength built up so that the serums can take effect. Go on back to

your beds. Everything will be all right."

Carlin's soothing words took quick effect. The cries of the pack quieted to dazed mumbling. They turned and began retreating docilely into the room behind them.

"Jeffers," Carlin ordered, "come and help me get them settled. Stay out here, Joe, and keep a gun on our guest till I get time to take care of him."

THE door of the ward-like room closed behind Carlin and Jeffers. Dorothy Lane's slim shoulders sagged wearily.

"I'm tired out, Joe," she said listlessly. "I think I'll go to bed."

She turned and opened a door on the left of the hall. Kent tried to catch her eye, but the girl kept her gaze stonily averted. In the brief moment before the door closed again Kent saw the interior of a small bedroom.

Joe slouched against the wall half a dozen feet from Kent, his dark face still sullen from Carlin's vitriolic tongue-lashing. He held a pistol alertly leveled in his right hand.

Kent's eyes drifted curiously around the hall. The three doors on the left were closed. So was a rear door on the right, but between it and the front of the hall another door was wide-open, giving Kent a view of a room that was a strange combination of laboratory and aquarium.

Large glass tanks were filled with murky water in which scores of giant swamp crayfish slithered and crawled. A bench along the wall was littered with retorts, chemical phials, and gleaming bits of metal that looked like surgical instruments. In one corner was a white-topped operating table. A partly open door in the rear led into another smaller room. It was in this back room that the ghoul with the pointed head and the clawed hand was apparently confined, for Kent heard the occasional clinking of chains.

There was an insidious and peculiarly repugnant odor in the air that made Kent's nostrils crinkle. It was an odd blending of a stagnant, slimy effluvium as from the glistening chitinous bodies of swamp crustaceans, together with a strong tinge of the nauseous reek of carrion.

Kent's gaze lingered on the aquarium tanks. His eyes suddenly hardened as the sight of the slithering crayfish roused a slumbering cell in his memory. He remembered now why the name of Carlin had sounded so elusively familiar when he

had first heard it back in the swamp. Dr. Enlow Carlin, professor of biology in one of the large Eastern universities, had been a particularly lurid sensation in the newspapers of a year ago.

Carlin had claimed that he had definitely located the hidden gland producing the hormones that gave crayfish and other crustaceans their unique power of growing new limbs to replace those lost in battle or accident. Furthermore, Carlin claimed he had succeeded in adapting the extract from this crustacean gland so that the hormones would have a similar effect in the blood of human beings, stimulating their bodies to grow new legs or arms to replace members lost by surgical amputation.

A storm of criticism and censure had broken around the head of the biologist. It was charged that Carlin was caught in the act of using human beings in blasphemously revolutionary experiments with crayfish and other crustaceans. Carlin was dismissed from the university in disgrace. After a brief investigation, scientists branded his serum a cruel hoax, and Carlin's name faded swiftly into oblivion.

Shocked conjectures ran riotously through Kent's startled thoughts. Was Carlin using this hidden swamp retreat to carry on human experiments even more radical and revolting than those that had sent him hurtling into professional oblivion? And if so, what possible connection could Dorothy Lane have with the mad biologist's grisly labors?

SOUNDS from the room at the end of the hall abruptly drew Kent's attention that way. The door was flung hurriedly open. Carlin and Jeffers hastened out, locking the door behind them. Their faces were worried and tense.

"Vanders is gone!" Carlin said furiously to Joe. "He must have escaped when they mobbed you and broke out of the room."

"He's gotta still be here somewhere," Joe answered sullenly. "There didn't nobody get by me to the front door. He's hidin' out either in one of the rooms or else downstairs."

"We'll soon see," Carlin clipped. He and Jeffers made a quick, fruitless search through the two rear rooms on the left, and the aquarium-laboratory. Carlin's rap brought Dorothy Lane to the door of her room.

"Have you seen any sign of Vanders?" he asked. "He's missing from the ward."

The girl shook her head. Carlin turned to the remaining door on the right. "He's down in the basement, then," he said grimly. "Come on, Jeffers."

As the door opened briefly to let the two men through, Kent caught a glimpse of a flight of wooden steps leading downward. The strangely blended odor of crustacean slime and carrion came in dankly increased volume from the subterranean depths. There was the clumping sound of the men's feet descending the stairs. A short moment of silence was followed by a swift blurred chorus of voices. Metal clicked. There was a heavy thud as of the closing of a ponderous door.

Dorothy Lane's face was drawn and white with terror as she stared at the basement door. Sound again erupted from the hidden depths, a muffled blending of hoarse shouts and a splashing as of some huge body wallowing in shallow water. A man screamed, horribly, the cry dying away to a bubbling moan.

A weirdly chirring call that was like the metallic stridulation of some scaled monster of the swamp rose in wailing crescendo, then abruptly lapsed into silence as a gun crashed twice. There was again the heavy thud as of a closing door, and a moment later the sound of steps climbing the stairs.

Carlin and Jeffers stepped up into the hall, and Dorothy cried out in sharp terror. Kent stared with dilated eyes at the ghastly object in Jeffers' blood-soaked arms. Horror coursed icily down his spine.

The object had once been a man. It was now a gruesomely sliced and shredded bundle of raw flesh that looked as though it had been cut to pieces by a pair of gigantic shears. Thin sandy hair was matted with blood on the head that lolled limply on a half-severed neck. The features were slashed beyond recognition. There was only one leg, but the unspeakable condition of the body made it impossible to determine whether the amputation was an old one or a part of the hideous mutilation just suffered.

Carlin's eyes blazed dark fire in the pale gauntness of his face. "Vanders tried to escape us by dodging into the room of the pool," he said tersely. "He blundered squarely into the Dweller's reach before we could stop him. We were lucky to even get his body away. Jeffers got badly slashed doing that."

"The shots!" Dorothy breathed the words so low that they were barely above a whisper. "Did you

kill—”

CARLIN shook his head. “We only fired to frighten it back long enough for us to get clear with Vanders’ body.”

“Doc!” Jeffers blurted, his voice husky and strained. “Help me get to my room. I got it worse than I thought! My whole side is—”

His words abruptly faded into silence. His eyes closed, and he pitched forward on his face, his gruesome burden thudding to the floor with him. Carlin exclaimed in consternation and bent over him. Joe’s small eyes widened in concern as he stared at Jeffers’ huddled body.

For a brief moment no one was watching Kent. He took instant advantage of the chance. His right fist swung for Joe’s face with all his weight behind it.

Joe’s brain was stolidly slow, but his muscular reactions had the lightning speed of those of an animal. He instinctively jerked his head to one side, just enough that Kent’s fist glanced harmlessly off his cheek. Kent had a flashing glimpse of the clubbed pistol descending in Joe’s hand. Then the metal barrel crashed into Kent’s skull with a shattering impact that sent him spinning dizzily into fathomless gulfs of black oblivion.

Kent’s first waking sensation was of a splitting headache that seemed to pulse through every cell of his tortured brain. Then gradually the throbbing pain lessened a bit, and other sensations began to impinge upon his dazed consciousness. He was vaguely aware that he was sprawled full-length upon his back upon some hard, cold surface. The air around him had the chill, slime-damp scent of an underground chamber.

Yellow light glowed hazily against his closed eyelids. From somewhere that seemed an endless distance away a low voice was urgently calling his name.

“Larry! Larry Kent! Wake up, Larry. Larry, please wake up!”

Realization that the desperately pleading voice was that of Dorothy Lane shocked the last lingering mists from Kent’s stunned brain. He opened his eyes.

For a moment the scene above him swam in a dim yellow blur. Then his vision cleared. He was in a small windowless cubicle of a room, with cobwebbed gray walls of roughly finished cement,

and a floor of hard-packed earth. Yellowish light came from a single dusty bulb dangling from the ceiling joists.

He was lying near the center of the floor. Dorothy Lane knelt beside him, her dark eyes wide with dread, and the lovely oval of her face streaked with tears. Her soft lips moved in a tremulous smile of relief as she saw Kent’s eyes open.

“Larry!” she breathed thankfully. “I was afraid you’d never wake up!”

Kent lay there for a minute longer with muscles relaxed while strength flowed slowly back into his body. Then he struggled up to a sitting position. He waited a second for his spinning head to clear, and with Dorothy’s help managed to regain his feet. He twisted his white lips into the semblance of a grin.

“I’m all right now,” he assured the girl. “What happened after that gorilla slugged me? How long was I out?”

“OVER an hour,” Dorothy answered. “After Joe knocked you unconscious, he and Carlin dragged you down here in the basement and locked you up in this little storeroom. Then Carlin went into his laboratory to work, and left Joe on guard at the foot of the basement steps. I sneaked a drink of whiskey down to Joe with enough veronal in it to put him to sleep for the rest of the night. After he collapsed, I came on back here to release you.”

“But I don’t get it,” Kent said dazedly. “What on earth are you doing in this madhouse, anyway? And why did you so pointedly refuse to recognize me before?”

“I had to pretend we were total strangers,” the girl answered. “That was the only way I could remain free of Carlin’s suspicion and wait for a chance to help you. But there’s no time to explain things now, Larry. Jeffers is in bed critically injured and Joe is unconscious. This is our one golden opportunity to overcome Carlin while he is without the protection of his paid thugs. We’ve got to do it, Larry, and quickly. That man is a fiend incarnate!”

“My dear Miss Lane, you honor me!”

Kent stiffened in startled shock as the jeering words came from behind him. He saw Dorothy’s face blanch in terrified surprise. Kent slowly turned.

CHAPTER III

MAD PACK OF THE MAIMED

CARLIN stood in the partly-open door. His gaunt face was a twisted mask of insane triumph. The pistol in his hand was gripped so tightly that his knuckles showed white against the blued metal. Kent's arm instinctively went around Dorothy's slender shoulders in a gesture of protection.

"A very touching sight!" Carlin mocked. "And when you two first met in the swamp tonight you were utter strangers! You fooled me then, Miss Lane. You would still be fooling me, perhaps, had I not chanced just a few minutes ago to look over the things we took from Kent's pockets when we brought him down here. The picture of Miss Lane that you carry in your wallet, Kent, is an excellent likeness. And the very affectionate inscription written upon it is hardly such as one would give to a total stranger!"

The softly mocking quality vanished from Carlin's taut voice. His teeth bared in a wolfish snarl. "I intended to eliminate you, Kent, before the night was over," he grated. "You saw too much in the swamp to ever be allowed to live. I regret that I shall now have to also remove Miss Lane. I had hoped to keep her alive for a time yet for purely financial reasons, but her usefulness in that respect is obviously at an end."

Carlin's deep-shadowed eyes were flaming pools of mad menace. "I could shoot you both down where you stand," he rasped, "but that would be a foolish waste of valuable material. There is another and far better way in which I can use your deaths to terrorize my poor stupid charges upstairs, and thus make easier my task of collecting from them. I shall turn the two of you over to the Dweller in the pool!"

Dorothy Lane cried aloud in terror. Carlin's thin lips writhed in a snarling smile. "You don't know what I mean by that, do you, Kent?" he mocked. "Miss Lane will tell you. She is very well acquainted with our pool-dwelling friend."

Carlin stepped swiftly out into the corridor. The instant the menace of the pistol left his body, Kent flashed into action. He flung himself in a hurtling dive at the closing door, but Carlin was too fast. The lock clicked shut a scant fraction of a second

before Kent's shoulder thudded impotently against the solid panels.

They heard Carlin's mocking chuckle outside, then the sound of his retreating steps. Kent turned to Dorothy.

"Who, or what, is the Dweller in the pool?" he demanded. "And what devil's work is Carlin doing here anyway that he is ready to commit cold-blooded murder to keep any hint of it from reaching the outside world?"

"The Dweller in the pool," Dorothy answered, her low voice trembling, "is my brother, Raoul!"

"Your brother!" Kent repeated dazedly.

"Yes. You never met him. He lived in Denver. He lost an arm in an automobile accident last Winter. He was too bitterly proud to tell any of the rest of the family. The first I knew of his tragic loss was in a note I got from him nearly two weeks ago.

"Raoul was one of the men selected by Carlin as victims of the crudest extortion scheme that any mind ever conceived," Dorothy continued bitterly. "Carlin carefully chose from widely separated parts of the country a group of well-to-do men who had suffered the amputation of limbs. He offered them a chance to have their lost members miraculously restored through the injection of his crayfish serum.

"HE swore them to absolute secrecy, telling them that the authorities would never knowingly permit it, and brought them here by devious routes. None of them knew their final destination till they got here. Raoul must have become suspicious at the last moment. When they came through Sharby he sneaked off a hurriedly written note to me, telling me what he was doing and asking me to investigate if I did not hear from him again within five days.

"When the time passed without any further word I left for Sharby," Dorothy continued. "I should have told you, but Raoul had begged me to tell no one. Carlin must have learned of Raoul's letter for Jeffers met me in Sharby with a story of Raoul being ill and needing me. I came here with Jeffers and I've been here ever since. I've kept my eyes and ears open and I've learned the real nature of Carlin's plot in all its ghastly details.

"Carlin's serum had no power to cause regrowth of normal human limbs." Dorothy's voice shook with emotion. "Carlin knew the terrible effects his preparation would really have, yet he callously injected it because it was upon the sheer horror of

those effects that his scheme was based. New appendages began sprouting from the maimed stump of arms or legs, but the growths were of horrible crustacean claws. Other changes occurred in the skin of the victims, their bones, their brains, turning them gradually into monstrous Things that were more crayfish than men.

“Carlin sprung the extortion phase of his plan then,” Dorothy continued. “He told the men that there had been a frightful mistake somewhere, but that he could still make their scaly bodies normal again if he had the money to buy the expensive corrective serums needed. Stupefied as their brains were by the serum and by their overwhelming dread of the fate threatening them, they readily signed drafts for huge sums. Carlin’s task was made easier by his two horrible examples, Bartlett and my brother. They alone must have refused to give Carlin money and as a result were punished by being given far heavier doses of the crayfish hormones.”

Dorothy’s voice caught in a sob. She pluckily regained control of herself again and went on. “Raoul was already changed beyond recognition when I got here. I caught glimpses of him through the door when it was opened to throw his food in. Bartlett, grotesquely deformed as he is, is almost a normal man compared to Raoul. My brother is a monster of stark gibbering horror, a monster who killed poor Vanders tonight as callously as a giant crayfish would slice up an angleworm!”

“Carlin’s idea in bringing you here,” Kent said grimly, “must have been to get from you the money that your brother had refused to give.”

Dorothy nodded. “It was,” she answered. “When I first came I gave Carlin checks for the amounts he asked. I’d have given him anything if it would have made Raoul a normal man again. But I know now that Carlin or no one else can undo the terrible thing he has done to his victims. His salves and corrective serums are merely postponing their fate long enough for him to drain them of their last cent. There is no real cure for them. Eventually they are doomed to degenerate into unspeakable monstrosities—like my brother!”

THE girl’s voice faded into silence, a tensely pulsing silence veined with the wan gray threads of fear that were so integral a part of the atmosphere of this eldritch house of madness. Kent shuddered. He realized now the ghastly basis of

that fear.

A group of men, drugged and sick, living in constant terror of the grisly transformation that was turning their maimed bodies into crustacean Things of unbearable horror, and a grief-stricken girl whose brother had become the dread Dweller in the pool. Small wonder that the throbbing agony of so many tortured minds should combine to taint the very air with a shuddering miasma of crepitant dread!

Recollection of the two maimed corpses in the swamp flashed through Kent’s memory. What tragic part had they played in the events occurring in this isolated torture-house? He started to ask Dorothy about the bodies in the looted graves, but before he could speak a blurred chorus of sound became audible in the corridor outside.

There were dully solid thumps of one-legged men hopping awkwardly down the wooden steps, and a slithering rustle of bodies. Voices yammered in wordless babble. Carlin was returning, and with him he was bringing the pack of the maimed!

The sounds advanced along the corridor, then came to a halt outside the door. Unseen fingers turned the key in the lock. The door swung open. Carlin stood in the doorway, his pistol menacingly leveled.

“All right, my friends,” he said tautly, “we are ready for you. Come!” The muzzle of the pistol jerked in preemptory emphasis of the order.

Kent’s arm was around Dorothy’s shoulders as they slowly started for the door. Carlin gave ground warily before them, his eyes glittering as he kept safely beyond reach of any possible break from the captives.

They emerged into the hallway. It was a long narrow corridor, walled with rough cement. At the far end, the unconscious body of Joe was huddled on the earthen floor at the bottom of the steps.

Between where Dorothy and Kent stood and the stairs there was another door in the cobwebbed cement surface of the wall. It was a massive wooden affair, locked by two steel bars of almost impregnable strength. The furtively fearful side glances of the maimed pack, and the dark spots where Vanders’ blood had stained the floor, told Kent that behind that heavily barred door must lie the pool and its dread Dweller.

The entire pack of the maimed, with the exception of Bartlett, was crowded into the narrow corridor. They yammered ceaselessly among

themselves in wordless stridulation. Their babbling murmur abruptly died as Carlin raised his hand.

"This man is a detective sent here by the authorities to spy upon me!" Carlin said vehemently. "And the girl is a traitor to all of us. In spite of the hideous fate to which it will doom her own brother, she gave this spy the information he was after!"

Kent started to voice a hot denial of Carlin's lying accusations, then grimly remained silent as a swift glance at the faces of the maimed pack told him the utter futility of any attempt to appeal to their reason. Their scaly-skinned faces were as devoid of all trace of human intelligence as the swamp-slimed features of the crayfish they were beginning to so hideously resemble.

CARLIN'S voice rose high and thin with nervous tension. "Do you know what it will mean to you if this man and this girl are allowed to leave here and tell what they know? It will mean that you will forever lose all chance of again being normal men! Doctors can't save you. I am the only man in the world who can help you. If anything happens to me, you are doomed. Your bodies will change, swiftly and irrevocably, until you become like the Dweller in the pool!"

Wordless mutterings of brutish anger and hate drooled from the slack lips of the maimed pack.

"This sneaking spy came here to learn the secret of what is in the pool!" Carlin shouted furiously. "Very well, we will show him the Thing he seeks. We will lock both him and his traitorous companion in the room of the pool. And we will leave to the Dweller the task of making certain that neither of them shall ever escape to tell their story!"

A yammering chorus of savage assent from the pack was Carlin's answer. The mad biologist's white teeth flashed in a snarl of satisfaction. He reached out a foot and kicked the bottom of the heavily barred door. Eerie sound came in swift answer from inside. There was a splashing as of a heavy body in water, and an oddly metallic, stridulating call that rose in sharp crescendo until it beat unbearably upon the eardrums, then slowly died away.

Carlin's eyes gleamed. "The Dweller is awake and hungry!" he exclaimed. "Myers!"

A one-armed stalwart stepped forward from the ranks of the maimed. "Unbolt the door," Carlin

ordered. The man shot the steel bars back.

Kent's muscles tensed, as he measured the distance separating him from Carlin. The movement, slight as it was, did not escape Carlin's alert attention.

"Better not try it, Kent," Carlin warned in a voice that was taut with vibrant menace. "The instant you move I'll fire—and I'll send my first bullet squarely between the very attractive eyes of Miss Dorothy Lane!"

Stark insanity danced in Carlin's dilated pupils. Kent hesitated, then his shoulders sagged in surrender. Before he could possibly reach Carlin there would be a bullet in Dorothy's brain. There might be some faint chance against the unseen monster in the pool. But against the drug-inflamed murder lust of this armed madman there was no chance whatever.

Carlin snapped terse commands. The one-armed man cautiously swung the heavy door partly open. A reeking stench of slime and carrion surged out into the corridor. The clawing hands and jabbing arm stumps of the pack urged Dorothy and Kent swiftly forward. A final flurry of blows sent them staggering headlong through the door. Its heavy springs drew it promptly shut behind them. Metal crashed as the steel bolts slid home.

Kent blinked blindly for a moment. Then his eyes began to adapt themselves to the comparative darkness and he dimly discerned the outlines of the place. The room was a big rectangle, fifty feet in length by twenty in width. There was a single small bulb set somewhere in the shadowed joists of the ceiling, but its light was so feeble that the dim yellow glow did almost nothing to dispel the dusky darkness.

Like the rest of the basement, the walls were of roughly finished cement and the floor of earth. Near the far end of the room the floor fell sharply away in a pool some ten feet square. And from the stagnant black water of that pool, looming in the yellow-tinged gloom like some monstrous creature of the Pit, was a figure that was Horror incarnate!

CHAPTER IV

THE DWELLER IN THE POOL

THE creature's hideous head rose sharply to a rounded point, from the crown of which

sprouted two stubby appendages that looked like rudimentary antennae. The eyes were lidless, bulging blobs of viscous black. Two small nostril slits occupied the space where a nose should have been. The mouth was a mere gash, lipless, toothless, and chinless.

The Thing rested on its elbows on the low bank facing them, with the lower half of its body still hidden in the black waters of the pool. The shoulders were massively broad. The left hand was grotesquely deformed, the fingers bound together by a horny membrane and the nails enormously developed until they resembled talons. But it was in the right hand and forearm that the creature's transformation had reached its grisly apex.

From the right elbow to the wrist was what looked like a solid mass of chitin. The appendage that grew from the horny wrist was a giant pincer-claw fully eighteen inches in length, with razor-sharp edges that looked capable of shearing through flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter.

Where normal human skin should have been upon the Thing's head and torso, the creature was sheathed in what was apparently the horny carapace of a crayfish. Darkly glistening chitinous armor covered every visible inch of the Thing's body, and made of its crustacean-featured face a gleaming mask of nightmare horror.

Between the door and the pool the earthen floor was littered with gruesome fragments of the monster's food, broken and splintered beef bones, and chunks of meat, discolored and rotting. Kent's senses reeled from the putrescent carrion reek, blended with the dank, slime-wet scent of the obscene monster in the pool.

The Thing stirred sluggishly, and faint sound whispered through the chill gloom, the sibilant scraping of horny, chitinous surfaces against each other. It jerked itself stiffly forward upon its elbows, then clambered awkwardly to its feet. Its lower body and legs were sheathed in the same dully gleaming armor that covered its head and torso. Horror crawled like a worm of gray ice in Kent's stunned brain as he saw that the contours of the thick body were marked in faintly segmented areas like those of a giant crayfish.

The monstrous figure started slowly toward them, stumping along with a curiously stiff gait on its chitin-armored legs. The giant claw at the end of its right arm opened and closed with the snicking

rasp of steel shears. The murky blobs of the lidless eyes glowed redly chatoyant.

"Oh, Raoul! Raoul!" Terror and grief were pathetically blended in Dorothy's trembling cry. Before Kent could realize her intention the girl flashed by him to meet the advancing monster.

"Raoul! It's Dorothy, Raoul!" she sobbed desperately through terror-whitened lips. "Don't you know me? I'm Dorothy—your sister!"

Her pleading words had no discernible effect whatever upon the brutalized brain within the monstrous armored skull. The Dweller took another stiffly awkward step forward until it was within arm's length of the slender little figure confronting it. The great pincer-claw began to rise, moving steadily toward the girl's bare throat.

Dorothy sobbed aloud and instinctively threw up her right forearm in a guarding gesture. The path of the claw shifted slightly. The great jaws of the claw gaped hungrily wide, scant inches from the slender wrist of the guarding arm.

KENT'S heart went sick within him. The unspeakable condition of Vanders' mutilated body had given terrible evidence of the cutting power of those pincer-jaws. They could shear completely through Dorothy's wrist as effortlessly as a gardener's shears would sever a flower stalk!

Kent reached Dorothy with a hurtling leap of desperate swiftness. He snatched her left wrist and flung her bodily to one side just as the pincer-claw clicked futilely shut in the empty space where her arm had been a fraction of a second before. She stumbled to her knees on the earthen floor, shaken but unhurt, and safely out of the Dweller's reach for the moment.

Insensate hate glowed redly from the bulbous eyes in the armored skull as the Thing confronted Kent. The malformed arms rose in menacing attack.

Kent feinted a blow with his left hand, then slipped lithely to one side. The Dweller started to turn with him. One of the chitin-armored feet slipped on a slime-covered fragment of putrescent meat. The Thing staggered momentarily in an awkward effort to regain its balance.

Kent took instant advantage of the opening. His lithe body flashed in with every ounce of his weight solidly behind the left fist that he smashed home on the lipless mouth.

Pain grated in excruciating agony up Kent's

forearm as the bones of his fingers splintered against the horn-hard armor of the hideous head. The Thing, seemingly uninjured by the smashing blow, lashed out with its great pincer-claw.

Kent dodged frantically to one side, far enough that the clicking jaws missed his throat by a scant margin, but not far enough to evade the ponderous lunge of the chitin-sheathed forearm. The steel-hard bulk of the malformed arm crashed against his cheek. He reeled backward, half-stunned by the blow.

He regained his balance with a desperate effort. The Dweller stumped inexorably toward him upon its stiff legs, its pincer-claw gaping menacingly open. Kent gave ground warily before the creature's advance.

Despair numbed his reeling brain as he desperately tried to devise some means of penetrating the monster's impregnable armor. Fists were worse than useless against the horn-hard surface of that chitin-sheathed body, and none of the rotting fragments of bones scattered over the floor were large enough to serve as weapons.

Kent was forced inexorably backward until with a start of terror he realized that he must be approaching dangerously close to the pool. The Dweller was far more crayfish than man; water was its natural habitat. If Kent once allowed himself to slip into the black waters of the pool his last faint chance would vanish.

He shot a quick glance back over his shoulder. The pool was scarcely five feet behind him. Then suddenly faint lines of light overhead drew Kent's eyes. His gaze flashed upward for a fractional second.

His face hardened in swift realization of the startling significance of the dimly illuminated lines in the shadowed corner joists of the ceiling. For the first time he realized the real character of the Dweller. Hope surged in a mighty flood through Larry Kent's heart.

THE pool was not a trap of deadly danger. Instead, it was the only place in the room where he had a real chance against his frightful adversary! Water was the one thing that might penetrate that impregnable armor.

Kent's eyes intently narrowed as he turned again to the stiffly stalking Thing. He fainted a sudden movement as though to dodge to one side, then allowed his foot to slip on the damp floor. He

twisted his body as he fell so that he landed on his back almost parallel to the nearby bank of the pool.

The crustacean-armored Thing flung itself forward headfirst upon Kent's apparently helpless body, the great pincer-claw aiming for his throat. Kent's legs flashed up. They bent hard against his body, then straightened with the lashing thrust of pistons.

His feet caught the monstrous body squarely in the abdomen. The sheer power of his terrifically driving legs lifted the Thing bodily. It landed on the edge of the pool, tottered in a vain effort to regain its balance, and crashed heavily face-downward in the water.

Kent came to his feet with the lightning swiftness of a cat. He leaped high in the air from the pool's low bank. He came down with both of his heavily shod feet crashing solidly into the monster's armored head.

The water was shallow, scarcely more than a yard deep. The crashing impact of Kent's feet apparently partially stunned the Thing, for its movements were sluggish and groping as it twisted its body in an awkward effort to rise. Kent flung himself recklessly in to close quarters.

His knees clamped firmly astride the segmented back. He snatched for the Thing's right elbow with both hands. Fighting back a surge of nausea as the shattered bones in his left hand grated together, he slipped his grip with flashing speed down to the chitin-sheathed wrist. A savage lunge of Larry Kent's powerful muscles brought the murderously clawed member up and behind the gleaming back in a wrestler's hammerlock.

The deadly jaws of the pincer-claw clicked menacingly, but in that position the razor-sharp edges were unable to reach Kent. His knees tightened their clamping grip upon the Thing's body. He thrust forward with all his strength against the imprisoned wrist in a lunge that drove the shoulders and grotesque head beneath the black surface of the pool.

The Thing went berserker then. For a long mad minute of savage writhing it almost succeeded in breaking the grip of Kent's desperately clinging hands and knees. Then gradually the monster's struggles weakened.

Kent thrust the submerged head deeper. Bubbles came gurgling up through the dark water. There was a final convulsive movement of the segmented body, and it went suddenly limp and motionless.

Kent grimly kept the head submerged for another full minute. Then he cautiously relaxed his grip. There was no sign of movement from the armored figure.

He dragged the heavy body half out of the water on the low bank. There was a blur of movement in the gloom above him. He looked up and saw Dorothy's white-faced figure.

"Is he—dead?" she whispered through trembling lips.

KENT nodded. He bent over the still figure with swiftly exploring hands. The chitin armor was a cunningly contrived suit of jointed metal. The great pincer-claw was a device of steel, worked by the human hand inside it. Kent found a seam in the grotesque headpiece. Fabric ripped beneath the powerful twist of his fingers. He lifted the torn piece. A human face was exposed—the congested, twisted face of Jeffers!

Dorothy's voice choked in a muffled cry, Kent swiftly silenced her with a warning finger against his lips. He pointed toward the telltale lines of dim light in the ceiling above.

"That's a trapdoor opening into Jeffers' room," he whispered tersely. "Jeffers descended through it whenever it was necessary for him to play the part of the Dweller. The pool was empty when Vanders blundered in here tonight, so they had to kill Vanders then to keep his mouth shut. Jeffers must have cut him to pieces with the iron claw."

"But I thought that Jeffers was in bed afterward with a badly wounded side," Dorothy protested.

"That's what Carlin wanted you to think," Kent answered. "He probably planned to throw me in here to be killed by the Dweller later tonight. Jeffers' injury was faked to remove any suspicion in your mind that Jeffers had a part in my death."

Kent's glance flicked to the barred door. He could go up through the trapdoor and surprise Carlin from the rear, but the quickest and surest method would be to lure him into the room here. Kent sought quickly around him for a certain object that he knew must be somewhere near.

He found what he was seeking in a small niche near the wall. It was a little metal cylinder with a crank in one end. A slight tug at the crank indicated that this was the noise mechanism that had produced the eerily stridulant call from the Thing in the pool.

Kent hastily propped Jeffers' armored body on

its elbows on the bank in a rough simulation of life, with the torn flap again in place over the dead face. He handed the noise-cylinder to Dorothy.

"When I lift my hand, give that a single hard spin," then fling yourself down on the bank here as though you were either dead or unconscious."

Kent raced across the floor on silent feet. He crouched against the wall close to the door, then lifted his hand. Dorothy spun the crank violently. The wailing stridulation rose in savage crescendo, then died slowly away. Dorothy slumped to the floor in apparent collapse.

Kent's heart leaped exultantly as he heard the steel bars of the door slide back. He had been correct in guessing that the metallic call would be used as a signal that Jeffers' murderous work had been safely accomplished. The door was cautiously opened. Carlin's face appeared in the opening.

For a moment Carlin warily studied the scene. Then the sight of Dorothy's motionless body on the bank of the pool near the dimly looming armored figure apparently reassured Carlin that everything was all right. He slipped into the room. The heavy door thudded shut behind him. A split second later Kent was upon him.

HE twisted the gun from Carlin's hand, sent the man reeling with a smashing blow to the face, and snatched the fallen weapon up. Carlin's face went starkly ashen. He licked dry lips, and looked furtively back toward the pool. His eyes widened in stunned surprise when he saw Dorothy rise and come toward them.

"No help from there," Kent said grimly. "Your little pal is dead. He played the Dweller just once too often." Kent's voice hardened to the timbre of chilled steel. "Carlin," he grated, "you've got just one faint chance to ever get out of this room alive. And that is for you to talk—and talk quick! One of those two bodies I saw in the swamp was that of Raoul Lane. Why did you kill him?"

Physical courage was obviously no part of the mad biologist's makeup. He was a shuddering figure of abject terror as he stared at the menacing pistol in Kent's hand.

"I didn't kill Raoul Lane!" he protested wildly. "Jeffers shot him down when Lane became suspicious of things here and tried to escape."

"And you kept his death a secret from the others," Kent said, "because you wanted them to believe that Raoul had turned into the Dweller, and

because you also intended to use Raoul's supposed transformation to get money from his sister when she came."

Tears streamed down Dorothy's white cheeks at the tragic news of her brother's death, but she fought off collapse. In the corridor outside the door there was dimly audible the wordless babble of yammering voices as the maimed pack milled in dazed uncertainty, but Kent was certain that their overwhelming dread of the Thing in the pool would prevent any of them from opening the door to interfere. He remorselessly hammered away at the cringing Carlin.

"How about the other body in the swamp?" he asked.

"That was Blake. He died of a heart attack soon after he came."

"And the clawed Thing that dug the bodies up—was Bartlett wearing another costume like the one Jeffers wore?"

Carlin's face set stubbornly, then abruptly changed as Kent savagely ground the muzzle of the pistol into his abdomen. Words spilled from Carlin's gray lips in chattering terror.

"Bartlett wore no costume. His deformities were genuine. He was a microcephalic, a congenital idiot of the type commonly called 'pin-heads.' He was a sideshow freak when I found him. His pointed head and his weirdly deformed hand gave him the appearance of being part crayfish."

"The whole thing was a hoax, then," Kent grated. "You never used real crayfish serum in your injections, did you?"

"No." Carlin's voice sank to a broken whisper. "I gave the men nothing but a vaccine that caused a mild fever. Since then, I've kept them stupefied by drugs. There are no actual changes occurring in their bodies. Caustic ointments caused the scaly condition of their skin. The protuberances on the stumps of their limbs resulted from warm paraffin injected while they were unconscious."

DESPERATE resolve suddenly flamed in Carlin's wide-staring eyes. His right hand streaked to a pocket in his smock, and up again toward his mouth. The pistol in Kent's hand moved with the flashing speed of a striking snake. The metal barrel cracked with bone-splintering force against Carlin's wrist. Carlin yelped in agony. A small white pill fell from his limp fingers. Kent's foot ground the pellet into the earthen floor.

"Poison would be too easy a way out, Carlin," he said grimly. "You're going to live long enough to sit in the death-house and taste just a little of the torture you've given those poor devils out there!"

Carlin's gray features jerked spasmodically for a moment. Then he slumped abruptly to the floor in abject collapse. Kent stared briefly down at the miserably sobbing figure, then turned toward the door.

There was only one task remaining now, and it was a welcome one—the task of giving to the drug-dazed pack of the maimed the joyous news that would forever banish from their cringing minds the grisly fear that had made of this isolated torture-house a place of gibbering horror.