

*At a single stroke John Phillips saved his own life and Myrna's—but at a price worse than their double death.*



# Satan's Bargain

*by Maitland Scott*

**M**YRNA FARRAR stood in the moonlight on the lonely bridge and stared fixedly down into the dark, swirling water below. She knew that all she owned in the world was a certain beauty. But life had treated her too shabbily. She hadn't the heart to buffet it any longer. Wearily she pulled her threadbare skirt above her knees, swung one leg over the guard-rail. Then, suddenly, she stopped, straddling the rail. Her eyes were intent

upon the uncovered length of leg she had swung over.

Automatically, her feminine eyes had fastened on the sheer-silk stocking where it was stretching, at knee and rounded calf, with the strain of her movement. Her mind had immediately registered apprehension of a run in the hose. Bitterly she smiled, whispering:

"Me, afraid of a run in a mended stocking—when I'm going down there."

Suddenly running feet pounded along the bridge, a shout sounded, and the beams of an auto's headlamps lanced along the rail. A man was running to stop her from jumping, and she was spotlighted in the headlights of an approaching car.

Myrna swung the other leg over, clung with both hands to the rail for a moment and held her breath and closed her eyes. Just as she gained the courage to let go, Myrna Farrar felt herself fainting—then a falling, falling, falling sensation, and then blankness....

Coldness, aching coldness was at her throat. Then Myrna felt arms, hands, holding her. She forced her eyelids open. A face was close to hers—a young man's lean, handsome face, out of which clear-blue eyes stared earnestly at her. He was kneeling on the bridge, holding her in his arms; and he had opened her overcoat at the neck. She shivered, and he buttoned the coat against the wintry air. Gently, still gazing earnestly into her eyes, he lifted her to her feet.

Myrna saw that a long, black limousine had stopped at the curb of the bridge sidewalk, its interior darkened. Its chauffeur sat unconcernedly in the front seat, staring motionlessly ahead along the road. She noticed that the young man looked curiously at the car. Then he was looking into her eyes, saying:

"How could you do such a thing to yourself? Why, you're the most beautiful—" He had stopped in embarrassment, she realized. After a pause, he smiled bitterly and said: "I was about to jump, myself, when I saw you. The going isn't so easy for an ex-engineer without much experience. I'm not going to ask you why you were going to do it; there are too many reasons these days...."

Myrna Farrar realized that she liked this young man—a lot. Somehow, he reminded her of the prince on the white horse for whom she had been waiting since

childhood, but who had never come to her. Covertly she inspected him and saw that he was tall and capable, though a bit underweight, and that his clothes were as threadbare as her own.

"Let's get away from here, if you think you're strong enough to walk a bit," he suggested, taking her arm. "I don't like the looks of that darkened car," he added in a whisper.

Without speaking, she yielded to the pressure of his arm, and they started away when the door of the limousine clicked open and a tall, angular figure stepped out quickly.

"One minute, if you please," came a dry, harshly piercing voice.

Myrna and the young man turned about, halted. Myrna stared at the man who had stepped from the darkened limousine. He was well over six feet tall. His angular frame was enveloped in a long, sweeping, cloaklike greatcoat, the big collar of which was turned up, muffling his face to the eyes. Those eyes, dark as obsidian, bored at her from under the turned-down brim of a black slouch hat. Unconsciously she shivered, felt the young man's hand tighten on her arm.

**T**HE tall black figure stabbed a forefinger at Myrna, and again the dry voice sounded: "You are too young and too beautiful to die—*that* way." Myrna seemed to detect some strange, hidden meaning in the words, "that way."

"Allow me to introduce myself," the tall stranger was saying. "I am Hugo Ghent. I dare say you have heard of me, if you've lived in this big city for any length of time?"

Myrna nodded, saw that the young man holding her arm did likewise. This was Hugo Ghent, fabulously rich, an eccentric recluse who never left his great stone mansion except at night. Strange things about him had been hinted in venturing newspaper articles.

"You have been saved from death tonight, young lady. But I can make it possible that the cold waters of some—ah—unappreciative river will never embrace you. I can give you good, worthwhile employment. True, they say I do not show my face because I look like Death himself; but I can give you all the luxuries of life until you die."

Myrna imagined something sinister, something cryptic about his last three words, "until you die." She answered, haltingly: "Well, I really—"

Ghent interrupted with: "Yes, yes, of course, I know that you are uneasy; that this all may be very unusual, even though I have a sister to chaperon you. However, realize that I am offering you excellent employment—and the young man, too." Ghent swerved his black eyes to the young man's face, and watching, Myrna saw that they were so black as to appear to be empty, darkened sockets. "Perhaps that makes things better, for I—ah—see that you trust this young man. Both of you, what have you to lose?" he added significantly, gesturing toward the river below. "I overheard him say that he was going to jump, too." He paused, then suggested: "Suppose I give you a moment or two to talk this over alone?"

Hugo Ghent moved away. He stood motionless, his back to Myrna and the young man.

"He's rich; he could easily give us work," Myrna heard the young man echo her thoughts. "But there's something—there's plenty—about him that I don't like. Yet these eccentrics do strange things."

Myrna thought rapidly; then, against her better judgment, she found herself looking up into the young man's face and saying: "I wouldn't be afraid—with you. As he said: 'What have you to lose?' It seems that you are as badly off as I am."

He took both her hands in his, paused a moment, then said: "All right, it's a

go.... My name's John Phillips."

Myrna was thinking what a nice name John Phillips was as she said: "Mine's Myrna Farrar."

Hugo Ghent's tall figure wheeled around, as though by telepathy he knew that their decision had been made, and strode toward them. And all Myrna's apprehension of the strange man returned momentarily.

"We have decided to accept your kind offer, Mr. Ghent," Phillips said.

Myrna seemed to see a sudden gleam spring into Ghent's dark eyes as he said, quickly: "A very wise decision, one that will cause both of you to be of far better use than down there." He gestured toward the cold water of the river. Then he asked, slowly: "Any—relatives—or friends—to whom—you wish to—send word?"

"I have nobody," Myrna heard Phillips say.

"Nor I," she replied in turn.

"Good!" Ghent ejaculated, and Myrna thought that he said the word with a relief and satisfaction that meant he would have changed his mind had their answers been otherwise. But she managed to dispel such thoughts from her mind, telling herself that an overwrought imagination alone was the cause of all her fears.

After they had introduced themselves. Hugo Ghent ushered them into the limousine, saying: "We shall drive to my house immediately; I rather think you both need food. Again I shall leave you alone, that you may feel more at ease."

He clicked on the dim light in the ceiling—keeping his head bent low—and gestured to Phillips to put the lap robe over Myrna. Then he slammed the door shut and got in beside the chauffeur.

They were silent during the trip to Hugo Ghent's mansion outside the big city, and they remained silent when they saw the great pile of stone that formed it. Gray and aged and somehow evil, the square dwelling

squatted in the moonlight.

IT was a sumptuous though foreboding supper of which Myrna Farrar partook late that night in the gloomy dark-paneled dining room of the old mansion, after Sybla, Ghent's tall, piercing-eyed sister, had shown her her room. But Myrna's young body needed food, and gratefully she ate the first real meal she had had in several days.

Opposite Myrna sat Hugo Ghent. Looking at him, Myrna shivered. Ghent's face was so white it appeared to be white-washed, and the cheeks were sunken so deeply on either side of red, flaring nostrils that his head, devoid of any hair, was skull-like. So colorless was his full, sensual mouth, matching the skin of the face, that from casual observation he appeared to be lipless.

Little was said during the meal. Once Phillips, sitting beside her, squeezed her hand reassuringly under the table. She was happy to have John Phillips near her—John, as she thought of him. When Simon, the butler, brought the salad course, she noticed that the man's hand shook; that there was a peculiar, glassy look about his eyes. But what was beginning to take up Myrna's attention most was the manner in which Sybla kept staring across the table at John.

Ghent's sister was nearly as tall as he. Her characteristics were similar, except that she possessed a peculiar sort of voluptuous physical beauty. Her great black eyes scarcely ever left John's face, and Myrna could see that the woman's staring was embarrassing John.

As the meal wore on, Myrna met Ghent's black, unfathomable eyes more and more often, until he, too, was staring at her as his sister was at John. To Myrna it seemed as though both these strange people were watching, watching, watching them with some unnatural anticipatory interest.

Perhaps it was from the bitter winter

cold that could be felt in the draughty old house, perhaps it was from the influence of Ghent's boring eyes; but Myrna shivered, violently.

Hugo Ghent snapped: "Simon!"

The butler approached from the shadows, his hands twitching.

"Miss Farrar is cold. See if you can't have Mark bring up more heat. Tell him to stoke up the furnace—give the boiler as much pressure as possible."

WHEN the man left, John Phillips said: "Mr. Ghent, Miss Farrar and I are most anxious that you tell us the nature of our employment. Won't you tell us now?"

"My dear young friends," Ghent replied in his dry, throaty voice, "there will be plenty of time for that tomorrow. But I will tell you that your work shall be to aid my sister and me in some very unusual and interesting—ah—research that means a great deal to us. I am sure that you will both qualify excellently. Have no fears."

Ghent's sister nodded in agreement, then turned her steady, smoldering stare back to John Phillips' face. Myrna shivered slightly. Some feminine intuition told her that the woman's interest in John held something evil, unfathomable; and Myrna realized more and more just how much the blue-eyed youth had come to mean to her.

"But I really think, Mr. Ghent, that we should know a little more concerning whatever arrangements you plan for us," John Phillips was saying. "It seems—"

"Relax for a while, young man," Ghent interrupted. "You have both been through a trying night. Have your coffee and liqueur; then, since you insist, we shall go into full details."

Again Ghent turned to his sister, Sybla. She nodded, deep-red lips curving in a slow smile.

"Yes," she agreed, "in full detail."

In spite of the cryptic import that

seemed to underlie Sybla's answer, Myrna couldn't help enjoying the warming comfort of the coffee and liqueur. Then a delicious drowsiness commenced to creep over her, lulling and quieting every tired nerve in her body. She caught herself nodding, and thought that she was a great deal more tired than she had realized. She saw that John, too, was becoming sleepy-eyed.

Myrna Farrar got but a fleeting picture of the last of that dinner as she slipped off into a languorous sleep, but what she saw made the fingers of Fear tighten the strings of her heart.

Hugo Ghent had come close to her, and his hot breath was fanning her face. A supplicating, sideward glance toward John showed her Ghent's sinuous sister bending over John, a cruel, evil smile playing about the corners of her mouth.

CONSCIOUSNESS slowly reclaimed Myrna Farrar. She tried to turn her body, free it of lassitude. Cold, binding metal restrained her. With an effort she forced her eyelids open, and it was several seconds before the full horror of the scene took hold of her reeling mind.

She was in the cellar of the mansion, chained upright on an iron frame attached to a wall. Beside her, upon a similar frame, was John, who had come to and had twisted his head sidewise to look anxiously at her. Opposite her was Ghent, hands behind him, in a waiting attitude. Simon was in front of John, likewise. A few yards away, Simon and three other servants were grouped near the furnace, which pervaded the cellar with a dull, pungent heat.

Slowly the hands of Ghent and his sister came from behind them—holding long, cruel blacksnake whips. Myrna struggled to check the scream that rose in her throat. Mad, that's what they were. She and John had been trapped in a house of the mad!

Ghent turned and looked toward the servants at the furnace, and Myrna followed the direction of his gaze. The servants were grouped about two iron frames, mounted on small trucks, to which were chained a young man and a girl.

"Too bad—they'd have been good ones for our pleasure," Myrna heard Sybla say. "If you hadn't been so careless when you were bringing them here, they would not have had an opportunity to fight and you wouldn't have had to use your pistol."

Looking closely, Myrna saw that the girl and the man were wounded, weak—dying. Then Simon had the furnace door open, and red, licking flames from its heavily stoked interior were licking forth. With a start, she saw Ghent's method of disposing of his victims.

Near the massive door to the furnace room, a portion of the flagged flooring, heavily underlined with iron, had been removed to reveal a pit. Nausea gripping at her stomach, Myrna realized that the sickening tangle of charred objects at its bottom were—human bones, from which the flesh had been burned in the furnace.

But now Ghent's servant was pushing the frame on which the girl lay chained into the fiery maw of the furnace. As the flames curled hungrily around her, the girl straggled weakly. One weak, strangled cry came from her mouth as she was thrust into the big fire. Then the man was served a similar fate, shrieking and groaning in a last return of vitality, and Simon banged the furnace door shut.

Now Ghent and his sister turned to face John and her. Experimentally they hefted their long blacksnake whips. Snakelike, those whips curled upward and back in skillful hands. Then, as Myrna braced her body to take Ghent's blow, Simon ran forward to his master.

"Please—we can't wait—you must give me what I need. I must have it—now—"

now!”

Ghent and his sister lowered their whips, Ghent turned savagely on Simon. “Back, you fool. You’ll have to wait. You’re needing the stuff more and more often. Soon you’ll be of no further use to me.”

The three other servants had crowded up behind Simon, their faces supplicating, twitching spasmodically. Ghent made a threatening motion with his whip. Covering they retreated.

“You’ll wait, you craven pack,” Ghent said. He strode angrily to the one entrance of the furnace room, produced a key and locked the massive door, saying: “And you’ll not go ransacking the house for the stuff this time, the way you did the other night.”

**M**YRNA realized that drugs were the medium through which Hugo Ghent enslaved his servants, forced them to aid him in his evil madness. She shrunk involuntarily as Ghent paced back purposefully toward her. The cruelty in the man’s face was unbelievable.

Myrna knew that John and herself were at the mercy of two inhuman sadists: people whose only pleasure was inflicting pain. She had read of such monsters, but never had she realized their terribleness.

The biting kiss of Ghent’s whip-began against her tender flesh. The torture was fast becoming unendurable. Hugo Ghent’s pasty-white face swam before her eyes in a reddish mist. Between lashes she could see him pause, gasping, a smile of ecstasy coming and going across his features.

Her head slumped over to one side, the nerves in her neck gone dead. As though from far away, she heard her own agonized shrieks reverberating in the furnace room. Before blessed unconsciousness took her, Myrna saw John Phillips. He was groaning jerkily as Sybla, smiling with an evil joy,

was wielding her whip with frantic abandon.

Myrna Farrar’s senses returned to her with the exquisite sensation of life-giving, cool water trickling down her throat. One of the face-twitching drug-fiends was giving her water. Then something from the neck of a bottle put new strength into her body. She realized that John Phillips was whispering, rapidly, guardedly to another of the servants who was likewise reviving him. But Myrna was unable to hear what he was saying.

“Soon they will be strong enough for more,” came the low, vibrant voice of the evil, smouldering-eyed Sybla.

Loathing and horror seized Myrna Farrar’s very soul as she looked for a moment at the two expectant Ghents—waiting for John and herself to suffer again the agony that gave the brother and sister such frightful joy. And with the shock of that realization, her head drooped and her eyes closed.

Then Myrna’s head came up quickly at the scream of Sybla and the angry, half-choked shout of her brother Hugo.

The two servants who had administered whisky and water to John and herself, returning to replace the liquids on a small table, had suddenly attacked the two Ghents. Sybla lay motionless on the furnace-room floor, and just then, Hugo Ghent went down under the onslaught of all four servants.

Before Myrna could realize fully what had happened, she and John Phillips were free. Simon had secured Ghent’s keys and had unlocked their shackles. Then John was handed Ghent’s pistol.

“Take us to it—hurry!” Simon was begging, the twitching of his face and hands increasing with every word he uttered.

Myrna Farrar began to understand what had happened. When John had been whispering to the servant, it was to make the drug fiend believe that he could lead the way

to Ghent's dope supply once he and Myrna were freed.

Then the attention of the four dope fiends was drawn to Hugo Ghent, who stirred, got to his feet. Sybla was also coming to. The four servants, their faces working<sup>1</sup> demoniacally, advanced toward their master.

"Don't bother with him," John called out sharply. "I'll shoot him if he moves. Give me the key to the door—immediately!—or I'll change my mind about showing you where the drugs are hidden."

The servants halted, and Simon, carrying the keys, started toward the door.

Myrna was grateful for John's supporting arm as they started after Simon. They were actually about to escape from this house of mad horror; they would be free, together—John and she....

"You fools, stop! Can't you see it's all a trick. He doesn't know where I have the drugs. He'll turn you over to the law, and you won't get any of the stuff, and you'll suffer, suffer, suffer!"

His hideous, deathly white face contorted with rage, Hugo Ghent's harsh voice flung the words at his mutinous slaves while he kept a careful eye on the pistol in John Phillips' hand. And Myrna held her breath, fearful, trembling, clinging to John.

**S**IMON stopped, came back a ways, doubt showing in his eyes. The other servants wavered, undetermined. Then their indecision broke, and they came running—at John and herself, Myrna saw. She shrank against John, holding to him with clutching hands.

The revolver in John's hand roared three times in quick succession. The explosions made Myrna's ears ring deafeningly. She saw that only one servant had dropped; saw that Ghent had taken cover behind a pillar, dragging his sister

there with him. John shook her away from him, cursing, and she realized that her clutching, fear-driven hands had spoiled his aim.

Myrna Farrar's knees gave weakly under her body. She knelt on the hard flagging of the furnace room. She saw John's finger tighten on the trigger as the servants were almost upon him. Then a heavy shovel swished through the air and struck John's arm. He staggered, firing the revolver desperately until it was empty. But again his aim had been spoiled. Only one servant dropped.

Suddenly John dived for the shovel, seized it and struck out with his new weapon. The two servants backed away. Myrna saw John hurl the shovel, upwards, and in the next moment the furnace room was in darkness.

Desperate, outnumbered, John had chosen to take his chances in the dark. He had hit the bulb in the ceiling with the shovel.

Fearfully Myrna got to her feet, but she did not move from the spot for fear that John would be unable to find her. Then his arms were around her, and he was guiding her across the cellar. She tiptoed carefully, knowing that noise might cost them both their lives. They stopped. He lifted her, then was lowering her, his words a faint whispering in her ear.

"They won't look for you here—for a while, any way; not before I come back."

Her feet touched unfirm objects, hard, rounded, that shifted with her weight—and then John was gone. Suddenly she crouched down, horror bringing nausea to the pit of her stomach. She was at the bottom of the pit—among the charred bones of Hugo Ghent's victims—in the ghoulish hiding place where he hid their bones after burning the flesh from them in the furnace.

Presently a slight sound overhead added fresh terror to her horror. But a

reassuring whisper from John, told her that he had returned. Then a sinister fight commenced in the darkness between John and Ghent and the two remaining servants; a fight that Myrna comprehended only vaguely in her half-fainting state.

It seemed hours to Myrna, this strange fight that went on in the dark above her; the intermittent crash of thrown objects, occasional shuffling of feet, the dull *thwack* of a blow being struck. Then, from a far corner of the cellar, came a strange sound—sound of heavy, scraping noises. After a while she realized that some one, either Ghent or one of the servants, was pushing away coal—forcing a passage up the coal chute.

Trembling, Myrna realized that if the man got out, it would be only a matter of minutes until John and she were captured or killed. Their position, at the pit of bones, guarding the door, would be useless. The man could open the door from the other side—enter with light and a gun....

Suddenly John Phillips lowered himself into the pit with her, and she knew that he, too, realized what that noise meant at the other end of the cellar. She wondered why he did not make a desperate attack upon the man trying to get up the coal chute. Perhaps he feared to go too far away from her.

Desperately she clung to him, and her clutching hands felt the weapon he was holding. She shuddered involuntarily. He had been using a long bone as a club.

**J**OHN was reaching up overhead, struggling with something at the top of the pit. Presently Myrna knew that he had closed them in; that he had covered the top of the pit with the iron-reinforced section of flagging. Now there was complete quiet; as the opening had been closed, the sound of the man at the coal chute had ceased. But that quiet was soon broken—terrifyingly.

The ground trembled beneath their feet, and a terrific, crashing roar depressed Myrna's eardrums painfully. Then the thundering rumble of heavy objects falling overhead sounded as though the entire mansion was coming down upon them. Finally it was quiet again.

Gently but quickly Myrna felt John free himself of her clinging arms. Then he was struggling desperately at the opening overhead, panting with the effort. He was making a crunching, grinding sound. Myrna knew he was using the long bone, striving to gain leverage with it in order to move the section of flagging. The air was getting closer and closer. It was becoming more and more difficult to breathe in the cramped, limited space.

Dully Myrna Farrar felt her brain going numb as she reviewed, like a drowning person, every incident she had experienced in her life's memory. Then John was speaking to her, from above. She reached up, felt his grasping hands. In another second or two he had pulled her out of the loathsome pit.

The furnace room was wrecked, a shambles of destruction. A huge, gaping hole pierced one wall, letting in a silvery flood of moonlight. By its light Myrna saw the head and torso of Hugo Ghent, projecting from a heavy block of stone and mortar that had fallen upon him. No longer was his face gaunt and deathly white; now it was black and swollen around the purple tongue that lolled from it.

John's arm went around her, leading her toward the breach in the wall as he said: "Don't look, dear. Let's get out of here. They're all dead—there's nothing more to fear."

It was not until they had reached the state highway, a good half mile from the Ghent mansion, that they stopped and John explained what had happened.

"I was taking an awful chance,

Myrna, dear," he said. "But I had to try anything. It would have been only a matter of time until they overpowered me. When I left you for a while in the pit, I managed to close all the valves of the old-fashioned boiler—I even plugged the needle head of the safety valve."

Myrna thought with a start of what might have happened to John had the explosion happened before he had joined her in the pit and closed the flagging over them.

"And all the time you were up there, it might have gone off any minute and—killed you."

"It was the chance I had to take," he said simply. "I know something about boilers and furnaces, and I calculated the approximate time of the explosion. I had to stay up there on guard until the last minute. If they had caught us in the pit, they could

have killed us easily by throwing things down on us from above."

They turned together and looked back at the somber Ghent mansion.

"After all, Ghent issued his own death warrant when he ordered the furnace to be stoked to the limit. It's a good thing that you shivered so much at dinner. Otherwise the explosion might have come too late—or not at all."

Myrna felt John's arm tighten about her. Then he drew her close to him and was kissing her tenderly. After a minute or two they started off along the state highway, heading back toward the big city and the fateful bridge where they had met. Myrna Farrar was thinking that neither of them had anything more in the world than before, except for their love that gave them courage to fight life anew—together....