

*This Uncanny Story Will  
Give You a "Creepy" Thrill*

# A GAME OF CHANCE

By HENRY LIEFERANT *and* SYLVIA B. SALTZBERG

**T**HERE is an artificial quiet about the wards of a hospital more oppressive than the muteness of the dead. But the silence of a laboratory speaks! The centrifuge whirls in frenzy at your touch, a dancing dervish yielding to the breath of his god. The glass-ware tinkles like the joyous laugh of a

child at its mother's approach. Incubator doors open wide, saying, "Here are treasurers. Dig and find!"

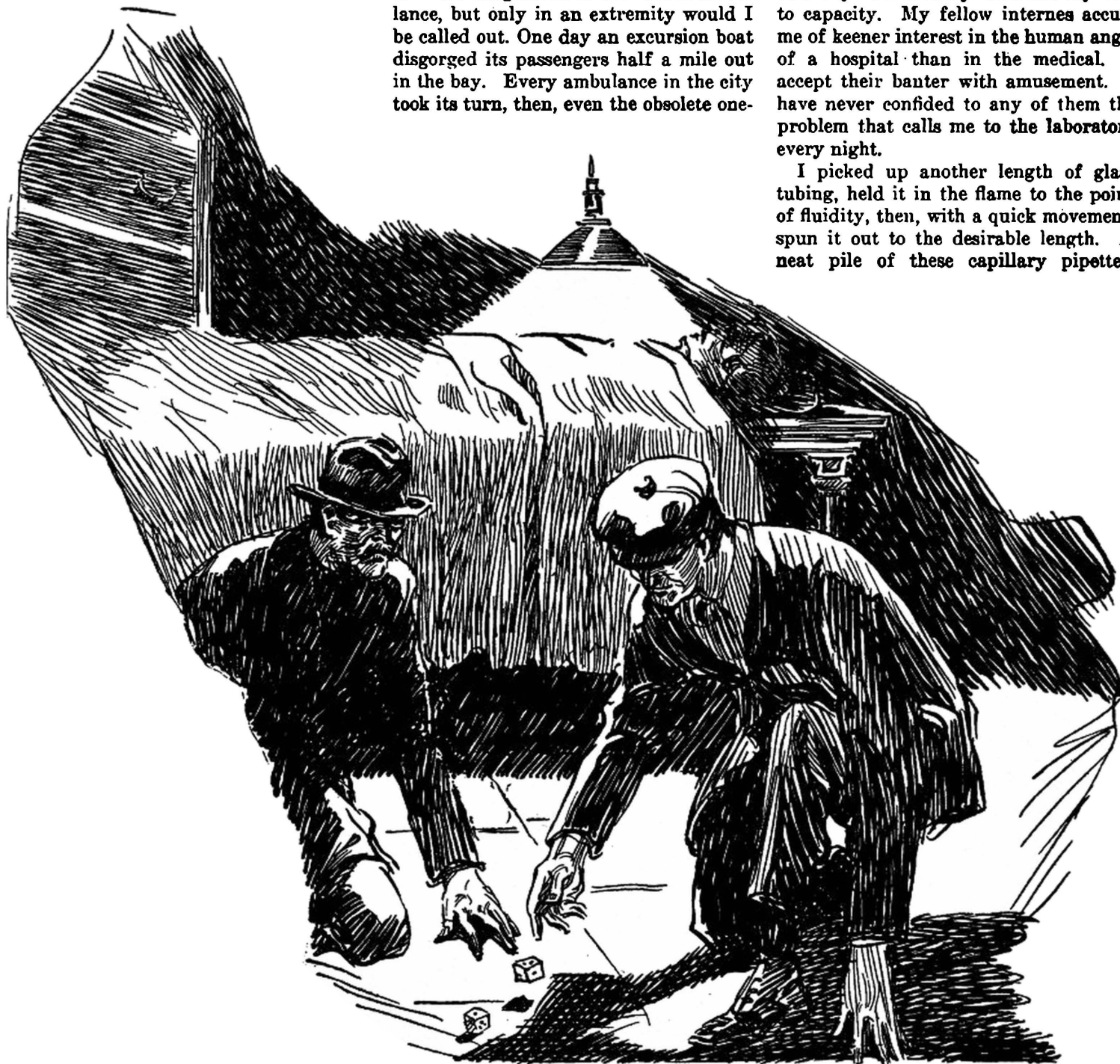
I worked late that night, later than usual. Free at length from the interruptions of a feverish day, I felt reasonably certain of my security. True, for the night I was riding fourth 'bus, as we term an assignment to the fourth ambulance, but only in an extremity would I be called out. One day an excursion boat disgorged its passengers half a mile out in the bay. Every ambulance in the city took its turn, then, even the obsolete one-

horse contraptions of the last generation. Only a month before, a ten-story, widely advertised bakery in the neighborhood—

Days after, the emergency wards reeked with the odor of burnt blood.

Selfishly, I admit, I hoped that the night would pass without a community misfortune. Enough of individual calamity had already crowded my day to capacity. My fellow internes accuse me of keener interest in the human angle of a hospital than in the medical. I accept their banter with amusement. I have never confided to any of them the problem that calls me to the laboratory every night.

I picked up another length of glass tubing, held it in the flame to the point of fluidity, then, with a quick movement, spun it out to the desirable length. A neat pile of these capillary pipettes,



made in spare moments, lay spread on a bed of cotton batting beside me, glistening, flexible, attenuated bits of glass thread drawn from a matrix of coarse glass tubing. In this fashion, too, had some master hand-moulded that girl with whom I had been talking during visiting hours—held her in the fires of experience to the point of dissolution, then twisted her sharply to a sensitive, fine-spun, fragile point, a vessel for poison or elixir as chance might provide. She had had no visitors. A tribute to the innate tenacity of the human organism it was, that the blow of the man she called her husband had not killed her. Spun glass with the strength of steel.

The far-off rattle of dishes from the kitchen preparatory to the serving of a midnight meal to the night staff emphasized my isolation. I decided to dispense with this midnight exchange of pleasantries. Peace and the comfort of undisturbed pursuits filtered through my tired brain. A glorious night of work if I chose to take it! I could wedge in a few minutes of sleep the next day. Even the garrulous morgue-keeper, whose tongue more than compensated for the many dumb ones in his domain and who could be expected two or three times of an evening to warm up, had gone—to visit a married daughter, he said. I remember wondering whether he jounced his grandchildren on his knee, taught them tricks and told them stories as other grandfathers do. Why not? There are men who make a living on hanging!

I pulled down the blue blind with ill-concealed irritation. A white light had suddenly spread over the courtyard and, blending with my microscope lamp, had paralyzed the effects of its rays. In the room where the light appeared lay a large Swede, too big for the ordinary hospital cot. He had been carried in that morning, still talkative. By sundown his jaws wore the grin of death, his limbs were rigid, his eyes glazed. Two days previous, an ordinary carpet tack had pierced his thumb. I felt in my pocket for the morgue key which the keeper had left with me. They might be coming for it any minute now.

Slide after slide, about a hundred in all, passed in review under the eye of my microscope. Gradually, Swede and girl, morgue-keeper, ambulance, hospital, everything dwindled to the relative size of the minute creatures whose habits had absorbed me completely. The organisms themselves—to the naked eye mere films upon a glass slide—usurped, in my world, that night, the place these other people had assumed.

Caught in the attitudes of life by the mordant I had applied, whole colonies

of micrococci, villages, towns, and nations, a veritable Pompeii of them bared intricacies of structure heretofore unreported in any journal of bacteriology. Not that I could claim, as yet, to have made a vital discovery. Only the presence of tiny specks on the surface of the micrococci, specks in each cell, consistently arranged in a characteristic formation stimulated my imagination to the point of unreality. Further investigation would be necessary before I could interpret their function. Further investigation—a whole day must intervene, a day of petty routine labors, of hospital rounds, of—

Might they not be the figures of some primitive karyokenetic process? The forces of some undeveloped sex instinct? *The anlage*, as it were?

The blood rushed to my head so that I could no longer see clearly. Door after door of Science swung open at the magic news of my discovery. Rocks moved! Fish talked! A hundred stained slides of *micrococcus haematodes* had conquered the world!

The *whir* of a 'bus engine close to my window, beyond the window, around the corner of the laboratory building to the morgue! The human mind at times is capable of a peculiar dual activity. While the focus of my consciousness centered on the illimitable possibilities of what I suspected was a sexual phase in the development of these lowest of plant forms, in the periphery of my consciousness, I concluded that a new driver must be handling the 'bus. Simultaneously, the two channels of thought continued their parallel course. What if these ultra-microscopic specks were the very entrails of life in its formative stage.

The old chauffeurs knew that the procedure was to turn to the right before the laboratory was reached and draw up at the emergency door, where a porter, summoned by the cacophonies of the 'bus bell would be waiting with a wheeled stretcher. If I asked to be released of a portion of my routine duties, perhaps there would be time to complete my investigations and obtain a hearing at the *National Bacteriologists'* before the end of the year. Credit would always redound to the hospital.

But the bell hadn't sounded! The 'bus had remained at the morgue door! There was the one conclusion.

"Damn that woman!" I heard Gleason say as I came up behind him.

The driver and a policeman who had apparently accompanied them had already tilted the stretcher from the rear of the 'bus. Without commenting on Gleason's remark, I bent over the dead woman. Under a dirty nightgown

(probably they had found her so) that clung tenaciously to her body as if it had not been removed for days, the woman's configuration was clearly discernible—swollen legs, distended stomach, bulbous breasts. Soggy skin hung from her arms and cheeks. Her lips, slightly parted in the relaxation of death, showed a marked outline of blue, the purplish-blue consequent to the inhalation of illuminating gas.

I turned on Gleason.

"Damn that woman!" he swore again, more viciously, continuing to brush the dust from his glossy white uniform. "Gas company was there when I arrived—pulmotor brought her around. Damn fool turned up her toes just as the 'bus got started."

THE policeman, making entries in a small black notebook, grinned his assent. Like the mercury in a thermometer, I felt my temper arising to burst its bounds. Gleason was a music lover, or claimed to be. Once a week, he and his fiancée permitted themselves the luxury of a concert. But an interne's salary is hardly elastic enough to include both the fine imposed upon him for bringing in a dead patient, and the price of a pair of tickets.

His reasoning was as ingenuous as a child's. Because one Mary Malloy's burdens had proved unbearable, he and his fiancée would be forced to endure each other's company at home, or in some neighborhood moving-picture house. Damn that woman!

To avoid argument with Gleason, I swung on my heel and followed the stretcher into the morgue. Our feet scraped jarringly on the cement floor. None of the external reverence and awe which custom, or perhaps fear, accord to the dead marked the temporary disposal of Mary Malloy.

"There she goes, boy! Shove 'er in! Watch out for the pigtail—"

"Mary Malloy—age thirty-six!"

The policeman, kind enough to relieve me of the duty, wrote her name on the tag with a flourish, rubbed his hands energetically as if washing them of the whole affair and bade us a cheerful good-night. The chauffeur lifted the heavy zinc cover, rattled it into place, once more tucked in Mary Malloy's recalcitrant braid of thick black hair, then thumped soundly on the cover to insure its stability.

"'Night, doctor. Guess she's safe!"

"Good-night!"

The discordant clatter of zinc, mingling with our voices reverberated down the corridor, bounded away from the closed metal doors of the locker room

and the autopsy theatre and returned twofold to the morgue proper. Side by side, bottom to top, the niches of the dead were embedded in the cement wall, four rows, five in a row, like pigeon-holes in a gigantic desk. Sometimes, when covers closed the fronts of all of them, they reminded me more of boxes on the shelves of a shoe-shop—all of one size, one color, one shape—with black figuring and lettering for more convenient identification, only that in a shoe shop one pair of shoes occupies one box. Here—new born babies are huddled six and eight in a niche to save room, until a truck from the department of Charities comes to cart them off, and in times of stress, when undertakers are busy—

I let myself into the laboratory by a narrow, almost unknown door connecting the two buildings. Marguerite Judson was waiting for me. All the iciness of the morgue melted from me while I watched from a corner, how she adjusted and readjusted the cap on her shining bobbed hair, cut sharply across the forehead after the manner of little boys. I could see two of her from my hiding-place—one in the flesh, slim with suppressed energy; one in the long glass door she was using as a mirror.

"I'm on duty in Ward Six tonight," she would say when I "hem" 'ed or "boo" 'ed at her from the door. "I saw your light burning. Everybody's asleep—I thought I'd come down."

Silly play-acting, of course—as if she didn't know that apologies were unnecessary—but nevertheless a delightful opening for whatever we had to say to each other. Unfortunately, she had been on night duty for a month, and I on day.

I resolved to remain concealed for another few moments until the cap should conform to her idea of what would attract me most. It would be too cruel to her to appear before. Then, entirely without forethought, my gaze wandered off to the table where I had left the tubes with which I had been working.

"Marguerite Judson!" I bit out sternly.

She shrank against the wall—covering her mouth with the back of her hand in fright.

I cleared the room in two strides. "You nurses could drive a corpse mad!" I cried. "You've disarranged my tubes. Thought they were gorgeous colors, I suppose, thought you'd like to play with them! In the operating room you're afraid to touch an instrument. You women! Ugh!"

Up went Marguerite Judson's head. Her sudden recuperation should have been a warning. Had I called her an

incompetent individual, or a meddling female, she might have humbled herself sweetly, and later proved to me the injustice of my opinion. But when a man incriminates the whole of womankind for what a woman believes is some personal fault of her own—

On behalf of her sex and her profession, Marguerite Judson slammed the door.

In a fury I swept my disordered tubes back into the incubator. I pulled out my watch. Two o'clock! At that hour the omnipotence of *micrococcus haematodes* no longer seemed a thing of the immediate future. Work—work—and years of harder work! A cutting wind blew in from the morgue under a crack in the door. It cooled my puerile anger.

Marguerite Judson, I felt convinced at the time, would never talk to me again. Why had Mary Malloy resorted to suicide? Gleason would sing to another tune in the morning when the *Local News* appeared with a sob-enrusted account of the valiant young ambulance surgeon who had fought tirelessly to save the suicide's life!

I was tired, dead tired. To another in my state I could have given sound advice, but because I had goaded myself beyond the point where exhaustion ceases to be exhaustion and becomes nervous irascibility, I cast about persistently for some interest to keep me awake. The silence of the laboratory taunted me now. Still it said, "Here are treasures. Dig and find." But I knew that I could not dig and find unless I insured myself against interruption.

I walked through the laboratory closing up for the night, unwilling to leave, hoping against hope that something would detain me. A guinea-pig I had bled late in the afternoon squealed like a rubber toy at my approach. I fed him a few lettuce leaves and a handful of oats. Two white mice, who should have been torpid with pneumonia were chasing each other up and down the miniature stairs in their infirmary. From the confines of an alcohol jar, the lidless eyes of a two-headed infant monster followed me about uncannily.

**A**LL at once the muteness of the morgue enticed me. I had no business to go up to my room, after all, for on the autopsy table the keeper had left for me the disemboweled body of a woman, the cause of whose death the coroner's physician had been unable to discover. I had a theory about that woman.

The morgue keeper would be down early next morning to sew up the coroner's cut, lest his infraction of the

rules be discovered by some early-prowling undertaker. The woman's family would come for their dead. I only wanted her heart, anyway. The woman's family! As I returned to the morgue, locking the little door behind me. I recalled what the hospital historian had told me of the family. Likely as not, she would be in her niche another day or two until the matter could be settled amicably. Two men had come to the office, each within a short time after the woman's death, each with a marriage certificate and several pictures, each claiming to be her husband. Would the third man, under whose name she had entered the hospital, assert his rights in the morning? Had there really been a third man?

I switched on the white lights. Another gust whirled through the morgue, twisting and turning the tags on the covered pigeon-holes until their scrapings against the metal sounded like the gnawing of rats from within.

The odor of death, obstinate despite disinfection, more obstinate now because of the uniced cadaver exposed all day, seemed to saturate my clothes instantly as a single plunge into water will saturate them. From the center of the slate table a drain pipe dripped a mixture of clotted blood, body fluids, and water into a tin pail below. I found myself crossing the morgue to the steady rhythm of it. *One—two—three—four! Drip—drip—drip—drip!*

Some facetious nurse, wearying of the endless one-inch bandage and square knot, had tied the woman's jaws with a three-inch bandage, securing the band by a flippant bow over the left ear. Instead of the usual impression of a corpse with a tooth-ache, the variation in method produced a corpse decked out for a party. In the recurring drafts that whistled through the door, the blood-stiffened ends of the bow fluttered and grazed each other. Contrary to rules, a pair of imitation jade ear-rings and a ring to match had been left on the body. The right arm dangled limply over the edge of the table. It interfered with my work, annoyed me, in fact, for it scraped against my trousers every time I bent over, like fingers trying to pick my pocket.

I lifted out the woman's heart. I examined it. In the gross, nothing was to be seen. I weighed it in my right hand. Normal to the touch, yet—inside—I suspected that Becker at St. Sebastian's would be profuse in his thanks for that heart.

Quite suddenly, then, as a dog will bark at some unseen danger, or a cat arch her back, my hand remained sus-

pended in mid-air. I knew that I was not alone! *One—two—three—four! Drip—drip—drip—drip!* All doors were locked. The dead were—dead. Yet I knew that I was not alone. Close upon the conviction came the sound of footsteps in the corridor, of short, labored breathing, of heavy bodies zig-zagging, it seemed to me, now to one side of the corridor, now to another.

What could I do? I slipped the heart into my coat pocket. Where could I hide! I did not believe in spectacular heroics. When I learned the purpose of the intruders there would be time enough to sound the alarms. I slunk into the only shadowed and sheltered corner of the morgue.

The footsteps, close upon me, halted. Voices:

"She's mine, I'm tellin' yuh!"

"The devil she is!"

"We'll see."

Over the autopsy table the two men leaned with ghastly unconcern. I could not see them well, but their necks, red, thick and dirty, told the story of their faces. The first speaker opened his mouth. The smell of whisky reached me. His tongue bunched and stumbled.

"All dressed up, ain't yuh darlin'?" he whined, fingering the spattered bow.

"All dressed up and waitin for me, eh?"

I fancied his voice, clouded though it was, boasted a tinge of triumph. The other fellow's head rolled unsteadily.

"I got pictures," he mumbled. "Pictures 'n ever'rything. You ain't gonna—I tell yuh what!"

Something, at the moment incomprehensible to me, passed between the two sotted figures. In a trice they were kneeling. The table cut them from my view. The rattle of small objects, perhaps buttons or stones, rose sharply above their asthmatic wheezing. Buttons, or stones? Curiosity made me bold. I took a step out of my corner. Neither man noticed me. I took another, then another. I was behind them!

*Drip—drip—drip—drip! One—two—three—four!* Under the very pendant hand of the woman, the two men were shooting dice!

I fingered the heart in my pocket. Through a life-time it had been the physical symbol of what these men desired. Over and again the dice fell sharply on cement. Now one man leered with approaching victory. Now the other

snatched it from his grasp. Oaths filled the gaps. The ring of metal startled them. They looked around, fortunately not in my direction. The bit of imitation jade set in gold dropped from the woman's finger!

"You talkin', babe?" the loquacious one laughed raucously at his own humor. He gave the hanging hand a generous squeeze. Once more their heads swayed toward each other. More desperate rattling of dice! The game resumed!

I have no standard to judge the passing of time. The far-off rattle of dishes announced preparations for the last meal of the retiring night-staff. A 'bus bell clanged. A light in the maternity operating room blazed. I turned up the collar of my meager twill coat. The tension became unbearable.

Slowly, cautiously, a half-foot at a time, I edged toward the door. Concentration engulfed the men.

*One—two—three—four. Drip—drip—drip—drip!* It struck me that the joy of the winner would be an unholy sight. I could not stay.

My fellow internes, I think I've told you, accuse me of unscientific reactions.

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