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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Beyond Death's Gateway

By PAUL ERNST

An utterly strange story about the world's weirdest criminal, who calls himself Doctor Satan, and his amazing journey through the door of death

THE sea was as calm as a pond. Over it the great ship floated like a ghost vessel, dipping a little to long, slow swells but otherwise as motionless as a thing on a backdrop. The white moon poured down its peaceful flood, but somehow the peace was an eerie thing and not reassuring.

In a large cabin on deck A, two men sat behind a locked door and talked in whispers too low to be recorded if there were a dictograph receiver concealed anywhere. One of the two had the often-photographed face of Assistant Secretary of War Harley. The other was Jules Marxman, inventor and manufacturer.

Harley, a slim, precise, elderly man who looked more like a high school principal than an important Government official, shook his head a little.

"Then, as the invention now stands, it is useless," he summed up.

Marxman, the inventor, nodded his bushy gray head. His heavy, grizzled brows drew into a straight line.

"Useless," he conceded. "I have the formula for the poison gas completed. It is perfect—a gas so volatile that it spreads at a rate of a hundred feet a second in all directions, and wipes out all living things, including vegetable matter. But its very speed makes it impossible to use it as other war gases are used. It would wipe out the men releasing it as well as the enemy."

"Special masks to protect our own men?" suggested the Assistant Secretary of War.

Marxman shook his head.

"I thought of that, of course. I worked along that angle for a time. But no mask can be devised to protect a man from the gas. So the answer lies in another direction. That is, an antidote of some sort for it that will permit the men releasing it to feel no ill effects from it."

"That sounds difficult. Look here, couldn't the stuff be shot from guns to explode and radiate at a distance?"

"No. It is so highly explosive itself



"The hand drove for Doctor Satan's throat, and found it."

that no shell can be designed to keep it from exploding when the gun charge bursts, when its high volatility spreads it all around the gun. Again, our own men would die from it. No, the only answer is the antidote that will make the corps releasing it immune to its deadly effects."

Harley stroked his long, spare chin.

"You've worked along that line, Marxman?"

"Yes. I have been working on an antidote for eighteen months. The final solu-

tion is not yet worked out. But I'm getting close."

Marxman looked at the locked cabin door, and lowered his voice still more.

"I have an antidote at present that will counteract the effects of the gas. But its own effects are almost as serious: The man who takes it literally dies for a short space of time. His heart and breathing stop. Blood circulation ceases. He's a dead man—for about twelve hours. Most curious."

"And most unfortunate," Harley said dryly. "In twelve hours the enemy from beyond the radius of the spreading gas could gun and bomb the helpless crew out of existence. But tell me, how can men 'die' for twelve hours, with the blood stream stilled and liable to coagulate, and then come to life again? Or—do they?"

"Yes, they do. I don't yet know how. The blood should coagulate, but it doesn't. Perhaps some life force beyond power of detection still functions enough to keep the body in shape to be reanimated when the effect of the antidote wears off. Anyhow, that's what happens to a man who takes it in its present state. He literally dies for half a day, then comes slowly back to life again."

"Have you tried it on anyone?"

Marxman nodded. His face was a little paler than normal.

"What happens to the subject of experiment?"

MARXMAN looked at Harley for a moment before replying.

"I tried it on a dock laborer, several times. He wasn't a clever or educated man. He didn't manage to express very well the things that happened to him. But as far as I could gather, he was in the land of the dead during the coma induced by the drug."

"Land of the dead!" Harley exclaimed. Then he smiled. "And where is that?"

"I don't know."

"What's it like?"

"I don't know that, either. My man hadn't the vocabulary to describe such things in the first place. In the second, he didn't want to talk! And, though he was fearless in a blunt, animal way, he refused to take the stuff more than twice."

"Probably it has some sort of hashish effect," said Harley, shrugging. "'Land of the dead!' That's a little thick! But

regardless of that angle of it—the poison gas invention is not yet ready to turn over to the war department. Is that it?"

"That's it," said Marxman. "The gas is perfected, but the antidote is not. And until it is, the whole thing remains only a novelty, a dream of empire that can't be crystallized till I have finished work."

Harley fingered his lean chin.

"Don't overlook the fact that, even as matters stand, you have a very valuable secret," he warned. "Any power on earth would pay millions for the uncompleted formulæ, on the chance that they could work out the conclusion in their laboratories. You have the formulæ written out?"

Marxman nodded.

"They're too complicated to carry in my head."

"You keep the papers in a safe place?"

Marxman smiled a little. He drew from his vest pocket a small capsule, like a quinine capsule. It looked like some sort of dyspepsia medicine he carried for use after meals.

"The formulæ are on onion-skin paper, in this capsule. If ever I am threatened for them, I swallow them. The capsule dissolves in my stomach—and so do the formulæ! I hope the necessity for swallowing them doesn't arise, for it would take me six wasted months to re-discover a few of the obscure chemical combinations in the formulæ. But it can be done if necessary."

Harley nodded. "As safe a way as any, I think. Well, good-night, Marxman. Take care of yourself, and for God's sake give the United States first chance at your gas and antidote when it's worked out."

"I am American," was Marxman's simple answer. "I have worked in France because a colleague there has just the laboratory equipment I needed. That's all. My own country gets the invention

when it is completed, as a matter of course."

The two men shook hands. Harley left Marxman's cabin.

MARXMAN stared at the little capsule in his hand, which contained the nucleus of the mightiest war weapon ever devised. Then he slipped it into his vest pocket again.

The night was warm, almost stuffy. He lit a cigar, put on a plaid cap, and went up on deck. . . .

At that moment, in the salon at the opposite end of the ship, from which he had not stirred all evening, a man who looked like a high school principal but was really Assistant Secretary of War Harley, was talking in low tones with his secretary, a good-looking young fellow of twenty-eight.

"I hear Marxman is on board with an interesting invention," the secretary was saying. "Are you going to see him?"

"By all means," said Harley. "I think a little later in the evening. . . ."

Marxman passed the windows of the salon without looking in. Assistant Secretary of War Harley had already seen him, he thought. It never occurred to him that a man could make up like Harley so exactly as to fool him—he was well acquainted with the man—and then proceed to pump him dry of details concerning his latest invention.

He walked to the rail, fingers touching the capsule in his vest pocket.

SEA calm as a pond. Great ship like a ghost vessel floating over it. Moon pouring down a peaceful but somehow eerie white flood.

From the stern came strains of music as the ship's orchestra played for those in evening dress who cared to dance. From the salon nearest to where Marxman stood by the rail came a burst of

laughter as members of a salesmen's convention to Europe laughed over a joke.

Right behind Marxman there was an iron staircase leading up to the boat deck. From that deserted upper deck a figure appeared. It blotted out the faint light at the head of the stairs. It began to descend, slowly, without a sound, like a great snake slithering down on its prey.

Once Marxman turned for a moment. The black figure became a motionless blot on the staircase. Marxman looked out over the sea again. Then the figure recommenced its crawling descent. A faint streak of light from the drawn shutters of a near-by cabin flicked over it.

It revealed a form in a black cloak with a black hat pulled low. That was all. The face could not be seen. Yet evil radiated from the form as heat radiates from black-hot iron..

The black figure reached the deck and took two rapid strides toward the inventor. . . .

Gay laughter from the salon—casual music from the dance floor—and on the deck, death!

Marxman tried to cry out. A steely arm hooked around his throat prevented a whisper from coming from his lips. His hand darted for his vest pocket and he raised the capsule to his lips and took it into his mouth.

The arm around his throat was replaced by steely hands. He couldn't swallow. His face grew blue, purple, with eyes starting from their sockets as he fought for breath. Then his writhing body became still. It hung from the iron grip of the hands around his throat.

One of the hands shifted. Fingers, gloved, pried open Marxman's jaws. They took the melting capsule from his mouth. Then the dark figure heaved up-right.

A thing like a badly tied bundle of rugs went over the ship's rail. There was

a faint splash, almost inaudible in the plashing of the ship's progress.

The dark figure watched Marxman's body float astern like a drift log in the white wake of the moonlight. Then it turned, and melted into the darkness of the nearest companionway. And with it went the formulæ of the new gas—and its partly perfected antidote.

2

ON A hill fronting the shore of the bay among great estates forming the cream of the big houses in the wealthy resort town of Red Bank, New Jersey, was the home of Linton R. Yates. A thirty-room mansion, it crowned the hill like a coronet of gray, cut stone.

At the moment it was dark. No lights showed from any window, even the windows in the servants' quarters. It looked empty. But it wasn't. In the darkness of the side driveway a roadster stood. The roadster had been driven there, alone, by Linton Yates himself. And Linton Yates was at present in the basement of the house.

Down there, with none of the electric light showing from any barred and steel-shuttered basement window, he stood beside the square furnace at the end wall. His withered old hand went out. He touched a small discolored patch in the wall next to the back of the furnace. A section of the wall hinged out.

Gray-bearded, wizened, crafty-looking, the rich man stared furtively around him before he stepped into the hidden basement room revealed by the swinging back of the concealed door. As he entered the room he touched another discolored patch in the stone wall, and the door closed after him.

There was a great safe door in the floor of the ten-by-ten cube. So large was it that it almost formed the floor of the room. Rubbing his hands together with

a dry, rasping sound, Yates walked over the safe door to a big knob in its center. He twirled that to the required combination, walked off the door, and threw a small switch.

There was a hum as a half-horsepower electric motor spun gears that slowly raised the ponderous door. Yates went down two steps into the safe. Here was a great heap of small, dirty yellow bars, and a square steel box. The yellow bars were gold; tons of the stuff, hoarded here by Yates against the day when the country would return to the gold standard—at a new and high dollar-value that should give him two dollars for every one he had spent for the precious metal. The steel box. . . .

Yates chuckled aloud as he passed the bars of gold and went to the box. It weighed perhaps a hundred pounds. It was with a panting effort that the wizened old man managed to open the lid. With the lid opened, he crooned aloud, as a man might talk to an adored pet.

A coruscating, varicolored fire came from within the box. It was cold fire. Yates plunged his hands in and lifted them. The fire trickled back down between his fingers and into the box again. The fire of diamonds, hundreds of them, unset but perfectly cut.

Diamonds and gold! The two commodities, particularly gold, that always have at least some solid worth, no matter to what low price levels other commodities sink.

"With these," whispered Yates, eyes gleaming, "I am secure. No man or form of government can harm me—make me poor."

He let diamonds trickle through his claw-like fingers again, then stiffened suddenly.

But his stiffening was not that of alarm, nor was it that of listening. He stared straight ahead of him, at the steel

and copper wall of the sunken safe. But he did not see that wall. His filmed eyes were glazing rapidly, as the eyes of a man glaze in death. His body was as stiff, suddenly, and for no apparent reason, as a thing of wood.

For perhaps a full minute he stood there, bent over the box a little, with the last of the diamonds trickling from his cupped hands to the strong-box. Then, slowly, he began to sag toward the floor. He sank to his knees, his rigid stare still centered on the safe wall. He fell, like a falling log, prone beside the treasure box.

He was dead. A glance could reveal that fact. But in a moment it was revealed that his death was not the most horrible part of the unseen drama to be played in the sunken safe.

The dead body abruptly began to lose its solidarity of outline. Its demarcations became blurred, as the surface of hot stone is blurred when heat waves shimmer up from it. And as the outlines became more and more blurred, they commenced to dwindle.

The dead body shrank, like wool in hot water. It got smaller and smaller, till it was like the form of a doll dressed in doll's clothes to resemble an old man. And then—there was nothing in the safe but the dirty bars of gold and the small box of gems. At least, a glance would have intimated that there was nothing. Only a careful look would have shown, on the floor beside the box, a tiny thing like a watch-charm shaped in human form.

That was at eleven-thirty at night. At twelve, a big closed car drew up behind Yates' roadster under the side portico. The closed car had come thirty miles in thirty minutes. From it descended a figure cloaked in black, with a black hat on its head the brim of which hid all trace of its features.

The figure worked an instant with the lock of the side door, opened it, and walked in darkness to the basement stairs. Beside the furnace a gloved hand—gloved in red instead of in more conventional hue—went out and touched the discolored patch.

Leisurely the figure went into the hidden basement room. It lifted the box of gems first. The box was borne to the big closed car. Then, bar by bar, the gold followed, carried by the dark figure as though the two hundred and fifty pounds each weighed were scarcely more than a normal load.

With plenty of time between trips, the big car was loaded till it sagged drunkenly low on its springs. Then it was backed out of the drive under the red-gloved hands of the dark form at the wheel.

It slid soundlessly into the main road, turned, and took the wide pike toward New York City. . . .

IT WAS at three in the morning when the Red Bank chief of police, a dark-faced, slow-moving man named Carlisle who was high in New York's detective bureau, and a man with black hair and steel-gray eyes, entered the sunken safe in the hidden basement room.

"See?" said the Red Bank chief. "It's all like I phoned you, Carlisle. Yates' roadster is at the side door, lights out and motor cold. The cook next door reported seeing the old man drive in, and after he'd been in the place two hours, with no lights on, she had sense enough to think something funny was going on, and phone me. But I get here and find this safe open and empty, and no sign of Yates! Now where the hell is he? He ain't in the house, and he ain't on the grounds. He couldn't have gone far without his roadster. And anyhow, his safe's cleaned. It must have had some-

thing pretty valuable in it. He certainly didn't clean it out himself and then just walk away somewhere leaving it wide open!"

The tall man with the coal-black hair and the gray eyes stooped suddenly. He picked up something from the floor, near a square in the dust that looked as though a box had rested there recently.

"What'd you find, Keane?" Carlisle asked.

Ascott Keane, probably the most competent detective alive, though few knew him as anything but a polo-playing rich man's son, faced Lieutenant Detective Carlisle.

"Nothing but a burnt match," he said, holding out a paper match with a charred end. "I don't think it will tell us much."

He gave the charred match to Carlisle.

But into his coat pocket went another small object, hardly bigger than the match, which he had picked up from the floor at the same time and palmed.

Carlisle grunted at the match, then looked expectantly at Ascott Keane.

"Well," he said, "you once told me to get in touch with you any time an especially mysterious crime was done. This is crime, sure enough. And damned if it isn't mysterious enough. Think your pal, Doctor Satan, did it?"

Keane shrugged.

"There undoubtedly was something of great value in this carefully concealed strong-room. There must have been a great deal of it. Probably hoarded gold. Certainly Yates wasn't able to carry it away: he was an old man, rather feeble. *Somebody* got rid of him, somehow, when he was down here counting over his buried treasure, and then carried off the treasure! And from the complete absence of all clues I'd say the person clever enough to do that might have been—Doctor Satan."

Carlisle stared curiously at Keane.

Keane's face was as calm as a poker-player's. But it was to be noted that fine beads of perspiration were on his forehead, and that his cheeks were not quite as calm as his expression. Hard muscle ridged them.

"That all you got to tell me?" he said.

"That's all for the moment. I think I'll run along——"

"But you just came!" Carlisle said, disappointed and a little suspicious. "You haven't looked around at all."

"Looking around won't get you anywhere—if this *is* the work of Doctor Satan. And I'm sure it is. A lot of quiet study in a secluded spot is more to the point. I'm off to indulge myself in that now."

He nodded to the two men, and left the basement.

BEHIND Yates' car was the police car the Chief and Carlisle had come in. Behind that was Keane's long, low-hooded sedan with its streamlines and its hundred and thirty miles an hour of speed under its hood.

Beside the driver's seat was a girl, waiting for him. She was tall and lithe. Her dark blue eyes, in the light from the dash, softened as they turned on him. Her hair, escaping in a few tendrils from under a smart, small hat, was coppery brown. This was Beatrice Dale, Keane's secretary. No, more than secretary! She was his able assistant, his right-hand man. More than once in his pursuit of the monster of crime who called himself Doctor Satan, Keane had reached the point where he could hardly have carried on without her aid.

"What did you find?" she said eagerly, as he took the seat beside her and started the motor. "Was it—Doctor Satan's work?"

Wordlessly, in answer, Keane handed her the small thing he'd picked up from

the floor of the rifled strong-room. Then he slid into reverse gear as she looked at it.

"Ascott, what is it?" Beatrice said. "It looks like a tiny doll. Yet it gives me the creeps somehow. It seems to be made of rubber or some such stuff. A little doll, hardly more than half an inch long. What is it?"

Keane tooted the car onto the highway and started along the New York pike. He glanced somberly at her.

"What is it? Well, it isn't a doll. Here, give it back to me before I tell you."

He took it from her fingers and put it back into his pocket.

"That," he said, "is a man. Not a doll. A dead man!"

"What——" Beatrice faltered.

"It's the remains of Linton R. Yates. Now, you're not going to faint! I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you were apt to do anything silly."

Beatrice Dale straightened her swaying body in the seat. She drew a deep breath, and her voice was measurably calm as she said:

"You flatter my nerves, I'm afraid. My God! A dead man! And I held it!"

It was notable that she didn't question for an instant the statement that a thing like a tiny doll, which could be held in the palm of her hand, was, impossibly, a dead body. She had worked with Keane long enough to know that his statements were apt to be infallible. And the *feel* of the little thing that "had given her the creeps" bore out his fantastic declaration.

"Yes," he said as the car leaped toward eighty miles an hour, "that little thing is Linton Yates, retired oil magnate. Can you imagine his loving family gathered around that, during a burial ceremony? Like burying a watch-charm with all due pomp and surroundings!"

"Then it *was* Doctor Satan! Nobody else on earth could have done so hideous and bizarre a thing! But how——"

She stared at him, still pale, eyes wide.

Keane frowned at the night, into which they were boring at express train speed.

"I think I know how. I'll make sure when we've got to my library at home."

THAT was at a little after three. At four, they stood in Keane's book-lined library beside the great ebony desk at which he had sat studying so many problems arising from the ghastly genius of Doctor Satan.

Keane was reading a two-year-old scientific paper entitled *The Possibilities of a Death, or Disintegrating, Ray*, by someone named Bernard Hallowell:

"The death ray, so-called from popular speculations of a disintegrating device by the public press, is not at all an impossible dream. I am working on some such device now. I have come close to its solution several times. As none of the features of my invention has yet been perfected to the point where they can be patented, I will naturally not reveal particulars to you. But I can describe the result of the machine when—and if—it is completed.

"My apparatus could be pointed and aimed as accurately as any gun, so that the ray it emits can kill one person, and one person alone, at a distance up to forty miles. Or the ray could be so diffused that all things within a forty-degree arc of its muzzle (at a lesser distance, however) would die. The ray strikes instantly dead the thing it is loosed upon. Then it further disintegrates the flesh of the carcass by causing the molecules to split apart and stream away, through solid objects around it, and eventually into empty space. How can I know this, when I have never yet quite

completed a machine? My only answer, unfortunately not provable since I cannot let anyone see the fruits of my experiments to date, is that I have come near enough to the solution of the problem to watch an effect, similar to what I describe, begin on bodies of animals in my laboratory. . . ."

Keane closed the paper, and looked at Beatrice.

Her blue eyes were level with concentration. She stared at the paper in his hand, then at his face.

"Doctor Satan got to the man who wrote that paper, Bernard Hallowell," she said. "Since he wrote it, he has completed the death-ray machine. Doctor Satan forced the secret of it from him. That is what the little figure you picked up in Yates' safe means."

Keane slowly shook his head. On his forehead again appeared fine drops of sweat. And again hard muscle ridged out on his lean cheeks.

"No, Beatrice. It means more than that—much more. You see, Bernard Hallowell is dead. He died two years ago, just after reading this paper before a meeting of the American Scientific Institute."

Beatrice stared at him, color slowly draining from her face as she vaguely sensed something of what was in his mind.

"Bernard Hallowell, the one man on earth capable of doing to a human body what was done to Yates, is dead. Yet Doctor Satan got from him the secret of the death ray—which was not quite completed when he died. That can mean only one thing:

"Doctor Satan has found out how really to do that which charlatans and self-deluded investigators have often claimed baselessly they could do—communicate with the dead."

THE disappearance on shipboard of the great inventor, Jules Marxman, stirred police circles as a stick stirs muddy water. The vanishing of Linton Yates was distinctly secondary: Yates, though far richer, was not as internationally known.

At the hotel suite booked by Marxman for himself and his assistant, swarms of detectives and newspaper reporters filed in and out interviewing, or trying to interview, Slycher, the assistant.

But there was one man who had no trouble closeting himself with Slycher. Known to police and news hawks if not to the public, he was treated with amazing deference. That was Ascott Keane. He sat in the tower suite now with Slycher.

"You say you thought Assistant Secretary of War Harley talked to Marxman just before Marxman disappeared?" Keane repeated.

Slycher nodded, white-faced, more than a little frightened. He was himself a murder suspect, of course.

"But Harley denies seeing Marxman?" Keane went on.

"Yes," said Slycher. "Most of the police think I'm making up the story. But I swear I saw Mr. Harley go into Mr. Marxman's cabin. Also, I saw him come out again, and shortly afterward Mr. Marxman went on deck—and was never seen again."

Keane looked at the man. He was obviously telling the truth as he saw it.

"Harley is above suspicion," Keane mused. "If he denies he was in Marxman's cabin, it's quite likely he wasn't there, in spite of appearances. That means someone must have impersonated Harley. Marxman was bringing home a nearly completed war formula, wasn't he?"

Slycher nodded and told him about the poison gas, which was perfected, and the antidote which was not.

"The gas was useless as a weapon till the antidote could be worked out better," he concluded. "So anyone stealing the gas formula couldn't use it anyhow: if he tried, he'd be knocked out himself."

Keane's eyes were intent, and were glinting a little as they always did when he was uncovering a warm scent.

"This formula of the antidote," he said slowly. "As it stood, it figuratively killed anyone who took it——"

"Not figuratively—actually!" the inventor's assistant interrupted. "Anyone taking it dies, as far as medical examinations can show, for twelve hours."

"And Doctor Satan can communicate with the dead!" Keane breathed.

"What?"

"Nothing. I think I'm beginning to see light, that's all. And now for a very important question. And you'll have to judge for yourself, from recommendations given you concerning me, whether you dare answer truly. Did Marxman, by any chance, have a sample of the antidote among his effects?"

Slycher hesitated a long time before he answered that. Then slowly he nodded.

"He did. He dared to do it because the formula was so complicated that he doubted if any laboratory could fully analyze the sample and duplicate it."

"Let me have it, will you?" said Keane.

Again the assistant studied his face for quite a time. But Keane's sincerity and authority were unquestionable. Slycher got up and went to the next room of the suite. He came back with a heavily sealed envelope in his hand. The envelope was padded out as though it contained a handkerchief or some other small but bulky thing.

"Here it is. Do you want all of it?"

"No," said Keane softly, "just enough for one dose."

Slycher opened the envelope. Onto a sheet of writing-paper he shook a minute quantity of purplish powder. It was coarse powder, small crystals, really. It looked like powdered amethyst.

"This is one dose of the antidote," he said. "May I ask what you intend to do with it?"

Keane looked at, and through, the man. His voice, when he answered, was a little hushed.

"I'm going to take it—and die. I'm going to find out where a man goes when he's dead. And I hope to meet another person in that place—and perhaps leave him there!"

Beatrice Dale, to whom he announced the same intention, when he returned home, was horrified.

"My God, Ascott! Meet Doctor Satan in death! You can't! The risk——"

"The risk is a little thing compared to what may happen if I don't," Keane said quietly. "Have you thought at all what this means? Doctor Satan, with the aid of Marxman's uncompleted formula, can visit the dead. From them he can obtain the secrets they died without revealing to any other mortal. Why, the world is his if he can't be stopped! Think of being able to discover the last, and perhaps greatest of the inventions Edison was working on when he died! Or the chance of learning from Captain Kidd's own lips where his treasure is hidden! Or of finding out the true political machinations of European diplomacy from any of the great statesmen who have recently passed on! Satan can be emperor of earth with that knowledge!"

He looked at the pinch of purplish crystals.

"The gateway to death. Bring me a glass of water, will you? Even if nothing is accomplished beyond that gateway,

even if I never come back from beyond it, it will be interesting to pass through it."

MIDWAY between New York and Red Bank, in New Jersey, on a flat-topped knoll near the sea, there stands a rather hideous replica of a Rhenish castle built by an eccentric rich man long dead. The people living near there call it Furlowe's folly, and know that it has been untenanted and in bad repair for many years. What they did not know was that it had been purchased recently by a man who never made a personal appearance during the transaction. What they also did not know was that in a steel-lined room in the basement the purchaser, and his ugly assistant, often engaged at night in occupations that would have blanched their faces could they have looked on.

The two were there tonight.

One, the secret purchaser of Furlowe's Folly, was Doctor Satan, dressed in the masquerade it amused him to wear: red cloak covering his lean, powerful body from heels to throat; red mask over his face; red gloves on his hands; and on his head the skull-cap of red with the little projections, like horns, that completed his costume of Lucifer.

The other was Bostiff, who was like a figure out of an illustration of Dante's *Inferno*. He had no legs. He hitched his gigantic, formidably muscled torso about by using his arms as legs and resting his weight on the calloused backs of his hands. His eyes, dull, dog-like, stupidly brutal, followed the red-clad figure of his master constantly.

Doctor Satan was bending over a long, plain table which was littered with laboratory instruments. He was manipulating a small glass beaker in which a purplish, heavy liquid was rapidly drying into fine purplish crystals. From time to time he consulted a wrinkled small bit of onion-

skin paper that had formerly been rolled up in a capsule.

He shook the dried crystals from the beaker onto the table.

"Ready, Bostiff," his harsh voice droned out.

Bostiff went to a corner of the steel-lined room. There was a low divan there. He wheeled it toward Doctor Satan, who lay down on it.

"For twelve hours, Bostiff," Doctor Satan said, "my body is helpless, a dead thing. Remember that. And don't let anyone force a way in here!"

"Yes, Master," Bostiff rumbled, gazing at the purple crystals with dull fear in his eyes.

"On my first trip to the land of the dead," Satan said harshly, "I got from Hallowell the secret of the death ray. Now I can kill from a distance, and loot the possessions of the victim at leisure. This trip I expect to get from the recently assassinated dictator of Texas, Kelly Strong, full details of his plan to become dictator of the United States, and names of men he placed in key positions to carry out the scheme. He was ready to start his plan in motion when he was killed. I shall carry on for him, and become dictator in his place. How would you like to be Secretary of State of the United States, Bostiff, with countless men—and women—dancing to your whims to avoid being killed or thrown into jail?"

Bostiff licked his thick lips, and his dull eyes gleamed. Doctor Satan laughed arrogantly, and poured the purplish crystals into a glass of wine.

"Then guard my helpless body with your life, oh good and faithful servant," he said mockingly. "And—don't be so misguided as to attempt to remove my mask and see my face. No man may do that and live!"

Doctor Satan raised the glass of wine,

in which was the little death of Marxman's antidote, and drank.

4

Two people had taken Marxman's drug and died the little death: the dock laborer on whom Marxman had experimented, and Doctor Satan. Now, with Ascott Keane's taking of the purplish crystals, there were three.

His first sensation after swallowing the stuff was—pain.

His body ached as though every bone in it had been broken. He felt as though each nerve were being slowly rasped with red-hot files.

It hurts to die, was his last conscious thought. And after that he seemed to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep that might have lasted a moment or two, or a thousand years, so that his next thought was: the gateway of death is no black river, or cavern mouth guarded by the many-headed watch-dog; it is sleep.

But that was a dim thought, quickly lost in a fog of blind horror as his senses slowly struggled back to him. What was it that horrified him? For a long time he did not know, could not define it.

He had been sitting at his ebony desk when he drank the antidote. When he regained conscious thought he did not know whether he was sitting or standing; for he seemed to have no body, no weight. And that was odd, for when he opened his eyes he could *see* a body. He seemed as solid and weighty as when he had swallowed the drug; and was clothed as he had been then—in most prosaic blue serge.

Yet the inability to tell whether he was standing or lying persisted. He simply *was*; he existed in——

In what?

It was the answer to that which finally brought his blind feeling of horror to a

head. For he seemed to exist, now, nothingness!

Beneath him he could see nothing. No ground, as we know it, or surface of any kind. Around him was—nothing. Over him was nothing. It was as though he had been transported, with the drinking of the purplish liquid, into the immensities of space—and then had seen the stars wink out till none remained.

Yet this vast nothingness in which he found himself was not a thing of darkness. Vague gray light was diffused everywhere; like dim moonlight, which is not strong enough to outline things tangibly, yet gives an impression of so doing.

A nothingness of gray space, with Ascott Keane existing in it, but not knowing whether he lay or stood because around him was no single thing by which to orient himself! Where was he? In the land of the dead! And the land of the dead, it seemed, was Nowhere!

Yet he existed, saw himself as he had been last in life. He had, at least to his own perceptions, body and individuality.

But that may be simply the materialization of my thoughts of myself, he thought. If that is so, then I have the answer to the question: does living intelligence die? It does not. The body does, but not the intelligence directing it.

Now, as he existed in the spaceless, dimensionless, objectless gray nothingness, Keane became aware of sensation, of other thoughts and feelings all around him. Countless forces had their source near him. He felt as one feels when surrounded by a great host of people. Yet he could see nothing, though the feel of being hemmed in by countless others grew stronger with each passing minute. (Minute? That was a figurative term. For along with the loss of dimension and space and outline as the living know them, Keane had lost all time-sense.)

Maybe, he thought, I am invisible to them too. Perhaps only the thinking of myself makes me perceptible, and that only to me.

The corollary notion came at once:

But if that is so, then I should be able to see others if I think of them! Then it is directed thought which makes outline here in this gray place; which makes tangible outline.

Well, there was a way to test that. If he thought of someone he had known, now dead, that person might appear. . . .

The most obvious person was his father, who had died when Keane was twelve, and whom he had admired as much as he loved. He thought of his father—heavy-set, with keen gray eyes under bristling gray brows, and with stubby, powerful hands thrust always in his pockets.

And his father appeared before him!

Keane thought he cried aloud. But there was no sound in this land of the dead. He felt his throat swell with the impulse for sound, and that was all.

"Dad!"

"Ascott."

But there was no sound. Vibration, thought-waves—the means of communication were as intangible and cloaked in luminous gray mystery as everything else here. Keane only knew that he looked at his father, dead for twenty years, and felt him name him.

"So you have died, my son," emanated from the figure, seemingly of solidified mist, that had appeared with Keane's thought of it. "Your mother will be anxious to see you——"

"My mother! Then everyone we knew—all people—have a life after death! They exist as they did on earth!"

Keane thought his father smiled. But he could not be sure, because he could not be sure if the face and form of his father were appearing before him, in actual

sight—or behind his eyelids, formed by imagination.

"Not quite as on earth," his father said—or, rather, radiated. "Here nothing has actual form. You and I, as well as all other living things, are bits of the great central plant of Life Force, which actuates everything that breathes. When we 'die', we are re-absorbed by the great life stream, though we know no more about it than a drop of water knows the meaning of the river that re-collects it after it has been drawn to the sky by the sun and released again in rain."

"But I see you! I see myself——"

"You see your thought of me, of yourself, not substance. There is no substance here. You will find out, now that you have died."

KEANE thought: queer he doesn't know that I haven't really died; that I will return from this gray land. Then he realized that secret thoughts were as evident to his father as specially directed ones were.

For again he seemed to smile, and he said: "I know nothing of what goes on on earth. None of us do, which is contrary to the idea that I, at least, used to have: that the dead know all. Sometimes I would like to know, but I can't find out. The veil of death keeps us from communicating with the living as well as preventing them from communicating with us."

"But now there *is* communication between dead and living," Keane replied. "And that is why I'm here. On earth a man invented a war weapon which is useless without an antidote that makes it harmless to the men who use the weapon. The antidote, failing in its intended purpose, gives death for half a day to whoever swallows it. Another man, a person without conscience as well as without fear,

stole this secret. He has used it to 'die' and while 'dead' to speak to those actually dead and get from them important information; though how he can do that when they must know his purpose is evil, and must try not to give it to him——"

"Here where all thought either takes physical expression or can be interpreted as clearly as audible speech in life, no thought can remain hidden," his father informed him. "The man you describe has but to think his question, and whoever the thought is directed at will necessarily think the answer. For thought is involuntary. It cannot be controlled. Only physical expression of it can be controlled, and there is nothing physical here."

Thought involuntary? Keane repeated to himself. He did not believe that. It had always been his contention that thought could be controlled by a strong-willed man. But now he was to have immediate proof of his father's correctness.

It was miraculous to converse with him! It was miraculous, and appealing, to think of conversing with his dead mother too. But there was a thought more insistent than either of these: that was the thought (recalled strongly to him by speaking of Doctor Satan to his father) of the diabolical being he had come here to thwart.

And so, converse with his mother, and further converse with his father, were not to be. For with his thought of Doctor Satan—the vague outlines of his father faded, and other outlines began taking their place.

"Satan!" he thought. "Now—I will see his face!"

But he had forgotten his own prosaic blue serge, the fabric that seemed to clothe him now as it had when he "died."

More and more plainly, the outlines of the figure driving his father from his

mind appeared to him. And they were still as secretive as they had been on earth!

He saw a lean, tall, red-cloaked shape, with a red mask over its face and red-gloved hands. He saw no revealed feature save arrogant, glittering black eyes through the red mask's eye-holes.

Doctor Satan—still masked against disclosure of identity!

But with the detestably familiar red form another was appearing. And, with the ability here to guess at all thought, even when that thought tries to conceal itself, he realized why.

He was seeing the man Doctor Satan had taken the little death to find! His thought of Satan had brought him into materialization and, as one object roped to a second will lift the second when it itself is lifted, with Satan had come the person he had been conversing with when Keane visioned him.

Keane saw a face that was a little hazy and yet very familiar; a face that was heavy-featured, topped by wavy, iron-gray hair; a face in which a large mouth was mobile over a long, cleft chin; a face often pictured, in life, in the papers. It was the face of Kelly Strong, in life political dictator of the state of Texas, presumed to have had designs on the presidency—and not quite the same presidency as that in the minds of the nation's founders!—before he died.

At the same time, Keane perceived with horror the significance of the meeting of these two. The strange but inevitable phenomenon of thought-transference, which was the rule here, instantly spelled it out for him.

Doctor Satan meant to get the whole of Strong's plans of dictatorship, almost completed before he died, and become dictator himself! And the idea of Satan as dictator was one to stagger the mind!

"My God!" thought Keane. And: "I wonder if I've come in time to stop it. . . ."

WITH his first materialization, Doctor Satan, as aware of Keane as Keane was of him, had turned snarling soundlessly from Strong. His black eyes bored into Keane's gray ones, insane with thwarted purpose. And as both he and Keane concentrated only on each other, the materialization of Kelly Strong slowly disappeared.

And in that instant Keane had his answer, given him as helplessly by Satan's involuntary thoughts as Satan's dead informants gave up their secrets to him.

Doctor Satan had not yet sucked the information he wanted from Strong! Keane had got to him in time!

"Keane!" was Satan's enraged thought. And, though the following words were born in Keane's brain rather than actually heard, he yet thought to hear the man's harsh, arrogant voice. "In the devil's name—how do you manage to cross me here?"

But in Keane's mind he read the answer, as the question called up in Keane's brain the memory of his talk with Marxman's secretary-assistant, and the obtaining of a dose of the antidote.

"So Marxman's man made it possible!" Satan raged. "And you guessed what I was doing by the results of the death ray on Linton Yates! Yes, I read it all! I tried to find *you* with the death ray first. But your damned ability, in life if not here, of shielding your thoughts from me, made you an unlocatable target where ordinary men were not! And so you're here——"

"And so I'm here," was Keane's response. "And of the two of us, one is going to stay. And I intend that that one shall be you!"

5

ALONE in the great nothingness of gray, misty light, these two were. Alone in the place of the dead. For here nothing existed that was not thought of. And the two had no slightest thought for anything but each other.

Doctor Satan's red-clad outline shimmered toward Keane, only a projected shadow of the red-clad body that lay in the steel-lined basement room of Furlow's Folly, but a shadow as sinister and real-appearing as the body itself.

"There is a hell in this place, my friend," he stated. "I have been here once before, and I have found that out. It is like its denizens, only to be perceived when it is thought of. In that hell you shall remain—while I go back to life, a dictator, and freed from your bungling interference for ever."

His black eyes gleamed more brightly.

"A hell, Ascott Keane! It's singularly fitting that I, Doctor Satan, should be the one to cast you into it!"

Keane made no reply. He couldn't have if he had wanted to. For now his eyes were beginning to see strange things in the gray mist; things conjured up by Satan's thought of them.

Slowly the empty space around him was being defined in the shape of a hollow globe, of which he and Satan were the center. And slowly the walls of the globe were narrowing down on them and were becoming more definite.

And Keane tried to cry aloud again as he saw of what the globe was composed, but he could not, since there was no such thing as sound here.

The walls of the globe were a solid, or seemingly solid, mass of bodies. But they were bodies such as had never before been seen outside a nightmare.

Some had no heads. Some seemed all face and mouth, with tiny, puny limbs

attached. Some were legless or armless or both. And all were blind.

Pallid gray shapes in the pallid grayness, they writhed and reached toward Keane and Satan; yet Keane knew intuitively that it was not Doctor Satan who engaged their attention, but solely himself. And he shuddered as he thought of being engulfed by the crippled, maimed, writhing things.

"That is just what shall happen," he perceived Satan speaking to him. "They shall take your soul here, Keane. These things were men and women on earth. They were 'crippled morally', as society chose to express it—just as you believe I am morally crippled when really . . . but we won't go into that."

The black eyes glittered satanically.

"Here, after death, they are warped and deformed as they were in life. Creatures of hell, Keane. And as destructive and murderous here as when they had actuality. But it is seldom they have the chance to try their talent for destructiveness now. They shall try it on you."

The hollow globe was very small now. Keane had the impression that he could almost reach out and touch the hideous shapes composing the wall—had there been anything there really to touch.

"They'll get Doctor Satan too," he thought frantically. "There's no reason why they should pursue me and not him."

But he knew as he thought it that there was a reason.

The lean tall form in the red cloak, and these warped creatures of after-life, were of the same stuff. Satan could command them, not be destroyed by them, because he thought as they did and lived as they had lived before death took them.

"Take him!" he caught Satan's soundless command to the hideous gray shapes. "Take his soul. Hold it here, that on

earth his body may be for ever a lifeless shell, with soul and intelligence gone!"

And then the gray shapes were on Keane, and he was a wavering form in a monstrous sea.

There was no pain. He saw claw-like hands rip into him, and saw the likeness of his body shredded from him as bits of cloud are shredded from the main cloud bank by a screaming wind. But there was, of course, no pain.

However, there was mental agony far exceeding any physical pain. He had no way of being told it, but he knew the truth: If these clawing hands managed to rip away entirely the thought-mantle that clothed his spirit, if they managed to strip him of his conception of himself, then he could never go back the way he came. He would be really dead, with no link left between him and the hulk of himself that sat before the empty water glass on his ebony desk.

"Take him!" Doctor Satan was exhorting the host he would assuredly join when it was his turn really to die. "Strip his soul! Keep him here!"

No real substance, but mist-stuff that could be shredded and torn as misty veils are torn! Keane struggled in the hideous current of writhing, clawing, venomous forms. Doctor Satan was near him. He got to the red-cloaked form.

He had but half an arm left, though like a man in a nightmare he could look at it and be appalled and yet feel no pain. But the hand remained on this arm, the whole underside of which had been clawed away. That hand drove for Satan's throat, and found it.

Perhaps it was because Keane was not really dead, and that hence his materialization had a shade more actuality than those of the writhing things about them. Perhaps it was that his hate of the man, whose cruel joke it was to act as Lucifer as well as costume himself in Luciferian

manner, was strong enough to take some tangible form here in a place of intangibility. At any rate, Keane's one crippled hand did more damage than all the clawing hands of all the clawing things that tore at him.

Like a ball of mist on a mist-column, Satan's head wavered and seemed about to leave its body as Keane's hand grasped at the shadowy throat.

"Take him!" Satan exhorted, frenziedly, fearfully, to the crawling throng. "Take him——"

His own red-gloved hands were wrenching and tearing at Keane's mangled wrist. But they could not tear it loose.

"Take him——"

Something was happening to Keane.

Suddenly, impossibly, he was beginning to feel pain. It was as though every bone in his body were being broken and every atom of flesh on them crushed. As the pain swept down on him in ever-increasing waves, the horrible gray shapes faded from his perception—as did the red-clad form of Doctor Satan. The luminous gray nothingness in which he had moved for an unguessable length of time (it might have been a minute or a year or a century) began to fade too.

There was Satan's thwarted, raging command, "Take him——" There was a last vengeful tightening of his hand on Satan's throat. Then the pain mounted over everything else and robbed him of consciousness. . . .

A VOICE was calling to him. A girl's voice, frantic, urgent.

"Ascott! Ascott!"

He tried to open his eyes, and could not for a moment. He was shuddering, and felt clammy with perspiration. He had just undergone some terrible ordeal, but for a little while longer he was spared memory of it.

"Ascott! Darling——"

He knew that voice. Yes . . . the voice of Beatrice Dale . . . yes. . . .

With an enormous effort he opened his eyes. He saw the polished ebony of his desk-top within inches of his face; saw his hands.

His hands! He gasped, and stared at them as memory returned. But his hands were all right. He had them both, and neither was torn nor mutilated. Nor were his arms.

"Nightmare!" he muttered.

But he knew better than that. He had undergone an actual experience in an actual place: the land of the dead. Now——

He sat up. He had been slumped over his desk with his hands supporting his head while his intelligence roamed afar from his body under the influence of Marxman's antidote. But now he sat up—and saw Beatrice's white face.

"Ascott! Thank God! You've been unconscious—dead, from all appearances—for an hour over the twelve the drug was supposed to stop working! I was going to call a doctor, the police, anything! But now——"

"Now I'm all right," said Keane, breathing heavily. "All right—now—nightmare I went through."

Beatrice bathed his clammy face, gave him adrenalin, ministered to him with all the affection she kept from expressing verbally for him. And then, when he was breathing normally and, while pale, seemed all right again, she said:

"Did you—did you find Doctor Satan, Ascott?"

Keane's nostrils thinned.

"I did. I got him in time. And—he almost got me. He calls himself Doctor Satan—and there is a hell, Beatrice, and at his command I was almost kept in it! I wonder. . . . Many a circumstance is shaped apparently by coincidence, and

many a mortal unconsciously acts in a way to bear out literally the conceptions of religion. An actual hell. . . . I wonder if our red-cloaked friend really could be an incarnation of the evil force we've always called Satan, though he himself thinks he is only acting a part?"

"Drink this," said Beatrice, handing him a cup of coffee with the practicality of the female. "Ascott, did Doctor Satan come back to life too?"

"I'm afraid he did," sighed Keane.

"Then everything was useless? Satan can return whenever he pleases, and get the secrets of the dead as he did before?"

Keane shook his head.

"That, at least, I think we can stop. There is a hell, and creatures in it like maimed demons. Then it follows that there must be beings in the land of the dead who were decent in life and so are

in death. And it also must follow that they outnumber the maimed."

He stared at the coffee, making no effort to drink it.

"I was almost kept from returning to life by the things from hell. I think Doctor Satan might be kept from returning to life by the decent dead. Anyway, I'm going back, now, to see my father and band the dead against Satan if he should ever return. Go to Marxman's assistant and get another dose of the antidote."

"For God's sake, Ascott——"

Keane stared at her. His eyes were as grim as death, and as impersonal.

"Get more of the drug, please, Beatrice."

Beatrice Dale's lips parted, closed again without uttering words. She turned and left him.
