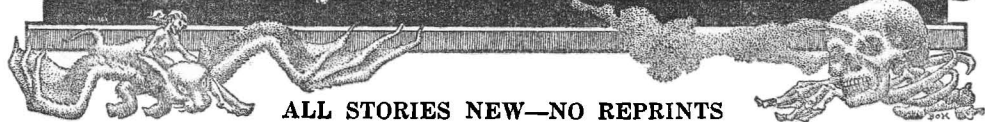


Weird Tales



MAY, 1942

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NOVELETTE

- STONEMAN'S MEMORIAL** Seabury Quinn 4
Cold and Hard as Death Itself Was the Bullet-Proof Doom That Hunted Down Sin in Modern-Day New York! A Tale of Jules de Grandin . . .

SHORT STORIES

- THE ENCHANTED RIVER** Dorothy Quick 24
The Wheel of Life Turns—Turns Endlessly; And Sometimes the Cycle Is Lived Again.
- GHOST FOR A NIGHT** Robert Arthur 33
The Gay and Ghostly Little Tale Which He Had Planned Takes a Turn Which the Author Finds Highly Distasteful!
- MASQUERADE** Henry Kuttner 43
No Reason Why a Vampire Shouldn't Change with the Times. No Reason at All . . .
- THE DEADLY THEORY** Greye La Spina 54
A Sorcerer, a Lover, a Murderess—These Three Had Formed An Unholy Alliance to Rob Death!
- BLACK BARGAIN** Robert Bloch 66
Are Black Books Still Read? Might Not a Missing Alley Cat Mean a Chosen Sacrifice?
- THE GIANT IN A TEST TUBE** George Armin Shaftel 77
There Are Serums to Melt Away the Decay of Old Age—To Give Everlasting Youth . . .
- THE CONCRETE PHANTOM** Weston Parry 85
Often Might Be Heard the Sound of Muffled Riveting—Between Midnight and Dawn . . .
- CRYSTAL VISION** Alice-Mary Schnirring 93
Everyone of a Certain Type Has What Might Be Called a Third Eye . . .
- THE GIPSY'S HAND** Alonzo Deen Cole 102
It Was Against All the Laws of Nature. But It Happened!
- VENGEANCE IN HER BONES** Malcolm Jameson 112
She was a Vicious Rogue. But She Could Smell Submarines. And She Could Hate 'Em, Too!

VERSE

- THE DREAMER IN THE DESERT** Francis Flagg 52
- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS** Irwin J. Weill 64
- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB** 122

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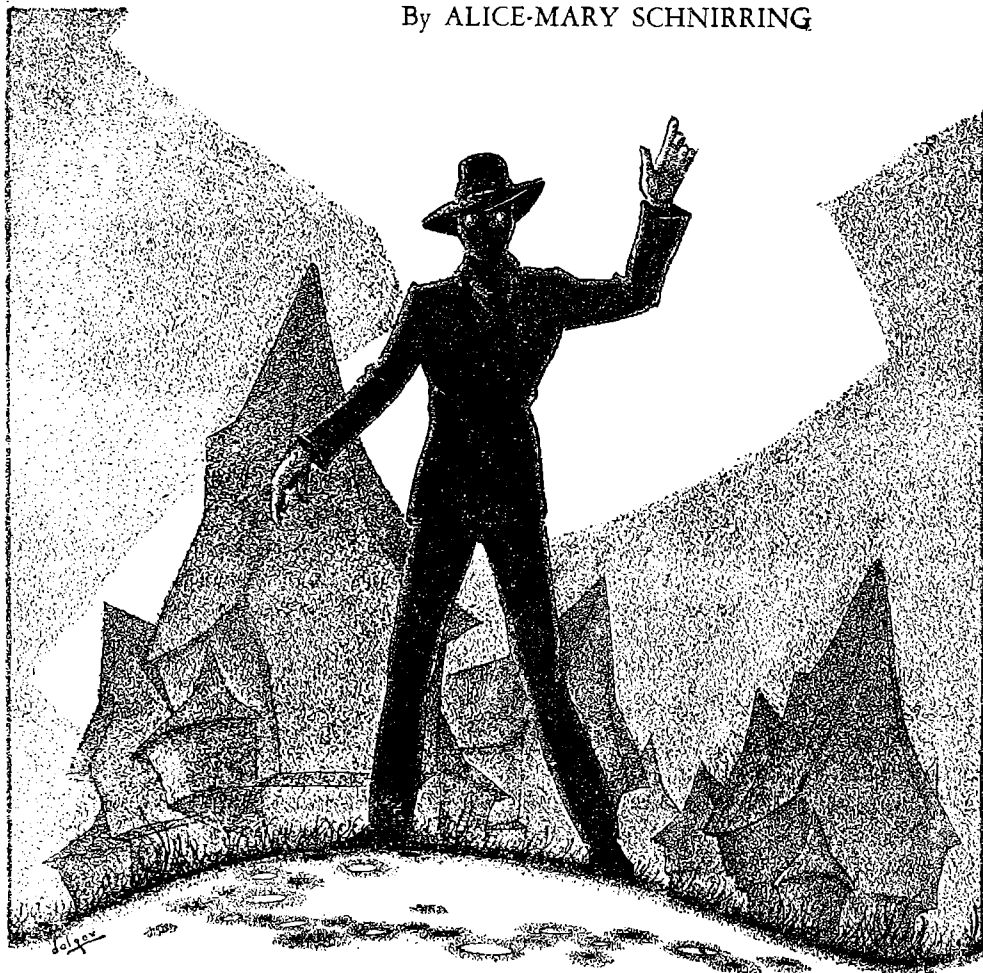
173
 Vol. 36, No. 5

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

Crystal Vision

By ALICE-MARY SCHNIRRING



I never saw his face. But to tell you the truth, I didn't want to see it; there was something about him that made me feel—uncomfortable . . .

“A H, PAAVONURMI!” said Henry, sarcastically. “Just where the hell have you been for the past two hours, Joe?”

“Delivering the window-cards to Matson's,” said Joe, trying in vain to look like injured innocence. “After all, the doctor

said I should be careful of my heart, didn't he? No hurrying—no hurrying, Henry—no undue excitement—Hey!” and he ducked the block of drawing-paper that hurtled through the air. “That comes under the heading of excitement!”

“Ten blocks each way and it takes you

two hours!" moaned his boss. "If I want real speed I'll have to hire a fleet of snails. Well, go finish the lettering on the hosiery brochure—if it doesn't overtax your strength." Thumbing his nose in answer (the studio was run on democratic lines), Joe sat down at his drawing-board, picked out a pen with a hair-line point, and began to work.

For some fifteen minutes the studio was quiet, except for a short word or two exchanged between Henry, Arthur, and Joe. Then Arthur put down his brush, stretched, and suddenly chuckled.

"Have you heard Fred's latest, Joe?" he asked.

"No—what?"

"He's got a glass marble," said Arthur, convulsed at the thought, "And he's trying to sell Henry and me on the idea that he can see visions when he holds it to his forehead."

"How can he look into it when he holds it on his forehead?" said Joe. "He isn't wall-eyed—or is he?"

Henry joined in. "He doesn't look in it—he just holds it to his forehead, the way Arthur said. Then, he says, he finds himself in another world."

Joe turned to Henry in mock alarm. "Are you feeling all right, Henry dear? Shall I put a cold compress on your head for you?"

"I didn't say it," Henry retorted. "It's his story—and a lemon, if you ask me."

"Some haven't the ability," said a new voice. "Joe might have, though you and Arthur haven't." All three of them turned to the door, which was open to let the heat and dust of a New York July come in unimpeded. "Hi, Fred," said Henry. "Come show Joe your marble trick, then, if you think he can do it."

Fred—tall, rather heavy, with a dreamy round face—ambled in and sat down at his own drawing-board. "Conditions are not too propitious," he suggested, with a

smile. "Unbelievers like you two would make even a poltergeist think twice before he bothered with any manifestations. You'd probably say "Mice!" and discourage him."

"Poltergeists! Witches! Marbles! Nuts!" said Arthur disgustedly. "And you, Freddy, are the biggest nut in the bag. How can you believe such stuff?"

FRED smiled again. "Well, poltergeists are pretty generally accepted," he said, "And witches—no, I don't think I can put up much of an argument for them; at least, not spelled that way; but my marble, as you call it—" "What do *you* call it, Fred?" put in Joe, who had been enjoying the exchange. "Crystal," said Fred. "My crystal vision I believe in the way you believe in—well, in the dinner you ate last night. That is, I *was* transported into another world, if you want to put it that way. You can't be mistaken about a thing like that."

"No kidding, Fred—does it really work?" asked Joe, with interest. Before Fred could answer, Henry spoke up. "Don't be a dope, Joe—Arthur and I tried it, and it's nothing but Fred's imagination. He probably falls asleep and dreams, and dreams, and thinks he's seeing things in the crystal."

"No," said Fred, with a curious earnestness. "That's not true. Look—I can prove it, if you will cut the clowning. And, of course, if Joe is susceptible to it."

"How can you tell if he is or not?" asked Arthur, skeptically.

"You can usually accomplish it at once, or can't do it at all. You and Henry just can't do it at all. Maybe Joe can. Look, Joe—lie down on the couch in the back room, and I'll show you."

Joe protested that the whole thing was just too stupid, but Fred persisted. "Try it, Joe—once is enough, if you give it a fair chance."

"Okay—sure," agreed Joe. "What do I do?"

"Here," said Fred, moving with surprising speed for one of his rather sluggish-looking build. He folded a woolen blanket and spread it on the filthy chaise-longue that graced the "back room" (an airless cubbyhole where the boys played bridge whenever a customer or a friend dropped in, which was about twenty times a day). "A woolen blanket makes a good insulator," he explained, moving the couch out from the wall, "And your head should point to the magnetic North. Here, lie down, Joe." Joe lay down.

FROM his pocket, Fred took a transparent crystal ball, about the size of a plover's egg. "This is it." Joe took it in his hand, and looked at it curiously. "What, no mysterious swirling colors?" he mocked. "This isn't the way it happens in 'Strange Tales.' The thing's a fake."

"Lie down, dope," said Fred good-naturedly. "Now, listen." His manner changed, became authoritative. "Before we start this experiment, I'll give you an idea of what to expect, in case it works. When you attain the vision, and find yourself in another world, you will find that you can explore at will. When you see some person—or even some thing—you can approach him, or it, and mentally ask the reason for their being. You will receive the answer—or, if it is something you should not know, you will be told so directly. I will sit by you and listen—because it will be best if you talk, so that we can know what you see. For some reason the memory doesn't seem to function very actively, and, also, I can help you by directing your questions so that you act merely as the means of perceiving, and will not be divided by having to think up the questions and be the source of perception at the same time."

"Oke," said Joe, airily, stretching him-

self on the chaise-longue. "Let's go. But where does the crystal come in?"

"Here," said Fred, stuffing a small, grimy pillow beneath each of Joe's elbows. "This will keep you from using any muscular tension to hold the crystal in place. Now hold the crystal with the tips of your third and fourth fingers of each hand." He handed the transparent globe to Fred, and put his fingers in place. "So—your little finger over your eye; forefingers high on your forehead as you can get them, and thumbs over your ears. Now you are shutting off all outside influence, and concentrating all your senses on one focal point."

"Maybe so," said Joe, grimacing, "but I certainly hope none of the boys wander in. I feel like a damn fool."

"You should—you look like one," Arthur informed him. He and Henry were grinning. To his surprise, the usually easy-going Fred turned on them with a look of anger, and was about to speak when the telephone, ringing in the studio, interrupted them. "I'll go," said Arthur; then, "Hello, Bowman Studio," as he picked up the 'phone. "Henry? Just a minute." He beckoned to Henry, who crossed over and took the 'phone from his hand. Arthur remained at his elbow, listening to the conversation.

Meanwhile, Fred was talking to Joe in a low, unhurried voice, and Joe, deprived of Henry's and Arthur's ribald comments, was becoming more serious and more genuinely interested in making a fair experiment.

"Try to think of nothing at all," Fred urged him. "Concentrate *all* your senses on absolute nothingness—and relax. Above all, relax."

For four or five minutes, there was silence in the stuffy little back room.

Suddenly it was broken by a muffled, half-spoken sound from Joe. Fred was quick to ask, "Did you see something?"

Joe hesitated. "Something—" he murmured.

"A person, or a thing?"

"A person—I think. Tall, dark. Wearing a soft felt hat; his face is turned away from me."

"Ask him—no, no; not aloud; *think* of asking him what he is, what he wants." Fred, outwardly calm, betrayed his inner excitement by the unusual pallor of his round face, and the fierce gesture with which he silenced Henry and Arthur as, finished with their telephone conversation, they came into the room and began to say something. "I will tell you what to ask him," he said, leaning forward and bending intently over Joe's relaxed body. "Don't think—just follow. If he moves away, and seems to want you to go with him, go."

Arthur and Henry were not laughing.

"He is moving away, down the street. I am going after him. The street is narrow and dark; it shines as if it were wet. I can see the sky; it is pale grey, cloudless. There are tall, windowless buildings on either side of me. He is turning a corner; I am turning after him. Now, the buildings are all behind me. I am in—I think it is a field. He has disappeared; all I can see is dark grass for a long, long way." The low monotonous voice stopped.

"Is this a job you two put up when we were—" Henry began, only to have Fred turn furiously on him and silently motion him to be quiet.

"Walk straight ahead," he suggested to the quiet figure on the chaise-longue.

"What else can you see? Trees, animals, houses?"

"Nothing."

"Look behind you—what is there?"

"Joe's voice held a note of surprise. "The houses aren't there any longer. At least there is just one house—it looks like a country estate. The moon has suddenly come out; I can see flowers growing

by the path, and shrubbery around the house itself."

He stopped again. Fred urged him on: "Walk up the path, to the door. Remember, you can go anywhere you want, ask questions of anyone or anything. Ask the house, if you want, what it's there for."

"'Ask the house what it's there for!'" mocked Arthur, suddenly. "Boys, your act smells. Henry and I could have dreamed up a better one than this on even less notice."

Fred's attempt to stop him was too late. Joe was sitting up, with a puzzled look on his face, juggling the crystal ball in his left hand, absent-mindedly.

"No kidding, Arthur—it wasn't an act," he said, slowly. "I really did seem to be following some guy whose face I couldn't see; down a dark street and out into a field. And when I turned around, I saw a big house, with a garden in front of it; but when I started to walk down the garden path, it all—sort of faded out. But it really works," he added, turning to Fred. "I'd like to try it again. What's the idea of it?"

Fred's eyes were glittering, though he attempted to present his usual calm appearance. "Why, everyone of a—certain type has what I might call a "third eye"—an ethereal, not a material organ. Did you ever see a statue of an oriental god? Very often you will find it represented. The crystal, of course, isn't exactly necessary to its use; but it helps to focus the attention of the subject upon the actual location of this ethereal eye, which lies just a bit out from the center of the forehead. It also is something like a resistor, similar to the bit of tungsten wire in an electric light bulb, which resists the flow of electricity, slowing it down to the numerical vibration of light; the glass acts as a resistor instead of an insulator, because body electricity seems to be capable of penetrating anything. It merely slows down the body

charge, and the "eye"—or its material representation—becomes lit, vitalized; and capable of this extraordinary vision."

"You sound more like an electrician than a mystic, Freddie," said Henry, although not unkindly. "But if Joe really did see anything, why didn't Arthur and I?"

"I told you—either you can do it almost immediately (though you get much better at it as you go on), or you can't do it at all. You say I sound like an electrician—carry the analogy a little further, and I might say that this force only operates on AC, which Joe and I happen to be; while you and Arthur are DC."

"And I suppose we blow out the fuse," suggested Arthur, rolling his eyes upward despairingly. "Well, it's quarter of five—let's all go out and snatch a drink before we go home. I have a date at six o'clock, and I want to get started on the right basis." He unexpectedly did a few soft-shoe steps, which Henry almost at once followed, sliding easily into a simple routine, and humming "Sweet Rosie O'Grady." Joe caught up a guitar and thumbed appropriate chords. Fred threw out his hands in a gesture of mock defeat, and laughed, but his laugh was higher and more breathless than usual. "Okay—let's go get a drink. This is the damndest place I ever worked in, anyway—how any work gets done is beyond me."

"Beyond everyone," smiled Henry. "But it gets done, and it gets done very-damnwel and at very-damn-good prices, too, Freddie—boy."

The four of them went out the door. "I'll lock up," said Joe, pulling a key from his pocket. "See you over at the bar."

"I'll wait for you," and Fred hung back, letting the other two go on ahead. In a minute, Joe put the key back in his pocket. As they swung into step down the street, he said hesitantly, "Fred—that wasn't imagination, was it?"

"No," he answered quietly. "Did it seem like it to you?"

"No—but, in a way, I wish—"

"What?"

"Well, you may think I sound like a sap, but—that figure; that man, or whatever it was—" he paused, struggling for words.

"What about him?"

"He—well, I never saw his face, but—to tell you the truth, Fred, I didn't *want* to see it. I didn't try. There was something about him that made me feel—not exactly frightened, but uncomfortable." He looked anxiously at his companion, afraid to find him laughing. But he was not laughing; he looked very serious, and it was some time before he spoke.

"You know, Joe," he said, finally. "You really are in another world when you use the crystal vision. And—not all of the beings that inhabit the other world are friendly. Some are, yes; I know one man who has been practicing this for years who even has made contact with what you might call his guardian angel, and consults him whenever he needs guidance. If I told you who the man is, you might find it hard to believe me. But sometimes you run into inimical forces; and when you do that, it isn't so good. They can do you harm. You know, Joe—maybe it would be better if you dropped this. I'm sorry you didn't tell me, at the time you were in contact with that being, that you felt afraid of him. I might have been able to divert you into another scene."

Joe's mouth was open a little too far for true beauty. "Oh, say, listen, Fred!" he protested. "Don't you think you're carrying this a little too far? All I said was that he made me feel that there was something queer about the whole experience, if it comes to that."

"There was," said Fred, and his plump face looked unhappy. "If I hadn't been so excited at your getting through on the

first try, so quickly, I would have realized that something was wrong. The narrow, dark streets—the houses without windows—the appearance of the streets, as if they had been rained on—finally, the empty field and the disappearance of your guide: no, Joe, I honestly don't like it. I don't think you had better try it again."

They had reached the bar, and Henry and Arthur hailed them from inside.

"Come on, come on!" called Henry, "Arthur has a date, and you two stand on the sidewalk gabbing like a couple of finishing-school girls, instead of improving the shining, if sticky, hours with a drink. For heaven's sake, Fred—you look like the last run of shad. What's the matter? The drinks are on me."

Smiling, with somewhat of an effort, Fred came in, followed by Joe, and pulled over a tall bar stool.

"Since the drinks are on you, Henry, I'll take a Scotch, instead of my usual beer," he grinned. "Make it two," said Joe. "Listen, Fred—"

"Not now—later," Fred said hurriedly. "Look—do you want to have dinner with me tonight? Or are you doing something else?"

"No; dinner will be fine," Joe responded.

Conversation became general, mostly talking shop, until Arthur, some three-quarters of an hour later and some three rye-and-waters further along, decided that he would just be able to make his date by hurrying, and the four of them uncoiled themselves from the bar-stools. Henry offered to give Arthur a lift uptown, and they drove off, leaving Fred and Joe on the Lexington Avenue sidewalk.

"Where'll we eat?"

Fred considered for an instant. "There's a good place around the corner from my apartment, on Forty-sixth Street. Want to eat there?"

Joe offering no objection, they found their way (yawning a little) to the place on Forty-sixth Street. Dinner took much of the edge off the Scotch, but they were both feeling exhilarated even when they downed the last of their coffee, and Fred was therefore more receptive to Joe's reiterated insistence on taking another shot at the crystal vision than he might otherwise have been. Finally he gave in, more or less gracefully.

"Oh, all right," he sighed. "Come on up to my place. But if you run into that same being again, ask him what he is, and what he wants."

They went up to Fred's one-room apartment; and this time Joe, within two minutes of the time he attempted to concentrate on the crystal, began to speak.

"I AM on a hillside, covered with small blue flowers—I don't know what kind they are."

"Is there anything in sight—houses, people, animals?"

"No—yes, something is moving over to my left."

"Go over to it and see what it is. Ask it what to do next."

"It is a sheep, grazing." There was a short silence, then, "I am to go straight ahead over the brow of the hill. Someone is waiting for me on the other side."

"Very well. Go ahead."

"I am on the crest of the hill. There is someone standing half-way down the other side of the hill. Far down below I can see what looks like a river—I don't see any buildings; nothing but trees and blue flowers."

"Go down the hill, speak to the person; ask him who he is."

"I can't see his face. His head is turned from me. I have a very clear feeling that he is waiting for me." There was a short pause, and then Joe's voice—much lower, with a note of fear in it. "His

face—he has just turned his head, and his face is a skull.”

“That isn’t anything—it just means that he was once alive, and is not any longer. Ask him what he wants.”

“I don’t understand him. He is trying to tell me something—I don’t want to hear, I don’t want to hear!”

With a violent movement, Joe threw the crystal against the wall, twisted himself upright, and swung his feet to the floor. He was trembling a little, and his face was white; a mist of perspiration showed at the roots of his hair. Fred was on his feet.

“What’s the matter? Don’t let the skull frighten you; it only means that you have to deal with someone who was once alive: after all, that’s better than an entity which might be inimical.”

“I don’t feel that my pal with no face is particularly friendly, if it comes to that,” retorted Joe, drily. “In fact, I’d just as soon I’d never started this.”

“What was he trying to tell you that you didn’t want to hear? Did you get any of it, or not?”

Joe hesitated. “He seemed to want me to go with him, but I didn’t want to go. Something about him made me feel—not exactly frightened, but horribly depressed.”

“Now that you’ve gone this far, Joe, I don’t think you should give it up,” Fred said slowly. “I don’t believe he means you any harm. Next time you might go with him.”

“Next time?” said Joe, lifting his eyebrows. “I’m not so sure there will be a next time. Not if I’m going to keep running into *him*.”

Fred laughed. “You’re not apt to, you know,” he said. “In fact, it’s very unusual to run into him twice. If it *is* the same one.”

“It’s the same one, all right,” said Joe. “I can feel it, somehow.” He picked up his hat.

“Well, I have to get up in the morning,” he said. “Sorry I lost my temper like that, Fred. See you tomorrow.” Fred flapped his hand in farewell as Joe went out the door, and lazily got to his feet. He went to the bookcase, and pulled out a volume; riffled it, put it back, and chose another. He glanced idly out of the window as he opened the second book; just in time to see Joe turning the corner. Except for Joe and one other figure, the street was deserted. The other figure—Fred suddenly leaned forward—was a thin man, dressed in something dark, with a slouch hat pulled down on his forehead. Fred strained his eyes in an attempt to see the second figure’s face, as he turned the corner by the street light; but he was only able to catch a glimpse of white.

He stood for a moment, indecisive; then shrugged his shoulders, turned out all the lights except the one next to the day bed, and went to bed, reading until he fell asleep.

HENRY and Arthur looked up from their drawing-boards as Fred came in, tossing his hat in the general direction of the clothes-tree that somewhat surreally adorned the corner of the studio.

“Only nine-thirty, and you grace the studio with your presence!” marveled Henry. “If I could get all of you to do it at the same time, I might have a really efficient organization here. You get in, and Joe doesn’t. Never the time and the place and the loved one all together.”

Fred looked sharply at Henry. “Joe isn’t in yet? I thought you might have sent him out on a job.”

“Nope—hasn’t turned up yet this morning. Could be a hangover but you were presumably drinking with him, and *you’re* here. He’ll probably be in in a little while. Meanwhile, you can take this down the street to be photostatted, Fred. Tell him—” and Henry launched into a tech-

nical description of what he wanted. Fred retrieved his hat, picked up the drawings, and left.

When he returned, an hour later, his first question was, "Joe come in yet?"

Henry was talking into the telephone, but Arthur shook his head. "Not yet."

"I'm going over to his house," Fred said, with sudden decision. "It isn't like him not to telephone."

"Be a lot simpler to telephone him," suggested Arthur. "Henry's going to need you here if Joe's sick. We have the Bilshire job to get out today, remember; promised for this afternoon."

"That's right—yes, sure I can telephone. I don't know why I feel so upset because Joe's late to work one day, unless it's because I feel sort of responsible. He got rather excited last night, and, in a way, it's my fault."

"Oh, good lord—not the marble again!" groaned Arthur. At that moment, Henry put down the telephone. Fred started forward. "Henry, let me have that a minute—I want to call Joe's house."

"Go ahead—tell him to get over here as quick as possible, even if he has leprosy. I told Stein he could have the Bilshire campaign by four o'clock, and I need

Joe here, not nursing a hangover in bed."

He dialed the number, and listened to the ringing of the bell at the other end, unanswered. "There doesn't seem to be any—hello! Hello! Who is this? Oh, Mrs. Josephson, I didn't recognize your voice. Is Joe there?"

There was a brief silence. "He's—what?" Fred's plump face took on a pasty tinge. In a half-whisper, he said, "Dead? Joe? Not— When did it happen?" In the complete silence of the studio, Henry and Arthur could hear Mrs. Josephson's voice, roughened and distorted by hours of crying, almost as plainly as Fred himself, at the telephone.

"Last—last night," said the hoarse, tired voice. "Just when he came home. I heard his key in the lock, and looked out of my bedroom window. I thought I saw someone going down the path, but he had a slouch hat pulled down over his face, and I didn't recognize him as anyone I had ever seen with—with Joe." Her voice broke. "Then—I heard Joe fall, and I ran downstairs—but there was nothing I could do. We always knew it might—might happen this way, but—"

Fred gently placed the 'phone in its cradle.

