

SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

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• Curse of • Dr. Vecchio

The girl's own danger was not the worst thing her sweetheart feared. Even more ominous was the fact that she defended the very man whose sinister thrall bound her



By
**MORGAN
GRANT**

THE headlights of the black coupe that had just pulled out of the driveway gleamed like great, malicious eyes as they swung into the main road. Enid's features were pale and chaste in the sterile moonlight as we stood at the railing of the Courtney veranda.

For a moment I watched the gentle rise and fall of her breasts beneath the bodice of her printed silk frock. She wore almost nothing under the dress and the material fell caressingly about

her molded curves.

"I don't like that man," I said quietly.

She stiffened. "That's no reason for being rude and insulting. No matter



The steel bladed dagger whizzed over my shoulder, missed my neck by a hair's breadth.

what you think, Dr. Vecchio is a gentleman!"

I looked at her questioningly. There was something in the timbre of her voice, something in her manner, that frightened me. It wasn't the first time we had differed about Dr. Arturo Vecchio, but Enid had never before gone to the psychiatrist's defense with such fervor. I stepped closer to her, gripped her



arms.

"Have you lost all sense of proportion, Enid? Does this man Vecchio mean more to you than I do? *You* know why I don't like him. I don't like him because I don't trust him! I watched

him while he was talking tonight. I watched his hands and his eyes. His fingers are like little snakes. When he looked at you, he was mentally tearing the clothes off your body and leering at you."

THE brilliant ripple of her forced laugh penetrated me like a sliver of cold steel. She leaned back and her alabaster throat was a gentle curve from her chin to where her breasts began to swell deliciously. All I could think of at the moment was Dr. Vecchio's moist lips kissing that throat; his thin, white fingers touching ever so lightly the lush loveliness of her.

"I don't want you to see him again, Enid! What do you know about the man except that he's *supposed* to be a Viennese psychiatrist? Why did he come here? What sort of black magic is he practicing in the old Kendall house on the hill?"

Again she laughed, and again the sliver of steel knifed me. "Roger, you become more amazing every moment. The Ridges met Dr. Vecchio in New York. There's no mystery about it. He wanted a quiet place to carry on some psychiatric studies, and Walter Ridge suggested the Kendall home. I suppose you read something into that, too, because Walter is fighting you for the State Comptroller'ship. What's come over you, Roger? You were always so sane and logical."

She swayed closer to me and I could feel the warm, globular softness of her breasts. Her lips touched my mouth and their sweet moistness brought heady intoxication. I tightened my arm about her waist, drew her closer. The very barrier that had raised itself between us made me more eager to hold her inescapably. If Vecchio so much as laid a finger on her, he would be courting death. She was mine; all mine—every lovely, adorable inch of her.

She drew away gently. "You'd better go now, Roger. It's late, and you have a speech to prepare."

THE speech I had to write could be put off until tomorrow. There was something much more important that had to be settled in my own mind. I stepped on the starter, threw the car into gear, and headed for the Kendall place. I knew that Walter Ridge had probably arranged for Dr. Vecchio to occupy it at no cost, since it had reverted to the county for non-payment of taxes. If he had, it was the least of his malfeasances while in office. Neither he nor any one else in his political setup made any secret of the fact that he used the State Comptroller'ship to further his own financial and political ends.

But the worm had turned. I had in my safe at home enough evidence of Walter Ridge's dishonesty in office to kill him politically despite the powerful machine behind him. It was only a matter of presenting it to the voters—and that was coming.

I reached the fork in the turnpike, took the dirt road that wound up through the hills to the gloomy house on the cliff top. It stood, dark and dismal, its black-shuttered windows staring down at the bright red and green roofed houses in the valley. A hundred yards from the Kendall place, I killed the lights, pulled over to the side, parked. All the windows, save one on the lower floor, were dark, and only chinks of light escaped there.

I approached quietly, conscious of the accelerated beat of my heart. I had seen nothing and heard nothing, but the very atmosphere was macabre. Somewhere off in the distance an owl hooted, and a cold shiver ran up my spine. A twig snapped under my foot, and the sound magnified, resembled the crack of a pistol.

I reached the lighted window, flattened myself against the weatherbeaten

side of the house. A rotted shingle crumbled under my shoulder. The odor of decomposed wood sickened me. It must have been alive with ants and termites. I felt something crawling over my neck, brushed it away.

I heard voices. First a man's voice and then a woman's. Down on one knee, I peered through a crack in the shutter and saw a young woman stretched out on a plush divan, her bare right arm hanging limply to the floor. She was fully clothed but the front of her dress gaped open. I could glimpse the net of her brassiere cups.

In profile she seemed familiar. I knew those blood-red pouting lips and that sensuous, wide-nostriled nose. She turned her head. My heart leaped to my throat. It was Lynn Ridge, Walter Ridge's wife!

Her lips moved and I heard her deep, throaty voice, but it was impossible to make out what she was saying. She beckoned with her outstretched hand. The next moment, Dr. Vecchio crossed in front of the window and seated himself beside her on the couch. The light from the fire danced on his thin, swart cheeks and high forehead, made his black mustache and goatee glisten. He leaned over, kissed Lynn Ridge full on the mouth. His white fingers seemed boneless. They moved up her supple arms, caressing her gently. Arturo Vecchio was adept at the things that please women. Lynn Ridge tensed under the stroking of his hands.

As I looked on, I could imagine Enid in Lynn's position. The vision chilled me. Evidently, I had been right about Dr. Vecchio. I swore to myself that he would never set foot in the Courtney home again. Now, if Enid wanted a reason for my stand in the matter, I could give her one; a very definite one.

I BACKED away from the window, turned and started for the car. But the moon had dipped behind a cloud and the darkness was impenetrable to my eyes. Suddenly, I tripped, stumbled, fell forward. There was a crash and a metallic clatter. I had overturned a wheelbarrow full of garden instruments. I picked myself up, but not before a light flashed on under the driveway portico. The front door of the old mansion creaked open and a giant of a man stepped out. He saw me before I could move. I chose the lesser of two evils, approached the portico.

As I drew close, I saw that he was either an Arab or a Hindu almost seven feet tall, with huge, ox-like shoulders. He glared down at me, his massive arms hanging like an ape's.

"I'm looking for Dr. Vecchio," I said tremulously.

His dark face was devoid of expression. He turned, stepped into the house. Long moments passed before Vecchio himself, appeared in the doorway. The psychiatrist's beady eyes lit up.

"Ah, I did not expect the honor of a call," he said. His voice was smooth, oily, with just the faintest trace of an accent.

"I'd like a few minutes with you," I said. "Alone."

He saw me glance at the towering Hindu. "This is Ali, my attendant," he said. "He neither speaks nor understands your language. Come in, please."

I followed him into the house. There was an odor of dampness and decay. The dim light from an orange bulb in the cavernous foyer threw gaunt shadows on the high, vaulted ceiling. Vecchio mumbled something to the Hindu. He disappeared.

"An extremely faithful servant," Vecchio said. "Rather terrifying because of his size, but docile as a lamb." He

rubbed the palms of his hands together, led the way into what had once been the Kendall drawing-room but was now an empty, barn-like enclosure illumined only by a rickety, goose-neck lamp and the dancing firelight.

Lynn Ridge was seated on the couch, her slim legs crossed, the flickering flames heightening the sheen of her chiffon hose. The front of her dress was now pulled tight over her high, conical breasts. Every strand of her dark hair was in place.

"I believe you know one another," Vecchio said, smiling unctuously. "You are friendly enemies, I presume."

Lynn rose, smoothed her skirt. I could follow the outlines of her legs and thighs. "We're not enemies at all, are we, Roger?" Her smile was fixed. "Dr. Vecchio has been telling me something of his work in Vienna. Walter is speaking at the auditorium in Scottsville tonight." She turned to Vecchio. "I guess I'll be going now. I'll walk. It's a pleasant evening and I need the exercise. Good night, Roger."

Vecchio saw her to the front door, returned shortly. "Be seated," he said.

JUST looking at the man made my skin creep. He was small and mouse-like, with a head that was too large for his body. His hands were always moving, the fingers squirming like thin white worms. Looking at them I couldn't understand how even a woman like Lynn Ridge would permit him to touch her. But I had seen it with my own eyes.

"It won't be necessary," I snapped. "What I have to say won't take very long."

He shrugged, crossed over to a worm-eaten highboy, removed a decanter and two glasses. "I have some rare Arabic cordial. Would you care for some?"

"I'm not here on a social visit, Dr.

Vecchio," I said. "I came for the express purpose of telling you not to call on my fiancee, Miss Courtney, again!"

His eyebrows arched diabolically. "Rather a high-handed request, isn't it, my friend? What if I refuse?"

"You won't refuse, Vecchio." I tried to keep my voice on an even keel, fought to control myself. I was itching to smash a fist into his weaselly face.

He poured a thick, orange-colored cordial into one of the glasses. "I see no reason for depriving myself of Miss Courtney's charming company because of your insane jealousy." He raised the glass but the rim never reached his lips. I lunged at him, knocked it from his hand, sent it crashing to the floor.

My right fist swung at his terror-stricken face, hit him high on the cheek. Blood spurted from a gash where my signet ring cut his skin. He lurched back, smashed against the oak-paneled wall.

"I'll kill you if you step across the Courtney threshold!" I cried.

He leaned against the wall, momentarily dazed. His viperish tongue licked at a trickle of blood moving over the corner of his mouth. God only knew what was passing through his devil's mind. He wiped the back of his hand across his lips. It came away smeared with crimson.

"You'd better go," he muttered.

I heard a sound behind me, wheeled. Ali, the huge Hindu, was standing in the arched doorway, his great arms swinging menacingly, his spatulate fingers clawed. Vecchio addressed him in his native tongue. Ali nodded.

"You had better leave before I forget myself," Vecchio said. "One word is all that would be necessary to have the breath of life crushed from your body. Go!"

The Hindu stepped aside as I passed

through the archway. Vecchio followed me to the door. The feeble light in the foyer made a macabre mask of his

ruttled dirt road ahead of me was blurred in the glare of the headlights. I could hear my heart beating and the pulses ticking in my temples. I blinked, shook my head, swung around a curve. Another five hundred yards and the car would be on macadam.

Suddenly something white shot out from the side of the road, loomed up in front of me. In the timeless moment



I heard her scream;
I wrenched the
wheel; but it was no
use!

face, ghastly pale save for a shimmering streak of coagulated blood running from the gash on his cheek to his receding, black-whiskered chin.

"We shall meet again, perhaps," he said, a faintly sardonic smile curling his bluish lips. "I trust the circumstances will be more favorable."

THE moon was still riding behind a bank of dark clouds when I reached the car. It was a relief to get out into the open air, away from the clammy dampness of the Kendall place. I swung around, headed down the hill toward the turnpike. For some strange reason, the

before the sole of my shoe jammed against the brake pedal I saw the ghastly, horror-twisted face of Lynn Ridge over the radiator ornament! I heard her scream, saw her throw up her arms as though to ward off the juggernaut of steel that was bearing down on her. I wrenched the wheel, but I knew it was no use. She was too close. The brake-bands shrieked and the car swerved.

I closed my eyes, unable to witness the horrible impact of metal against human flesh and bone. The car skidded off the road; crashed into a high embankment. I pitched forward and my head struck the wheel.

LOW, mumbling voices penetrated the black curtain of unconsciousness. I forced my leaden eyelids open. Familiar features took shape and form above me. A black mustache and goatee, small dark eyes, the sheen of a high, hairless, forehead. Dr. Vecchio was leaning over me.

"You have suffered only a slight scalp wound," he said. "Mrs. Ridge has been seriously injured. A grave brain concussion. She will require an immediate blood transfusion. Fortunately, Ali's hearing is acute. He heard a scream from the road."

Cold sweat broke out all over my body. I sat up. "Have you called a doctor?" I gasped.

"Not yet. You realize, of course, what this means? If Mrs. Ridge should die—"

Something snapped in my head. "It was an accident!" I screamed. "Do you think I ran her down purposely?"

His voice was maddeningly calm in comparison to mine. "It doesn't matter what I think. You might have some difficulty explaining how it happened. A clear night, an open road. You see, I'm aware of the political differences between you and Mr. Ridge."

I stared at him amazed. "Do you think I'm going to let her die because of that?"

"No, hardly. However, I was about to suggest that you permit me to care for Mrs. Ridge. I have done a good deal of brain work and am better equipped to handle the case than any of your local physicians. However, the final decision rests with you. If you wish this unfortunate occurrence to become public knowledge, I should consider it my duty to inform the proper authorities of all the facts in the case."

My fingernails dug into my palms. "What are you talking about? What facts?" I was certain I detected a smug, weaselly smile curving about his lips.

"The facts as I know them," he replied. "That Mrs. Ridge left this house a few minutes before you did. That you seemed in a hurry to follow her." He stepped back from the couch. "That not only was she struck by your automobile but her physical condition shows every evidence of her having been assaulted."

I lunged at him, got my fingers around his skinny throat. With amazing strength, he tore himself loose. His face was greenish white. Ali, the giant Hindu, loomed in the doorway.

"Don't be a fool!" Vecchio snarled. "You happen to be the only one in the community who doubts my integrity. What chance will your word have against mine? If that woman dies, you will go to jail for life, maybe hang. Every moment counts."

IFELT as though I were caught in the steel jaws of a trap. God was my witness that I had done no wrong, but God could give no testimony in a court of law. This little rat of a man had me backed up against the wall of circumstance. He was right; it was his word

against mine. His voice droned in my ears.

"If she lives, nobody need ever know whose car it was. I will do this for you to show you that I bear no ill feeling, despite your opinion of me. I will do it for the sake of your fiancee."

I passed the back of my hand over my eyes. All the fight was gone out of me. I was beaten, licked. "All right. What's to be done?"

His eyes glistened. "You are being very wise. Ali will tow your car up the hill and hide it somewhere in the woods. You are much too weak to submit to a blood transfusion. I have been thinking the matter over and I suggest that you take my car and go for Miss Courtney at once. I should not think it necessary to explain any of the details to her, but I imagine she trusts you implicitly. Do you feel well enough to drive?"

My head was spinning and my body was clammy. "I—I think so."

"Good. The sooner you get Miss Courtney here, the better. There is no time to lose. Ali will bring my car to the driveway."

To this day, I marvel at how I was able to drive into the village, awaken Enid, and bring her back to the gloomy Kendall place. She begged me to tell her what had happened but I remembered Vecchio's dire admonition. Before we entered the gabled house, I took her into my arms, kissed the warm, sweet softness of her lips. I could feel the pressure of her deliciously yielding breasts. The round fullness of them against my chest gave me courage.

"Roger!" she gasped. "Tell me what it is! Maybe I can help you!"

I kissed her again, avidly, hungrily.

"Trust me, Enid," I murmured.

Vecchio was waiting for us in the living room. The fire had burned down until it was only glowing embers.

"Everything is in readiness," he said quietly. "Miss Courtney will please come with me."

He started toward a door but Enid held back. She turned suddenly, gripped my shoulders. "Roger! For God's sake, what is this madness? Why have you brought me here?"

I held her close. Again the sweet warmth of her lush figure brought comfort. "I've told you as much as I can, darling. There was an automobile accident. I want you to give some of your blood to save a life."

She trembled in my arms. She had dressed hurriedly and there was apparently little more than the ripe softness of her own body under her frock.

"Come please," Vecchio urged.

I LED Enid to the door. Her breasts were straining, pulsing, against the bodice of her frock. Swaying unsteadily, she followed Vecchio into an adjoining room. The door closed behind them.

I stepped over to the fireplace, stood with my back to it, trying to warm the chilled blood in my veins. It all seemed like a hideous nightmare. The moments dragged. A clock chimed from somewhere in the gloomy depths of the house. I thought I heard a low, quivering moan, but it may have been just a figment of my tortured mind. Dr. Vecchio stepped through the door, closed it behind him.

"There is every reason to believe that Mrs. Ridge will live," he said. "You are fortunate." He rubbed the palms of his hands together. "Miss Courtney is resting. I have given her an opiate."

He offered a cigarette from a lacquered humidor. I refused. He lit one, inhaled deeply. "You must realize," he said, "that my intentions are not entirely altruistic. I shall demand a price."

I could have throttled him with my bare hands. But I stifled my anger and thought of my position. "I'll pay your fee," I said.

Blue smoke curled up from his twisted lips. "It isn't money I want. You have become the medium through which I can repay a debt of gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Ridge. I am given to understand that you have in your possession certain documents detrimental to Mr. Ridge's political career. I want them, together with a statement in writing announcing your withdrawal from politics."

For a moment, I was stunned. His dark, beady eyes met mine unflinchingly. I could read contempt in their glittering depths.

"Do you think I'm mad?" I cried.

He shook his head slowly. "No, on the contrary, I think you are very sane. You will turn over these documents and a statement."

Every muscle in my body tightened like the strings of a violin. "Never!"

He raised his cigarette to his lips. The tip glowed as he inhaled. "I think you will," he said softly.

I tried to hang onto reason, but fire was burning in my brain. For an instant, darkness wiped him out, and then he was standing there again, a taunting, sneering smile on his lips. I lunged at him, struck with a tight clenched fist.

The blow never landed. Powerful hands gripped me from behind, pinned me as though in a vise. I struggled to free myself but the giant, Ali, swept me off the floor, held me as a terrier holds a rat.

Vecchio darted from the room, returned with a coil of rope. The Hindu swung me face down on the floor. In a moment, he had my hands tied behind me. In another moment, my body was

trussed. He rolled me over on my back. Vecchio stood over me.

"There are always, as you say, my friend, two ways to kill the cat. Now, we will try the other way." He snapped an order to Ali. The Hindu lifted me in his arms as though I were a feather pillow, followed Vecchio into the adjoining room. There, stretched out on a low couch, her supine body still except for the rhythmic rise and fall of her breasts, was Enid.

ALI propped me up in a chair. Vecchio approached the couch, touched the tips of his sensual fingers to Enid's waxen cheek. His tongue circled his thin, cruel lips. I watched his eyes run the length of Enid's figure, watched them lick at the gently tremulous curves so clearly outlined under her thin cotton dress. The blood backed up in my veins until my heart seemed about to burst. Vecchio looked over at me.

"You will see now that your suspicions regarding my intentions toward Miss Courtney were justified," he said. "I find her very lovely." He lifted Enid's arm, ran the tips of his fingers along the smooth inner surface of it. "She is so young, so soft."

I strained at my bonds, but the tight cords only cut deeper into my flesh. "I'll kill you if you touch her!" I shrieked.

Vecchio laughed mockingly. "Unfortunately, my friend, you are in no position to give orders or dictate terms." He sat down on the couch, leaned over deliberately and kissed Enid's half-parted lips. Those fine white fingers of his skimmed delicately over her throat, skirted the neckline of her frock. He sat up again. "Beautiful," he murmured liquidly. "Firm and feminine and lovely."

Again my body stiffened. The ropes

cut cruelly. From where I sat I could glimpse the milky-whiteness of Enid's thighs where her rumpled dress had crept above her knees. With each breath she took, the loose front of her dress fell open a little, bared the upper rondures of her breasts. The deep, shadowed valley between them was a tempting lure.

Vecchio's eyes swung to me again. The pupils were pin-point embers. His voice was almost dreamy! "And she shall love me, too. It will be very pleas-



As Vecchio bent over her, the Hindu held me helpless.

ant." The deadly menace returned to his voice. "And, my friend, do not forget Ali! He is quite a ladies' man himself!"

The Hindu was staring wildly at Enid's limp figure. The muscles of his brown cheeks twitched. The horrible picture of him so much as touching this helpless girl pierced my brain like a hot poker.

"No!" I screamed. "I'll give you anything you want!"

DR. VECCHIO stood before me. "The keys to your house, I presume, are in your pocket. You will tell me the combination of your safe. I have already prepared a statement which requires only your signature. You will sign it when Ali returns with the documents."

He copied down the safe combination as I gave it to him, removed the key-ring from my pocket. "You have my assurance," he said, "that once the papers are in my hands and your signature affixed to the resignation, nothing more will be said of this incident. Both you and Miss Courtney will be taken into town." He stepped out of the room. The Hindu followed.

I tried desperately to relax, to collect my scattered thoughts. Vecchio's knowledge of the evidence I had against Walter Ridge could have come only from Ridge, himself. Evidently this diabolical trap had been set for me. But what of the accident on the road? Had Lynn Ridge sacrificed herself in order to get something on me? Purposefully thrown herself in the path of my car? It seemed insanely incredible.

A soft moan brought my eyes to the bed. Enid was stirring. Her eyelids fluttered and a babble of whispered sounds escaped her lips.

"Enid!" I called huskily. "Enid!"

A shudder ran through her body as consciousness returned. She sat erect, her blue eyes staring, the pupils pinpointed from the dope Vecchio had no doubt given her.

"Enid, this is Roger!" I gained her attention. "Don't talk," I whispered. "See if you can loosen these ropes."

She slid off the couch, swayed unsteadily as she stood erect. The bodice of her dress, torn by Vecchio, swung wide and revealed the snowy contours of her trembling breasts. She passed a hand over her forehead.

"Roger, what happened?" Her voice was strained, breathless.

"Don't talk, darling," I pleaded. "Try to free me."

She stumbled over to the chair. It seemed like hours before her trembling fingers made any headway with the intricately tied ropes. I kept my eyes glued to the door, expecting Vecchio or the Hindu to enter at any moment. But luck—for a change—was with me. Enid loosened the bonds sufficiently for me to squirm out of them. I swept her into my numb arms, kissed her full on the mouth. It was good to feel the soft warmth of her against me again.

"Wait here for me, darling," I whispered. "If I'm not back in five minutes, get to a phone and call the sheriff."

"Roger!" Her clawed fingers dug into my shoulders. "Roger, I'm afraid!"

"There's nothing to be afraid of, sweet. Just do as I say."

I OPENED the door gently, fearful lest the squeak of a hinge might ruin everything. The huge living-room was empty. The fire had died down and only a few wood embers still burned. I stepped out, treading on tiptoes. Fortunately, the flooring was heavy and solid. Even the dampness hadn't warped or loosened the boards.

I reached the dimly lit foyer, drew up as I heard the low, muted sound of voices; then the unmistakable tinkle of a woman's high-pitched laugh. A heavy oaken door leading off the foyer swung open. I ducked behind a dusty blue plush portiere just as a figure came out.

For a moment I thought I had gone mad; that my mind had cracked. There, standing in the doorway, silhouetted in the light from the room behind, was Lynn Ridge, her face bright with laughter, the front of her dress revealing the deep, narrow valley between her mature breasts! Lynn Ridge, the woman I had struck with my car! She was alive and well! Had it all been a ghastly nightmare? I stood there, rigid, uncertain of my own eyesight until I heard her speak.

"Where is the whiskey, Arturo?"

Vecchio joined her at the doorway, urged her up against the jamb. His fingers dug into her shoulders and his slim body pressed itself to hers. He was shorter than she and he had to stand on the tips of his toes to reach her lips with his hungry, quivering mouth. I could see her bosom rise with her quickened breathing as he kissed her. His hands slid down along her arms, laving their smooth nudity.

He drew his mouth away. "Must you have whiskey, beautiful one?" he murmured throatily.

She pressed her palms against his cheeks, joined her lips to his again. Vecchio stiffened, coiled his arms about her waist.

I HAD seen enough to know that it was no chimera; no mindless hallucination. Somehow, I had been tricked into believing that my car had struck and almost killed the woman who was now writhing under Vecchio's caresses. By what black magic this ebony-bearded demon had brought it about, I did not know. Of one

thing I was certain. That last horrible vision of Lynn Ridge's terror-twisted face had been no figment of my imagination. Her piercing screams, too, were stark realities. I could hear them even now, cutting against my eardrums.

But if all this were true, how was it possible for her to be quivering in Vecchio's arms, giving him her warm, damp mouth with all the abandon of the hot-blooded woman she was? There was only one way to answer the question. I stepped from behind the portiere.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Dr. Vecchio," I said.

He wheeled at the sound of my voice. In the semi-darkness his eyes gleamed like those of a lynx. I could hear his breath hissing through his nostrils. At any moment I expected forked flame to spit forth.

Suddenly he moved with the lightning speed of a rattler's head, darted along the foyer wall. He reached up, jerked a short, bone-handled dagger from its hanging scabbard.

"I'll run it through your heart if you lay a hand on me!" he snarled.

Out of the corner of one eye I saw Lynn Ridge move from the doorway. I side-stepped, lunged at her just as she curled her fingers about the neck of a pottery vase standing on a table. She had it half-raised to hurl at me when my fist smashed against her jaw. I pulled the punch but there was enough force behind it to send her crashing into a corner. She hit the wall, swayed momentarily, then crumpled.

The scrape of feet behind me was warning enough of Vecchio's approach. I ducked, spun around. The steel-bladed dagger whizzed over my shoulder, missed my neck by a hair's breadth. I closed with Vecchio, hurled him to the floor.

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The Curse of Dr. Vecchio

[Continued from page 27]

We rolled over and over, fighting desperately for the lethal weapon now tight-clutched in his right hand.

THE little man's strength was amazing. More than once he wrenched loose and freed his knife hand long enough to slash at me. The blade cut through the sleeve of my jacket, drew blood. I could feel the life fluid seeping down my arm, warm and sticky. The

dagger might just as well have slashed my throat or buried itself in my heart.

I jammed my knee up into his groin, took advantage of his momentary weakness to get on top of him. But even pain failed to stop him. His right arm circled my neck. Something warned me in the nick of time. I threw myself off his body just as the dagger swung down, its point aimed at my back.

I heard him groan horribly, saw his

body stiffen. The handle of the dagger was sticking out of his belly. Unable to check the momentum of his arm he had *knifed himself!*

For a moment that seemed like a century, I crouched on the floor, watching the blood spurt from the wound with each beat of his heart. He was dying and he knew it. His eyes were glazed, and his lips had lost every vestige of color. He motioned to me, indicated that I was to lift him up. I did so, as gently as possible, braced him against the wall.

"Paper," he whispered. "Paper and pencil. In . . . in . . . the desk . . . drawing-room."

I found a pad and a pencil, brought them to him. His hand shook as he wrote a note in Arabic. "You . . . you will give this to . . . to Ali," he said. "Unless you do . . . he will kill you." The pencil slid from his inert fingers. I could hear his teeth click as he gritted them. A faint, painful smile touched his lips.

"You . . . you must wonder about . . . about the accident," he murmured, his voice scarcely a shadow of sound.

"You . . . you did not strike Lynn. It was an illusion created by placing a concave lens over your . . . your windshield. It . . . it brought her figure nearer . . . like . . . like binoculars."

I placed my lips close to his ear. "Did Walter Ridge put you up to this?"

He shook his head. "No. I did it for . . . for Lynn in exchange . . . in exchange for certain favors. Tell her . . . tell her . . ." His chin dropped to his chest. A shudder ran through his body. He was dead.

I HEARD a gasp and a muted cry behind me. Enid was standing in the drawing-room archway, gaping at the corpse of Dr. Vecchio. I hurried to her, held her in my arms. She was trembling.

"It's all over, darling," I whispered. "Death has lifted his curse."

She buried her face against my chest, sobbed like a child. I knew, then, that all the horror and all the mental torture was not in vain if it had brought Enid back to me once again. For Dr. Vecchio it was the end. For us, the beginning.