

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Volume Seven

January, 1935

Number Two

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Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer

Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 295 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Stanger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 8, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1935, by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. \$1.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

DARK BONDAGE

By Hugh B. Cave

(Author of "Inn of the Shadow-Creatures," etc.)

IT WAS, for Fiskeville, an event as important as the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When the last pen had scratched out the signature of its wielder, the murmuring drone of voices in the crowded courtroom became an undulating tidal wave of sound. Fiske-

ville's citizens surged forward and would have carried Milton Perry in triumph through the tree-lined streets of that peaceful New England town, had not Perry grinned quietly and pushed them away.

Yet the smile on Perry's lips was slight-



**Complete
Mystery-Terror
Novel**



The curse of old Benjamin Merritt was upon Milton Perry, blighting all that he touched, sending those he loved to agony and death. . . .

ly grim as he walked with the town's selectmen and Martin Gregg, manufacturer's representative, through the ranks of patriotic citizens who cheered his name. For at the rear of the room, near the door, stood a small group of townspeople who were not cheering—who were, instead, glowering at him as if he were something unclean that had defiled the air they breathed.

With a hand on Perry's arm, Martin Gregg said lightly, "Well, young fellow, I guess you've won. Won a clear victory. It won't be long before that handful of conservatives will get over their supersti-

tious objections and be glad you made 'em come to terms!"

Perry's answering smile was forced. Glancing into the pinched, sallow face of Anton Walzek, emissary of the rival company whose bid had been turned down by the committee, he saw hatred in it, and a veiled threat. And as he neared the threshold he glanced again at his defeated foes, and stopped. Then and there, he would have begged for the hundredth time that they bury the hatchet and try to understand his motives in bringing a factory to the town which had always been his home and to which he had pledged his

allegiance. But Everett Latham, beside him, nudged him forward.

"Not now, Perry," Latham said wisely. "Better wait until they've cooled off."

Then, as Perry stepped into the corridor, pent-up hatred burst its dam.

Old Benjamin Merritt was the man who lurched forward. Old Merritt, who only half an hour ago had faced the crowded meeting and croaked out, with half-mad vehemence, that he would never, while still alive and able to fight, permit Fiskeville's most sacred shrine to be defiled by factory buildings. Old Merritt, whose ancestors had fought beside Benjamin Church in the conquest of King Philip and the Wampanoags—whose forefathers had brandished muskets against Gage at Bunker Hill.

Fists clenched, bloodshot eyes glowing with fanatical rage that had broken its bonds, old Merritt stumbled from the little knot of discontented townsmen near the door. Lurching forward, he shrilled words that brought Milton Perry to a halt.

"Wait a minute—you! I got somethin' to say to you!"

The blood of fighting ancestors fumed in Benjamin Merritt's emaciated frame. Like a huge crab, clawing hands outflung, he surged through the gaping crowd and planted himself on trembling legs before Perry. His grey-haired head was cocked sideways; his smouldering eyes were live coals in a withered face whose muscles worked convulsively.

"You listen to me, Milton Perry! You listen to what I say and mark my words! No man alive can do what you're proposin' to do and escape judgment for his sins! You hear me?"

Perry sighed, said softly: "I hear you, Merritt." Compassion gripped him. It was impossible not to admire the courage of this wizened old man who was still at heart a colonist and dwelt mentally in

times long past. Old Merritt was not to blame for this savage outburst. More than likely the scheme had been spawned in the cunning mind of Ora Fiske, leader of the anti-factory delegation.

But Merritt's clawing fingers raked aside the hand that Perry extended to calm him. "I'm warnin' you, Milton Perry! If you destroy the sanctity of Jason's Knoll by puttin' up a factory there, you'll pay for it! It's blasphemy against Almighty God! You put up your factory on hallowed ground, and the curse of God goes with it!"

Perry was silent, as were the amazed people around him. In the doorway stood Ora Fiske and the rest of Merritt's companions, grimly staring. Off to one side stood Anthony Walzek, the defeated factory-representative whose bid had been refused. The victorious murmur of the townspeople no longer filled the corridor. Merritt's shrill voice was the only sound in a sudden, unnatural hush.

"My curse be on you, Milton Perry! The curse of Benjamin Merritt, whose ancestors helped to hang the Salem witches! The breath of doom on you! Mad, am I? Mad or not, I tell you you'll pay! You'll bring death and doom to everyone and everything you love! You'll bring disaster on everyone you put a hand on and everyone you try to help! That's what comes to a black-souled fiend who defiles the shrine of—"

The old man retched backward, his face livid. His hands ceased clawing at Perry's clothes and went to his own throat, fingers curled in sudden agony. Foam flecked his thin lips and whitened his yellow teeth. Surging blood made a carmine gargoyle of his face.

Perry jerked forward, eyes wide with sudden apprehension. But old Benjamin Merritt went down, writhing. On the floor he screamed:

"My curse on you! The curse of me

and my ancestors, who hanged the Salem witches! Mad, am I? Mad I may be, but *not half as mad as you'll be—*"

Perry's hands clutched the old man's body and raised it, despite its writhing and twisting. The amazed spectators opened a path as he carried the stricken man over the threshold into the courtroom. Like a siren, Merritt's voice shrieked through the strange hush.

"Take your filthy hands off me, Milton Perry! Take 'em away! They're death hands and the curse is on them! Don't be touchin' me!"

Perry lowered him to a bench, straightened above that writhing figure and looked desperately into the faces around him. "Get a doctor, one of you! Hurry!"

"Death hands!" Merritt screamed. "Hands o' death, and they touched me! A doctor can't do no good now! It's too late. Too late . . ."

The scream expired in a bloody gurgle. Benjamin Merritt's bony hands ceased clawing at the wooden bench; his wizened body stiffened with a convulsive jerk. With horrified eyes Perry stared down at him.

The old man's bulging orbs were no longer on fire with smouldering passion. They were sightless glass marbles coated with film. Just once the matchstick legs twitched, and the foam-flecked mouth released a low moan as of wind sighing through wet leaves.

Then old Benjamin Merritt was dead.

GREY-HAIRED Hallam Jordon hunched forward in a rocker on the front porch of the Jordon home on Main Street, and blinked up into Perry's pale face. "Good Lord, Perry," he said, "don't take it so hard! First thing you know, you'll be broodin' yourself into thinking the old man's curse has something *in* it. Don't be a fool! Benjamin Merritt died of heart-attack and nothing else. He had one foot in the grave anyway."

Perry forced a weak smile and looked down at himself. Hallam Jordon was right, of course. Yet even Jordon's blunt words were insufficient to drive away the feeling of uneasiness that had festered for hours in his mind.

He didn't fear old Merritt's curse. It wasn't that. Probably he was just tired out, after days and weeks of fighting for what he knew to be right. From the very beginning, a certain few inhabitants of Fiskeville had fought tooth and nail against the prospect of securing for the town a factory which would practically solve its unemployment problem. They were wrong in fighting against it! Dead wrong! Such a factory would mean better business for everyone concerned, and would increase by some thousands of dollars the money spent in the town.

Yet Ora Fiske and Merritt and a few others had accused him of scheming to make a fortune for himself at the expense of the town's good reputation. They should know better than that. He had lived in Fiskeville all his twenty-six years, had fought to build the very reputation they now accused him of scheming to tear down. And—he was engaged to wed Janice Jordon, the daughter of Sarah and Hallam Jordon, who were staunch loyalists and firm New England Yankees.

What more proof of his allegiance could Ora Fiske and the others demand?

Yet he understood their motives. Fiskeville, because of its limited railroad facilities, had possessed only one site acceptable to the mammoth textile corporation which had agreed to give the town a factory. That site had once been something of a shrine. Neglected and weed-grown now, it was nevertheless cloaked in deep-rooted sentiment.

"You can't build on hallowed ground!" Ora Fiske had thundered at the meeting. "Jason's Knoll is sacred to the memories of what hapened there! Maybe *your* peo-

ple didn't make it sacred, but ours did!"

Yes, Jason's Knoll was a hallowed ground, if one believed in legends that had been handed down through the years. On Jason's Knoll a band of early settlers, fighting for their lives against red-skinned fiends led by King Philip himself, had prayed for divine aid and received it. Besieged by painted savages, the handful of whites had turned to a priestly one of their number—and that man, if legends did not lie, had fallen to his knees in a pool of his own ebbing lifeblood, and prayed as only a devout Puritan could pray. And in the deepest hour of darkness had come a miracle—blinding sheets of rain, livid shafts of white lightning in a furious storm which had spiked the hearts of King Philip's warriors with terror, causing them to flee.

Many years later, on that same hallowed ground, a valiant band of Americans had again prayed for divine aid when menaced by British troops. Their leader, Randall Fiske—whose blood now flowed in the veins of Ora Fiske—had knelt and prayed in the face of withering musket-fire, then had arisen in glory, and with heaven-sent inspiration led his doomed band to miraculous victory.

Hallowed ground? Yes. But since the days of Lincoln and the Civil War, Jason's Knoll had lived less and less in the memories of the townspeople; and now only a few pseudo-sentimental zealots, aroused by Ora Fiske and Benjamin Merritt, opposed the plan of turning that weed-grown site into a commercial enterprise which would raise Fiskeville from debt and despair.

Nevertheless, Milton Perry stared anxiously at the grey-haired man who scowled up at him. "It isn't that I fear old Merritt's curse, Mr. Jordon. I don't. But Merritt's death will make Ora Fiske and the others even more determined in their opposition. They'll see in it a recurrence

of that divine intervention they've been prating about. They'll call it a work of God and a warning."

"Nonsense, boy!"

"But they will! You don't know them!"

"I know them better than you do."

Hallam Jordon's deep eyes narrowed in wrinkled flesh-pits. "I know enough about 'em, my boy, to be scared of old Merritt's curse if I were superstitious that way, which I'm not. The history books say that some of Benjamin Merritt's ancestors were burned at the stake for practicing arts forbidden by Almighty God. But the books don't tell the whole story. I've looked into those things and I know more than you do. Go ahead with your plans and don't be afraid. No future son-in-law of mine can back down because of an old man's curse!"

Perry nodded slowly. "I'll stick it out, Mr. Jordon. Come hell or high water, I'll stick."

"Good! And when Janice gets back from her visit to the city, she'll be right smart proud of you!"

Perry smiled, felt a warm glow creep inside him, driving out the chill that had taken possession of his heart. The sound of Hallam Jordon's blustering voice was soothing; that voice was real and honest, not in the least like the screeching howl of old Benjamin Merritt.

Afraid of Merritt's curse? Not he! Merritt had been queer anyway; perhaps even half mad.

He felt better as he hiked down the steps and opened the gate. Behind him, Hallam Jordon leaned back in the rocker and smiled knowingly; and if the smile were of short duration, changing to a doubtful shake of the head and a squint-eyed frown, Perry did not turn to see.

ALL the way home, he pondered Hallam Jordon's advice. Home was a small white cottage on the outskirts of town: a

cozy dwelling where Milton Perry had lived alone for nearly four years. Right now, it looked more friendly than ever. Here there would be no thoughts of old Merritt's grisly curse, or of the veiled threat in Anthony Walzek's thin face, or of Ora Fiske and his muttering cohorts.

He walked slowly up the flagstoned path and glanced with pride at the beds of varicolored flowers blooming near the veranda. They at least understood him and did not doubt his allegiance. They did not curse him.

Inside, he stripped to his shirtsleeves, donned slippers and lounging-robe, and prepared to make supper. On occasions the townspeople had thought him queer for living alone. A rising young manufacturer, ambitious and progressive, living by himself in a small white cottage, with only flowers for company? Incredible! They did not know that he spent weary hours hunched over a kitchen table cluttered with plans and blueprints; they should have known that his love for flowers was inherited from the grey-haired mother who had died four years ago in this same white cottage.

Janice, too, loved flowers. In a little while, not longer than a few weeks, this white cottage would be hers; these lonely rooms would awaken to the sweet murmur of her voice.

The thought warmed Perry's heart-blood. Then another thought, that of old Merritt's vicious curse, returned to supplant it. He shuddered and stood rigid, staring into shadows.

The thought persisted, intensifying the cold chill in his soul, until the white cottage was no longer a place of peace and quiet. In the very thud of his own footsteps Perry heard other steps that were not real and yet were terrifyingly relentless. In the soft whistle of the kettle on the stove another sound was born: a vague, faint mockery of Benjamin Mer-

ritt's shrieking voice screaming words of madness.

And while Perry sat at the kitchen table, listlessly stuffing food between pale lips, the gnarled face of old Merritt took form in deepening shadows and hung like a gaunt leering gargoyle always beyond reach.

But that was madness! Only a fool would believe such things! Thrusting the food away from him, Perry lurched erect, stood trembling in every muscle, his hands white and tense on the table top. Words snarled through the room and they were his own. "What am I, anyway? A five-year-old kid scared of the dark? For God's sake, snap out of it!"

He laughed then, but the laugh was empty of humor. Later, when he paced nervously into the living-room, the face of old Merritt went with him and Merritt's raucous voice was in that room, too. No, not in the room. The voice was in his brain, where he could not smother it or escape it.

He went to a mammoth window-box choked with flowers—a box of red and gold glowing in lamplight—and watered them. He spent the best part of half an hour tending them; but even their soft beauty could not stifle the misgiving in his heart. No matter where his steps took him or what his hands were doing, old Merritt's voice screamed in his soul.

"The breath of doom on you, Milton Perry! Doom to everyone and everything you love!"

And again: *"Death hands! Hands o' death and they touched me! A doctor can't do no good now! It's too late. . . ."*

Hours later, when he climbed the stairs to the small white-walled bedroom and threw himself on the bed, cold sweat beaded his twitching face and his eyes were blood-rimmed from staring so long into shadows. He lay rigid, gazing dully at the ceiling. And he thought: This is mad-

ness! These hands of mind had nothing to do with old Merritt's death! Good God, what am I—a coward? Am I fool enough to let the death of one old man, who was half mad and would have died anyway, make a gibbering scarecrow of me?

He slept, but the sleep was filled with leering shadows and a gaunt face screaming words of evil. Nightmares tormented him in endless procession. Old Merritt came, and Ora Fiske, and a handful of muttering townspeople who threatened dire things. And in his dream he ran screaming in terror to the home of Hal-lam Jordon, where Janice held her arms out to him and comforted him and said softly: "What are you afraid of?"

Morning came and the sheets of the bed were damp with perspiration. Exhausted by a sleep which had been no sleep at all, Perry went downstairs, made a breakfast for which he had no appetite. This day there was work to be done. He must visit Jason's Knoll and talk with Martin Gregg, the manufacturer's representative who would supervise the work of construction. And yet he was tired. . .

Wearily he walked into the living-room and took his hat and coat from a chair. And then, looking toward the flower-box over which he had worked so painstakingly the night before, he stiffened abruptly, opened his eyes wide.

A sob welled in his throat as he lurched forward. He put both hands out, and the fingers of those hands were ice cold and twitching when they touched the rim of the flower-box.

The flowers were no longer beautiful, no longer a vivid sea of color. They were withered, drooping mockeries of a loveliness that had faded. It was as if years instead of hours had passed during the night, as if some malignant malady had brought death. For the flowers in that box—the same blooms over which he had worked with such care and tenderness—

were seared and ugly. Black emblems of death!

Milton Perry stared with widening, glazed eyes at the stiff fingers of his ice-cold hands, and shrieked hysterically: "Death hands! Oh my God. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Grave

WHAT happened immediately after that, he was not sure. For an eternity, terror had him in its relentless grip. He stumbled backward and slumped like a drunken man into one of the room's many chairs.

Fear of madness spiked him. He gripped the chair-arms fiercely and fought for self-control. Over and over he mumbled aloud: "It wasn't the curse! It *wasn't!* Such things can't be true. . . ."

The thing that saved him, finally bringing self-control, was a sudden realization that the phone was ringing. The sound stiffened him, droned through the hoarse words of horror that spilled from his throat. He crossed the threshold and snatched the instrument in trembling fingers.

Over the wire came a harsh masculine voice that blasted his eardrums.

"Perry? This is Latham. Perry, in God's name come over here! I'm at Hal-lam Jordon's house. Something terrible—"

The voice broke in a sob. The phone slipped from Perry's stiff fingers and for seconds he stood staring at it. Everett Latham—at the Jordon home? A green glint of jealousy gathered in Perry's eyes. What was Latham doing there?

He had no great liking for the man, even though he had taken him into the newly formed textile corporation. But there was nothing really wrong with Latham. He was Jan's second cousin and held a good position in the Fiskeville

Bank, of which Hallam Jordon was owner. A good man and an honest one. But—he had long been a rival for the hand of Hallam Jordon's daughter. He had wanted Janice. . . .

Then, dully, Perry realized what the voice had said. The Jordon home. Something terrible. . . .

Good God, if anything had happened to Janice!

It was a quarter-mile to the Jordon home, and Milton Perry had his car out of its small white garage and over that quarter-mile of rutted road in less than five minutes. Janice Jordon's father was not this time sitting on the trellised porch. It was Everett Latham who jerked the door open when Perry pushed the bell.

And the face of Janice Jordon's cousin was no longer normal and handsome. It was a chalk-hued mask racked with torment. The hand that stabbed out to grip Perry's arm was quivering as with ague.

"Thank God you've come, Perry! I couldn't have handled this alone. Mrs. Jordon is on the verge of hysterics—"

"What's wrong?" Fear whitened Perry's lips. "Is it Jan? Has anything—"

"It's not Jan. It's Hallam! The sheriff has been here." Latham shuddered. "There's been a murder and they've taken Hallam. Taken him to jail. They say he killed Martin Gregg!"

Perry heard sobbing sounds from the living-room and lurched forward, forced his leaden legs to carry him over the threshold. At his entrance the wife of Hallam Jordon raised her bowed head and looked up at him. Sobs shook her thin shoulders; her body, slender despite its burden of years, was a small, trembling thing huddled in a chair that seemed enormous by comparison. Her white hands gripped the chair-arms. Her face was racked with anguish under its halo of grey-white hair.

Perry went to her and put an arm about her shoulders. The anguish in her bloodless face found its way into his own heart. "Don't, Mrs. Jordon! Please don't. It isn't as bad as that. It—can't be. There's a horrible mistake."

"She won't be comforted," Latham groaned. "God knows I've tried. I hurried here as soon as I learned what had happened. It *must* be a mistake! But the sheriff found what he said was damning evidence—"

"Found—what?"

"Evidence." Latham's voice bubbled through moist lips. "He and his men searched the house. They had a man's boot-heel—the double-thick heel that Hallam always wears. They said it was found on the hotel fire-escape, outside the room where Gregg was shot. They went through the house here as if they owned it, and they found one of Hallam's shoes in a closet upstairs, with the heel ripped off. They took him—"

He clenched his fists, glared at Perry with eyes that suddenly smouldered. "It's a dirty frame-up, Perry. Ora Fiske and Walzek are back of it! At the meeting yesterday, when old Merritt pulled his little act, Fiske and Walzek were mumbling together as if guilty of something underhanded. If ever I saw a look of fiendish delight on a man's face, it was on Walzek's. By God—"

He stared at Sarah Jordon and suddenly stopped talking. A shuddering moan had escaped the woman's lips; her head was on Perry's shoulder. But she said nothing. Torment had robbed her of speech.

Compassion filled Perry's heart and he tightened his arms about those slender shoulders. "It's a mistake, Mrs. Jordon," he whispered again. "It's nothing more than that. You must be brave."

The woman stared up at him. "Oh God, it isn't true! Tell them it isn't true!"

"I'll go to them now. And I'll bring him back with me. I promise!" Perry withdrew his arm and stood up, caught a deep breath.

"Take care of her, Latham," he muttered. Then, bitterly: "I won't be long. I'll make them listen to reason."

HE STRODE savagely from the house and hiked downtown with long ground-eating strides. Hallam Jordon a murderer? Did the sheriff and the rest of them believe even for a moment in a thing so utterly impossible? What if they *had* found "evidence?" Evidence could be faked or framed or invented, but a man's character could not change overnight! They should know that

If murder had been done, and evidence planted, the ghastly deed was but another part of the vicious program of terror sponsored by Ora Fiske and his fanatic followers. Another savage attempt to prevent what they, in their blind madness, chose to call the desecration of Jason's Knoll!

Would they stop at nothing?

Outside the courthouse jail a crowd had formed, and Perry pushed his way through with savage strides. Inside, he came upon another group and found himself confronting Ora Fiske, Sheriff Andrew Gates, and other Fiskeville citizens.

Fiske, sitting pompously in a swivel-chair before the desk, was speaking in a high-pitched womanish voice that harmonized with his watery grey eyes, bony frame, and bilious face.

"That's exactly what happened, I'm telling you. I went to the hotel this morning to make a last attempt to persuade Gregg to abandon his plans. Henry Johnson, the clerk, was at the lobby desk when I went upstairs. I went up alone and knocked on Gregg's door—number twenty-three as I recall it—and there wasn't no an-

swer. And then I saw a dark stain on the floor, right at my feet."

Fiske screwed his pink lips out of shape and jerked his head to spit at a cuspidor beside the desk. "That dark stain was blood, and it come from under Gregg's door. So I hustled downstairs and got Johnson, and we opened the door, and there was Gregg layin' on the floor, just over the sill. He'd been shot sometime durin' the night and he'd been shot in the back. The window was open overlookin' the fire-escape. It's plain as the nose on your face, what happened."

Sheriff Gates nodded, reached down to pick up a shoe that stood on the desk. Perry, moving forward, said quietly. "May I look at that, Sheriff?"

But a close look was not necessary. Beside the shoe lay the torn heel that obviously belonged to it. Only one man in Fiskeville wore a double-thick leather heel of that type. Hallam Jordon had been forced to suffer such a contrivance since childhood, when infantile paralysis had left its mark.

"I reckon it's open and shut," Gates said grimly. "We found the heel on the hotel fire-escape outside Gregg's window. Soon as we examined it, we knew who it belonged to. What reason Jordon had for wantin' to kill Gregg, we ain't yet been able to figure out—and Jordon won't talk. But it's apparent he done the shootin', and in makin' his getaway he got his heel caught in one of the rusty iron slats of the fire escape."

"And then?" Perry's prompting came in a whisper through twitching lips.

"Well, we naturally went to Jordon's house and accused him, and when he denied knowin' anything about it we searched the house. We located the shoe, with the heel ripped off of it, in a cupboard up in an unused bedroom. He swore up and down that he ain't worn that particular

pair of shoes in six months or more, but—well, evidence don't lie."

Perry's hand closed tremblingly on the sheriff's arm. "Let me talk to Hallam."

"Why sure, if you want to." Gates swung about, pushed through the crowded room and led the way along the jail corridor, rattling keys in his outthrust hand. At the corridor's end he stopped, opened a cell-door and nodded. "I'll have to lock you in, Mr. Perry. Holler when you're done talkin', and I'll come let you out again."

Perry stepped forward, shuddered as the door rattled shut behind him. Then he was alone with the man who sat staring at him.

The cell was small, and sunlight slanted through a barred window close to the ceiling. Hallam Jordon sat in shadow, on a cot that sagged under the weight of his big body—sat and stared, with deep eyes glowering in sunken sockets. Beside him, on the floor, dirty dishes were stacked against the wall. A cigarette protruded at a defiant upward angle from his tight lips, and grey smoke hung without motion in the narrow room.

Perry moved forward, said falteringly: "Mr. Jordon. . . ."

The dark eyes narrowed; the thin lips curled downward. "Well, Perry?"

"They're mad out there! Stark mad, all of them! Ora Fiske has egged them on with his fanatic ravings, and all they can think of is Fiske and Merritt and Merritt's curse."

HE STOPPED abruptly, stood stiff. In the anguish of the past half hour he had forgotten the hideous words of Benjamin Merritt. Now he remembered, and the muscles of his throat contracted with sudden chill. Those dead flowers. "You'll bring death and doom to *everyone you try to help!*" Great God. . . .

"It makes no difference what they think

now," Hallam Jordon said bitterly. "They've branded me. They've called me a killer and thrown me in prison. That's all that matters. My wife and daughter are shamed forever."

Perry took a faltering step forward. It was no time now to think of Merritt's curse. Such thoughts were madness. Old Merritt had died; the flowers had rotted away—but not because of any wild threat flung from the heart of a half-mad lunatic! Hallam Jordon needed help. Needed it now!

His hand gripped the older man's shoulder. "Your wife and daughter are not shamed. The whole thing is a foolish mistake, that's all."

But he knew now that the murder of Martin Gregg had been no mistake. Gregg had been slain because of his determination to see the Jason's Knoll deal through, despite all opposition. He had been shot down because he represented the company that was backing Perry's plans.

But why had the unknown killer elected to plant evidence that would convict Hallam Jordon?

Jordon owned the Fiskeville Trust Company. Perhaps . . .

"Son—" Jordon's hand trembled on Perry's rigid arm. "Son, I've a feeling I'm not coming out of this. It's the end. Take care of Janice and—"

A girl's voice from the jail corridor outside interrupted him. He stiffened, stared with widening eyes at the cell door. Perry's eyes widened, too, and filled with gladness. He knew that voice! Since Jan had left Fiskeville, two weeks ago, and gone to visit friends in a nearby city, he had missed that voice and its owner as much as a man could miss anything on earth.

He lurched erect, strode to the cell door and stared past the stocky form of Sheriff Gates into the anxious face of the girl

he loved. Then the door creaked open and Janice Jordon was in his arms.

She clung to him only a moment, then turned impulsively, put both arms around the rigid body of her father and stared with wide moist eyes into Hallam's gaunt face.

In the past moment that face had changed! Color had seeped out of it and left a bloodless mask. Jordon's eyes were glowing live coals; the flesh of his cheeks was sucked in, like thin rubber, over bulging muscles that worked convulsively! Spittle flecked the man's lips and he gasped for breath as if suffocating.

"It—it's too late, girl. Too—late. . ."

Too late! Perry stared in horror as that husky voice whispered through the room. It was not Jordon's voice; it was the muttered croak of old Benjamin Merritt, wheezing the same ominous words. "Too—late. . ."

Moments ago, Hallam Jordon had been physically well. Now the man was a gaunt, trembling scarecrow, sick unto death!

Death hands! A chill of horror stabbed Perry's heart. Slowly, against his will, he raised his own two hands and stared at them. Was it his mad imagination, or did those lean fingers curl toward his gaping eyes, of their own volition, in a gesture of black mockery? Death hands! Merciful God. . .!

Hallam Jordon's hoarse voice broke through the shroud of midnight fear that enveloped him. "I'm done for, girl. Done for."

"But what's *wrong* Dad? Oh God, tell me what's *wrong!*"

"I don't know." Hallam's voice came weakly. "Light me a cigarette, Jan, like a good—girl. I don't know what's *wrong*. It came of a sudden. I—I'm choked up—can't breathe." He raised his head as if it were weighted, and his palsied hand came up to take the cigarette the girl offered him. His glazed eyes focused, as

if gazing through dense fog, on Perry's rigid form.

"Merritt's—curse." The words came half inaudibly, struggling through weak lips. "There must be something—to it—after all. I was all right till Perry came in here. Then—he put his hands on me. . ."

Blood rushed to Jordon's gaunt face. Suddenly he was erect on widespread legs, swaying. His lips worked furiously, spitting grey froth, and he stood like a blasted tower ready to crash. His arm jerked up; a lean forefinger stabbed toward Perry's wooden form. "You leave my daughter alone! God help you—"

His big body pitched forward and the girl's clutching hands could not hold him. Foaming at the mouth, he crashed to the floor and lay still.

PERRY did not move. He could not move. The blood in his veins had congealed; his rigid frame was ice-cold, stiff as stone. He stood with both hands half extended, eyes bulging and filled with black terror. And Janice Jordon, even while kneeling beside the fallen body of her father and sobbing incoherent words of anguish, stared at Perry as if gazing at a specter from some dark room of hell.

"Is he—is he dead?" Perry whispered.

She shuddered, made no answer. Slowly he took a step forward, but her shrill voice blasted out to stop him. "Don't come near me! Don't touch him! My God, haven't you done enough *already?*"

Perry closed his eyes in agony. So she, too, had heard about old Merritt's mad curse. Even though she had but just returned to Fiskeville, she had heard the whole ghastly story and believed it.

He groaned, retreated step by step from the girl's wild gaze. Of course she had heard. A score of gossiping tongues would have poured the hideous story into her ears. And now, now she had witness-

ed the horrific power of the curse that damned him. She had seen with her own eyes. . . .

Vaguely, through a mental agony that numbed him, he was aware of other voices, other shapes crowding around him. The cell door was open; Sheriff Gates was in the room, gaping down at Hallam Jordon's contorted body. Others were gawking in the doorway, pushing closer.

But their stares of astonishment changed rapidly to something else. Their attention went from the dead man to the man who stood stiff and pale in their midst. With one accord they shrank from him, gazed at him in terror.

Ora Fiske, peering into Perry's face, cringed back and muttered aloud: "It's the curse of old Merritt. 'The breath o' doom,' Merritt said, and it's true. First *he* died, and now Jordon!"

A moan of mortal anguish welled in Perry's throat; he took a step forward, arms outstretched toward the girl who had loved him. "It isn't true! Oh God, it can't be. Jan—"

The horror in her wide eyes stopped him. For a moment he stood rooted to the floor while his gaze roved dully from one fear-filled face to another. Then panic seized him; he stumbled blindly to the door. They let him go, shrank from him as from a leper.

With madness in his heart, Perry lurched through the jail corridor and out of the building. And outside, where the news of Jordon's death and the manner of it had circulated through the assembled crowd, men and women fell back in wide-eyed horror to let him through.

Alone, he returned to the small white cottage on the outskirts of the town. He made his way into a bleak living-room where dead flowers leered at him from the window-box. Sitting there in a chair near the black fireplace, he stared with hollow, vacant eyes—and saw only the leering face

of old Merritt, heard only the shrill cacophony of Merritt's voice screaming, as from a great distance:

"The breath of doom on you, Milton Perry! Death and doom to everyone you love. . . ."

The breath of doom! How long that soul-retching thought endured in Perry's mind, he did not know. Hours passed before other thoughts came to supplant it.

What had become of Sarah Jordon? Had the shock been too much for her? Had Latham stayed with her, to comfort her?

Slowly, Perry got out of his chair and went to the telephone, forced himself to raise the receiver from its hook and call the Jordon home.

Everett Latham answered, and said quietly in reply to Perry's mumbled questions: "She is under the doctor's care. The shock was great, but she has a good chance to pull through, thank God. How about you?"

"I'm—all right."

"I want to talk to you, Perry. No, I'm not afraid of the curse. It may be some time before I'm able to leave here, but I'll come as soon as possible. Janice is still at the jail, with Sheriff Gates and the others."

Perry hooked the receiver, returned to the living-room. For a while he stared at his hands, and shuddered. Then he forced himself to stop shuddering. Death hands? After what had happened, it was easy to believe that Merritt's curse had given those lean fingers the power to destroy whatever they contacted. But such things could not be! This was the twentieth century, not a dark age of sorcery and witchcraft!

Someone, someone with sinister designs, was behind all this. But who? Ora Fiske? One of Fiske's fanatical followers? Or Anthony Walzek, the man who

had tried to get the factory site for his own company?

Or even Sheriff Gates, who had long been a close friend of Fiske and might now be in league with those same fanatics?

Benjamin Merritt was dead. The flowers in the window-box were black mockeries. Hallam Jordon was dead. How could Fiske or Gates or Walzek or any other one man have been responsible for such a hideous sequence of events?

Perry sat and thought, until he found himself unable to think. A dull longing stabbed his heart. His arms went slowly out; the name of the girl he loved came convulsively from his pale lips. Then he remembered the horror in Janice Jordon's eyes when she had cringed from him in her father's death-cell, and he uttered a low groan of torment that came from the depths of a soul dark with agony.

Even *she* believed that a black curse hung over him threatening doom to all he loved!

He stood up, gaunt and trembling, and paced slowly into the kitchen. While coffee was brewing on the stove, he stood before a mirror and gazed at his reflection in the glass. The face he saw was no longer his own. It was a strange, uncouth gargoyle with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. Madness hung in the terror-glare of its eyes. Leprous white, frightful in its paleness, it glared back at him so fiercely that he shrank from it.

HE HAD no desire for coffee then, or for food. Silently he returned to the living-room. Hours had passed since his return to the cottage, and when he drew the window curtains aside now and peered out at the street, he saw that it lay in darkness. Night had come. Creeping shadows filled the room, and the shadows brought a new fear, a new dread.

Alone and lonely, Perry sank into a

chair, lighted a small lamp on the table beside him. Damp hair hung in his staring eyes. He had long ago discarded coat and tie and exchanged his shoes for slippers. Lamplight cast wriggling shadows over him, yellowing his face and hands. In the silence of creeping night, the house became a thing alive and acquired a voice. Not one voice, but many. And at every vague sound, Perry jerked to attention, sat like a stone image while his wide eyes sought an explanation.

In the room with him, a clock ticked the passing seconds. Strange, the human quality in that sound, as of some skeleton finger gently but relentlessly tapping out seconds of doom. It came from behind him, throbbing into his brain, repeating the same word over and over without pause or variation. *Doom . . . doom . . . doom . . . doom . . .*

Then it was no longer a whisper, but the shrill voice of old Merritt, screaming forth in savage glee its ominous message. **DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!** How in the name of God could any voice go on and on, on and on like that without pausing for breath? How—

Perry lurched erect and his own voice shrieked an answer. "In God's name, stop it! *Stop it!*"

Like a blind man he lurched across the room, stumbling, crashing against chairs and tables, his arms outflung, his hands clawing like twin crabs. The offending clock squatted on a mantel near the hall doorway, leering at him. His fingers seized it, curled around it. With a hoarse cry of triumph he flung the clock from him, heard it crash against the wall and thud to the floor. The voice of old Merritt died to silence.

He realized then what he had done. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he stood rigid. Whispered words spilled from his lips. "My God—am I going *mad!*"

There was no answer. Slowly, with groping hands outstretched, he returned to the chair. Mad? Yes. None but a madman would have let the harmless ticking of a clock affect him that way. A hoarse sob rose in his throat, found utterance in a ghastly moan of fear. Then another sound found its way into the room and worked on his diseased nerves.

Behind him, the windows rattled to a sudden sharp impact, as a wind-driven gust of rain drummed against them. The house had possessed whispering ghost-voices before, but now it became an abode of inhuman din. The drumming of heavy rain was a devil's tattoo throbbing in his brain. . . .

He listened, and felt hair crawl at the nape of his neck. The beat of his heart quickened as his warped imagination played tricks with him. That sudden whispering sound above him—was it a stealthy tread of feet in an upstairs room, or merely an echo of rain on the sloping roof? That demon laughter from the kitchen—was it something more than the wail of wind against creaking windows?

Out in the hall a clock was striking, and the sound was a beating of huge hammers against Perry's twisted brain. *Bong . . . bong . . . bong . . .* Merciful Christ, would it *never* cease? Yet he counted the strokes, widened his eyes in bewilderment as they continued. Ten . . . eleven. . . It could not be that late! Twelve! The huge clock was silent. Twelve o'clock! Midnight! No, no—!

But he knew it was true. For hours he had lived in torment, enduring the tortures of the damned. Time had meant nothing. Now it was midnight!

He moaned dully. Everett Latham would not come now. Latham had thought things over and realized the horrible truth and decided to stay away. No one would ever come again.

Perry stiffened in his chair. A sound

not of the storm had found its way into the room. Seconds passed while he clung to the chair-arms, his body twisted half about, his red-rimmed eyes focused on the hall doorway. Yes, there it was again. A thud of heavy feet on the veranda steps, outside. Latham had come!

With a glad cry he heaved himself erect, stumbled into the hall. Even before the door echoed to the dull thud of a pounding fist he was lurching toward it, his hand outflung to grip the knob.

Then, as the knob burned hot against his icy fingers, he hesitated, sucked breath into his heaving chest.

What if it were not Latham? What if it were someone—something else—some monstrous visitant conjured up by old Merritt's black curse?

The thought knifed his brain and spawned a sob in his throat. What matter now if the vilest demons of hell came to claim him! Death would be better than creeping madness. Anything would be better than living in a dark world of eternal terror!

In a low, trembling voice he called out: "Who—who's there?"

No voice answered him. Again the door vibrated to the impact of a thumping fist.

"*Who's there?*" Perry shrieked. "*Who is it?*"

Did a voice answer him? He was not sure. Faintly, through the throb of heavy rain and the moan of storm-wind in the upper reaches of the house, a low voice seemed to intone: "Open—and see." Was his brain again playing tricks? . . .

Slowly his fingers turned the knob. It would not be Latham. Latham would have thumbed the bell instead of knocking. It was some stranger. . . .

Then the door was open. With horror-filled eyes Perry stared into the dark, drooling face of the man who stood on the veranda.

Rain puddled the porch and cascaded

from the eaves above. Rain and darkness blurred the hunch-shouldered shape that stood just beyond the open door. But the face that glared at Perry from beneath the down-turned brim of a sodden black hat *was the face of Benjamin Merritt!*

CHAPTER THREE

The Curse Falls

A SCREAM gurgled in Perry's throat and died unuttered. As if turned to wood by the glitter of those eyes, he stood rooted to the threshold, his hands white and wet on the sides of the door-frame. Then the glaring eyes narrowed; the drooling face beneath them wrinkled into a triumphant leer. A peal of low laughter came from Merritt's shadowed lips.

The voice that croaked from those lips was hardly more than a cracked whisper, barely audible above the pounding of rain on the porch. "You see, Milton Perry, I have returned!"

He took a step forward; his sodden boots sucked on the wet boards. "Yes—I have returned to visit you." He stopped again and laughed mirthlessly. His shriveled body, wrapped in a monstrous black overcoat whose upturned collar all but concealed his features, was a thing risen from the grave—a black ghoulish shape that blended with the dark of night as if spawned by that very darkness.

A clawlike hand stabbed out. A bony forefinger pointed rigidly into Perry's bloodless face. "Listen to me, Milton Perry. In spite of the curse on you, you went ahead with your evil plans. Now it's too late! Too—late! Doom is on you. Sickness'll come, and madness. Before three days are past, you'll lie in an agony worse than death, away from all who love you.

"All alone you'll be, in a place of darkness and despair. And then death will come to shake hands with you, and I'll be

waiting to lead you to the pits of torment." The cracked voice sank to a whisper. "You hear, Milton Perry? Before three days are past, you'll be like me, dead! You're cursed. The doom is on you. The breath of doom. . ."

Something let go in Perry's brain. A jangling scream toesined from his lips and he lunged forward. This leering, mocking ghoulish shape before him was the cause of all his agony! This thing, this black monstrosity that in life had been Benjamin Merritt, had brought doom to Fiskeville and death to the father of the girl Perry loved!

His lunging body surged over the threshold, arms outflung, hands clawing toward the death's-head that leered there in darkness.

But his hands failed to make contact. Rain had puddled the floor of the porch and made of it a sodden slippery surface that hurled him headlong. The ghoulish shape moved sideways with a silent gliding rapidity that seemed no movement at all.

Perry reeled across the narrow veranda, flailing the dark with both arms as he sought to regain balance. Then his stumbling feet encountered emptiness; his contorted body hurtled into space, struck the veranda steps a glancing blow and crashed to the flagstoned path beyond.

Excruciating pain knifed one shoulder. A moan of agony filled Perry's throat and spilled into the night. On the veranda above him, old Merritt chuckled in obscene triumph. . . .

Perry rolled over once, twice, as a dog might roll after being struck by a speeding car. Then he lay still, with rain beating his limp body and a cold chill creeping through him from the wet stones beneath. . . .

HE DID not lose consciousness. Like a man condemned, he lay there in rain and darkness, waiting. This was the

end. But why was that hideous shape so slow in descending the veranda steps to bend above him and put its vile hands on him? Surely the thing meant to destroy him!

He remembered, then, the words that had issued from those death-rotted lips. "Before three days are past . . ." So he had three days left to live. Three days of unbearable agony and loneliness. Death would be a thousand times more merciful if it came now! Three days of madness, of utter isolation . . . knowing that he could not seek help without bringing doom to those who tried to comfort him. God!

Three days. Benjamin Merritt had returned from the gloom of the grave to deliver the summons. Had come back with dark eyes glowing, corpse-face iridescent with gloating, to whisper those words of inescapable doom.

Perry groaned, clawed the flagstones in an effort to rise. Old Merritt's guttural words were still in his brain, mocking him, watering the blood that chilled his heart. Numb with a cold not of the rain that beat down on him, he had no courage left, no hope, no desire to fight. What good would come of fighting, now?

Then he heard footsteps, and at the foot of the flagstone walk the gate creaked open.

Groping hands pawed Perry's shoulders. A familiar voice, the voice of Everett Latham, said hoarsely: "Good Lord, Perry, what's happened?"

Perry stared into the face above him. Violently he wrenched his shoulders, tried to squirm clear of the man's friendly hands. "Leave me alone!" Strange, that that shrill, half-mad voice should be emanating from his own lips! "Leave me alone! Don't touch me!"

"Don't—touch you?"

"You'll die the way the others died!

Don't come near me, in the name of God—"

"Nonsense, man!" Latham reached down, found a grip and hauled Perry erect. "You're ill. Come inside, out of the rain."

A scream convulsed Perry's face. "I warn you, Latham. Don't say I didn't warn you. The curse—"

"Oh, bother the curse! Only an idiot would believe in such things!"

Gently Latham put an arm around those sodden shoulders, aided Perry in climbing the porch steps. The sounds that spilled from Perry's throat were low sobs; the terror in his glazed eyes did not diminish.

This would mean another victim! Blackness clutched at his soul, racked him with torment. Weakly he fought to free himself from the strong hands that supported him, but Latham would not permit it.

Inside, Latham steered him to a chair and lowered him into it, stood back and gazed at him with an expression of deep pity. "I'd have come sooner, old man, but I had to wait at Jordon's house for Janice to return. Someone had to stay with her mother. What the devil have you been up to? What were you doing out there on the walk?"

Perry licked dry lips, shuddered. "He was here."

"He? Who?"

"Merritt. I'm not mad, Latham. Not—yet. Old Merritt came here to—to warn me."

Latham scowled, took a short step backward as if suddenly afraid. "You *are* ill. Let me get a doctor, Perry."

"No, no. My God, don't you realize—"

"But Merritt couldn't have come here." Latham's voice was soft, soothing, the voice of one who sought to calm a terrified child. "He died. Don't you remember, old man? Old Merritt is dead."

"I know. But he was here."

"Nonsense! You were seeing things,

that's all. Your nerves are upset." Firm fingers touched Perry's shoulder and clung there reassuringly. "It's nothing but nerves. You've been through a lot, Perry. Just take things easy for a while. I'll make some coffee to straighten you out."

He was gone, into the kitchen. Perry sat motionless, conscious only of a numbing fear in his heart and the dull throbbing of rain against shut windows. Why had Latham come? Why had not a merciful God warned him to stay away? Now it was too late. The black tentacles of old Merritt's curse had reached out to enfold another innocent victim.

"Too late," Perry moaned. "It's too late. . . ."

Vaguely he was aware of comforting, everyday sounds from the kitchen: the gurgle of running water, a hissing sound as Latham ignited a burner of the gas-range. But they were merely a background for the thoughts that crawled like bloated slugs through his racked brain.

Latham was trying to help him. That was funny, now. He and Latham had always been cold toward each other, because of their mutual love for Janice. Yet in time of trouble Latham had come, had forgotten that coldness. And Janice had stayed away.

Thank God she had! Otherwise she, too, would be doomed!

Footsteps scraped on the threshold and Perry forced his lolling head up, gazed dully as Latham came toward him.

"Here . . ." Latham bent above him, held forward a steaming cup that contained black coffee. "Here, drink this. You're just upset, old man. Coffee's good for the nerves."

Perry drank, mumbled his thanks.

"And don't worry about old Merritt's visit," Latham said softly, persuasively. "You were seeing things, that's all. You're on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and

jangled nerves do queer things to us sometimes. You'll be all right."

"You don't understand," Perry muttered.

"I think I do. But don't worry about it, and don't worry about me, either." A grin wrinkled Latham's thin face. "A curse works only when you believe in it, Perry. Psychology, that's all. And it won't affect me because I just don't believe. Nothing's going to happen to me."

"It—doesn't work unless you believe in it?"

"That's the big secret. Now you just take care of yourself. Pack yourself off to bed and I'll see that Janice is here in the morning to look after you." Again Latham's hand found Perry's shoulder and exerted pressure. "She loves you, you know."

He straightened, stepped back. "I'll run along now. See you later. If the nerves get you again, give me a ring on the phone and I'll hustle over here. But you won't need me. You'll be all right. I'm sure of it."

He walked to the door, working his arms into the sleeves of a rubber raincoat. From the doorway he called a cheery, "Goodnight, Perry." Then the outer door opened, closed, and Perry was alone.

VERY slowly, Perry got out of his chair and dragged his weary body up the staircase to the bedroom on the floor above. Sobbing, he flung himself on the bed. . . .

But sleep was a mockery, filled with a procession of garish nightmares that paraded one after another through his warped mind. Old Merritt's guttural voice intoned again from shrunken lips: "Sickness'll come, and madness. Before three days are past, you'll lie all alone in an agony worse than death. The breath of doom is on you. . . ."

Ora Fiske was in the room, too, sitting as he had sat in the jail office, fatly

important, somehow triumphant. And Walzek, smiling a smile so benign that its very benignity was replete with evil.

And Fiske's followers, leering and pointing and screaming words of fanatical triumph. "You would have desecrated Jason's Knoll, where the hand of God preserved our forefathers from doom. Now the doom is on *you*, for your sin! Three days. . ."

He awoke trembling in every muscle, sat up in bed with a convulsive jerk and stared into the room's darkness. And the room was empty again. Rain made a hollow dirge on the roof and the storm sang a funeral singsong. The chamber was black with that blackness which comes just before dawn.

Perry put damp hands to his quivering face, and the hands were cold as the fleshless bones of a corpse! The darkness mocked him; the voice of the storm was a muttering cry of evil that spiked his soul with dread. Frantically he pushed the bedclothes away and lurched erect.

He knew then that the threat of old Merritt had taken effect. "Sickness'll come, and madness. . ." He *was* sick! And before long madness would rush upon him out of darkness. . . .

A numbness was in his head and his trembling body was cold as ice. When he removed his hand from the bedpost and ventured a step forward, the room swam before him, the floor billowed, the ceiling formed a distorted angle that leaned into limitless space. His feet followed a zig-zag course to the door and carried him in staggering flight to the head of the staircase. On the stairs he would have pitched headlong had not his hands clutched the banister.

"Sickness'll come, and madness. . ."

What time was it? How many centuries had passed since Latham had bent above him, offering words of comfort? He stumbled along the downstairs hall and

peered at the clock, but the clock-face was a blur before his eyes—a human face grinning derisively. Sobbing, he found a light-switch, stared again and saw that the hour was four-thirty. Four-thirty a. m.

He could not stay longer in this house of torment. Every fiber within him shrieked at him to get out, get away. He looked down at himself out of bloodshot eyes and saw that he was dressed. Dressed in the same dark clothes he had worn the day before, but they were crumpled now and flecked with lint from the bed-sheets.

He groped toward the door, stopped again and gazed dully at the telephone. If only he could talk to Janice, even for just a moment! Talk to her and hear the soft murmur of her voice, pour out the anguish in his heart! She would listen surely. She did not hate him that much!

His hand clawed the phone, then with a convulsive jerk came away. No, no, he could not call her! Old Merritt's curse—there was no knowing how horribly far that monstrous threat could reach, how hellishly long were its sucking tentacles of doom. If those tentacles coiled around the girl he loved, it would be the end of life, of hope, of everything!

"Oh my God," he moaned, "if only I could talk to someone! I'm so lonely!"

What had Latham said? "If you need me. . ." He could go to Latham's house, leave this abode of madness behind. Latham lived on the far side of town, in a small brown cottage with an older sister and a mother who for years had been confined to a wheel-chair. Latham would talk to him, comfort him.

RAIN lashed his bare head as he walked. Rain drenched him and soaked the clothes that clung to his shivering body. But the chill of wet darkness was as nothing compared with the chill within him that numbed his muscles. Cool air drove

some of the sickness out of him, but not all. He staggered, peered ahead with wide eyes that strained to see through an unnatural mist, a mist that came from his brain and was thicker, denser than the darkness.

He walked in a daze, hardly knowing the route he followed. Mud sucked at his feet; a biting wind whined in his face and drove slanting sheets of water against his hunched shoulders. In a little while it would be daylight. That thought comforted him. Then another thought came, and brought wild hope to his throbbing heart.

Latham! Latham would be the final test of the power behind old Merritt's curse! If he were alive, if he were well, it would be proof that the curse was but a black mummery created by Walzek, Fiske, or some of the others!

Latham's house loomed ahead through the downpour, and Perry quickened his stumbling pace, clawed the gate open and labored up the veranda's wooden steps.

No lights glowed in the structure before him. No sound penetrated the hollow drumming of the rain. For an instant he hesitated, felt as if he were doing an evil thing by arousing sleeping people at this hour. Then his quivering hand found the bell.

He heard the drone of the bell inside, heard it die to silence. Half a mile distant in the town square, the clock on the courthouse tower boomed five times. Five o'clock. It would be daylight now, but for the rain. The darkness was a grey murk that crowded around him.

Again he thumbed the bell and waited. The courthouse clock had stopped striking. A light glowed behind the frosted door-panel and footsteps were audible beyond the barrier. Perry held his breath, stood trembling. A shadow blurred the light. The knob turned slowly.

Then the door opened—and Perry took

a faltering step backward away from the threshold. Eyes wide, he stared in horror at the human thing that stood there. Rain lashed against him and he was unaware of its savage impact.

That human thing was Everett Latham. Leprous-white hands gripped the sides of the door-frame. Last night's smile was not on Latham's lips; his eyes no longer were filled with sympathetic understanding.

The man's face was a gaunt grey gargoyle empty of life. His lips were curled in a snarl, displaying blackened teeth. His cheeks were thin layers of flesh sucked in around bulging muscles. Illness—some horrible, devouring illness had claimed him!

Words came hollowly from the man's shapeless mouth. Glaring with dark orbs he said sluggishly: "What—do you want?"

But Perry had no reply. Blood had ebbed from his own face. His own eyes were protruding so far from their sockets that pain stabbed through them. What had he thought a little while ago? This would be the final test of old Merritt's curse? God!

"Leave me alone," Latham said hollowly. "Go away and leave me alone. Haven't you done enough to me already?"

Perry did not move, could not. That agony-racked face fascinated him and he stared into it, seeing every horrible detail, every pit of shadow. And the pain-glazed eyes returned his stare without blinking.

Then suddenly the gargoyle face convulsed. Blind rage filled it, as Latham's crooked hands lashed up and stabbed forward. "Get out! Get out and don't ever come back! You're a demon out of hell, Milton Perry! The curse is on you. . . ."

Perry stumbled backward, turned with a shriek and clawed his way down the steps. The gate clanged shut behind him

and he ran—ran blindly through fog and rain and darkness, without knowing where his feet took him.

Long later, when he stumbled up the steps of his own empty house, night had crept away before a sunless dawn. The darkness in his own soul was far greater than the darkness around him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alone with Doom

“ALL ALONE you’ll be, in a place of darkness and despair, away from all who love you. Sickness’ll come, and madness . . . and then death will come to shake hands. . . .”

Old Merritt had said that. Old Merritt had crept from the grave to come in the darkness and mutter that grim threat. And now, standing in ankle-deep mud on the sidewalk, Perry stared back at the porch where the corpse-creature had stood while delivering the ultimatum.

He shuddered, and glanced down at the bulging suitcase in his hand. By leaving Fiskeville and going away alone, he was doing exactly what Merritt had prophesied. But what else could he do? An aura of death clung to him; hideous destruction lay in the touch of his hands, in the stare of his bloodshot eyes. “*Death and doom to everyone you love. . . .*”

A sob shook his aching body as he turned away. This was the end. This was goodbye to friends and loved ones, to the sleepy New England town that claimed his affection. This was farewell to Janice and to hope.

The hour was still early, the town still slumbering in a winding-sheet of grey fog. Shades were drawn in the houses on both sides of the narrow street; the houses themselves were distorted shapes looming through drizzle, staring in grim silence as Perry trudged along the sidewalk.

He had left his car, last night, in front

of the Jordon home. Unless someone had moved it. . . .

No one had. In the house beyond that familiar white fence, a light was burning. He stood by the car’s dripping fender and stared, and his eyes were wet with more than rain-mist.

If he climbed those steps and touched the small white button in the door-frame, someone would answer. Janice would answer. She would open the door and, for the last time, he would be able to look into her face.

The thought spawned resolution and he took a sudden step forward. But resolution died when his hand fell on the gate-latch. Still staring, he backed away, shut his eyes to the temptation of that lighted window. A groan died in his throat. He heard again old Merritt’s croaking voice: “*Death and doom to everyone you love.*”

This time old Merritt would be wrong! Wrong! A snarl gurgled against Perry’s twisted lips. He turned away, forced himself to walk to the car. And as the car’s damp engine coughed to life and the machine sputtered slowly away from that lighted window, he did not look back.

Fiskeville faded behind him in a sea of mist. Ahead lay lonely country roads leading into desolation. And the clicking of the windshield wiper made words.

“*The breath of doom be on you, Milton Perry! Before three days . . .*”

He knew his destination. Twenty-odd miles from Fiskeville a narrow dirt road wound through deep woods and circled the base of Baldtop Mountain, and a snake-track trail, beginning there, wormed up the mountainside. Up there, on the shore of a small pond that had no name, stood a weather-beaten, dilapidated hunting-lodge—his own lodge, built years ago and seldom used except for occasional week-end hunting trips.

With food and other necessities he could hide there forever from prying

eyes. None would suspect his whereabouts. Even Janice would not guess.

Alone, all alone in a forgotten wilderness hideout, he could fight his own battle with sickness and death. And with madness.

He drove slowly, and no cars came toward him. Rain throbbled its dirge on the roof; water cascaded into dense underbrush on both sides as the machine's wheels lurched into hidden pitfalls in the unpaved road. The wiper counted minutes into eternities and mocked him with its endless beat that was so like the laborious pounding of his own heart.

Once, glancing into the mirror, he saw that his face was haggard with sickness, his eyes red-rimmed from staring. But it did not matter. Even the despair and dull loneliness that gripped him did not matter now.

Miles from the village, he turned the car up a rutted road, drove it on and on through a quagmire of red mud. At last he stopped it. Sliding wearily from the seat, Perry stood clutching the car door.

The sickness had wormed into his legs. Minutes passed before he was able to rope his supplies together, and lock the car, and trudge into the sodden trail that led ever upward through deep woods.

That climb was torment, the trail a patch through Hades. Hours later when he came in sight of the ramshackle lodge building, breath husked in his throat and his heart hammered wildly in his chest. He staggered the last few strides.

His fingers were ice-cold as they fumbled with the rusty padlock on the lodge door.

He slumped then into an old rustic chair before the fireplace, and was but dimly aware of the whining storm-wind that sought ingress through walls of huge pine-logs. This was desolation. Here he could be alone, all one, with no fear

of bringing doom to other innocent victims.

And he was tired, ill. His head lolled. The wail of the wind became a muffled, half-audible human voice, intoning words: "*Three days . . . Then death will come to shake hands. . . .*"

He slept.

THE rising fury of the storm awoke him and he sat suddenly stiff, his hands clawing the rough chair-arms. Seconds passed while he stared about him in bewilderment. Then he remembered, and laughed hoarsely. Rising, he threw pine-chips and logs into the fireplace and built a fire.

What time was it? He had no watch, and the battered alarm-clock on the fireplace mantel had stopped months ago. Stumbling to a window, he drew aside the dusty curtains and peered out. But the storm had brought artificial darkness, blurring the huge trees whose tops bent under the wind's savage onslaught. No man could judge time by the noise-some murk that held the lodge in its maw.

Yet he must have slept a long while. Hunger gnawed at him, and the sickness within him had increased alarmingly. The floor swayed beneath him as he turned, made his way slowly toward the kitchen. His outthrust hands clawed at tables and chairs in an effort to keep him erect.

Three rooms the lodge possessed—kitchen and bedroom and living-room. In the kitchen an ancient wood-stove loomed like a pot-bellied old man, and pots and pans hung in rusty array along the wall.

He made a fire, drank hot black coffee and stuffed food into his mouth. But the food made him ill and quickened the vicious throbbing of his heart. An hour passed while he slumped over the kitchen table, his head in his hands. Then he returned to the living-room. He knew then that he had been in the lodge a long while,

for the room was gloomy with the darkness of night.

When he poured oil into a greasy lamp and put a match to the wick, the reluctant flame cast crawling shadows over walls and floor and ceiling. Despair and loneliness stalked the storm-racked enclosure, taunting him with storm-born voices of derision.

Three days. Then death . . .

Perry stood wide-legged, stared with bloodshot eyes and felt self-control ebbing out of him. Someone in the room was shrieking wildly, in a voice that tocsined above the muffled roar of wind and rain: "I can't stand it! My God, I'll go mad!"

The voice was his own.

That night he made himself think of Ora Fiske and Anthony Walzek and Sheriff Gates and all the others who had reason to hate him. Was it not possible that Hallam Jordon had been murdered—poisoned, perhaps, through the food served to him in his jail cell? Gates would have served that food. Perhaps Ora Fiske had helped prepare it. . . .

Yet, even if that were true, it would not account for the death and resurrection of old Merritt, and for the hideous disease which had attacked Everett Latham. It would not explain those withered flowers and other dark happenings.

He wondered again what time it was. Probably around midnight. He was ill, and when he stood up to peer into a mirror he saw a bloodless, hollow-cheeked face that startled him.

Merritt had given him three days. It would not take that long. . . .

He fell asleep in the chair before the fireplace. Asleep, he did not know that the storm increased steadily in violence throughout the night hours; nor did he see the first grey murk of dawn. Nor did he hear the first muffled knockings which

in time, through their very persistence, aroused him.

When he did awake, he gripped the chair-arms with thin bony fingers and jerked his head around, and stared. Stared at the door. And scowled, in bewilderment.

Someone was out there. But who? Who of the townspeople could know that he had come here to this forgotten hide-away? Few of Fiskeville's residents even knew of this place. Latham knew, and Janice, and perhaps Sheriff Gates. But. . . .

Again that insistent thumping boomed hollowly through the muffled shriek of storm-wind and the endless drumming of rain against shut windows. He pushed himself slowly erect, tiptoed furtively to a window. One thing he knew—whoever saw him now would be shocked by his appearance. If they had come expecting to see the Milton Perry of a few days ago, the ambitious young manufacturer who had striven so hard to put Fiskeville on the map, they would cringe from him as from a graveyard ghoul! Well, he had not invited them!

His face close to the rain-splashed glass, he peered out, tried to see who stood there at the door. But it was dark out there. Someone was there, but he could see only a shadowed shape.

Then suddenly he stiffened, straight-armed himself away from the window and stood with bated breath. Out there a voice was calling his name. "Milt! Milton Perry! Please let me in!"

He would know that voice anywhere. It was *her* voice!

HE stood staring at the door, and terror crept like a living thing into his wasted face. Of all people, *she* must not get in! The others he no longer cared about. If they were mad enough to seek him, knowing the horrible doom that

exuded from the very pores of his emaciated body, that was their own concern. But not Janice! Merciful God, if she came over that threshold of death she would try to help him, as Latham had tried. And then. . . .

He saw Latham's face, a mask of disease-eaten ugliness, glaring at him with dull accusation. . . . Then, eyes wide and bloodshot, Perry was standing flat against the locked door, his nails clawing the rough pine panels as he shouted hysterically: "You can't come in! I won't let you in here! Go back where you came from!"

The answer came above the howl of the storm. "Milt! Milt Perry! Are you in there?" Evidently she had not heard him. The storm had become a vicious screaming monster during the hours of darkness, and through its mad din she had not heard his voice. . . .

"You can't come in!" he shrieked again. "Do you hear? I won't let you!"

She was rattling the latch now, and thumping at the door with a clenched fist. She must know he was somewhere inside. Probably she had seen his car parked at the foot of the Baldtop Mountain trail, miles below, where he always left it when coming here. She had been here two or three times, last summer, and would know that if the place were empty now the padlock would be on the outside.

But she had not heard his voice. Why was that? He bellowed again with his lips close to the heavy barrier, and knew the answer. What he had thought to be a hoarse shout was only a husky whisper. He had no voice, no strength.

She had stopped knocking, was no longer calling his name. Breath sighed from his wasted lips and he stood stock-still, listening. Then suddenly he whirled. She had gone to a window! Her small fist was thudding against the glass. Her face,

strangely white and unreal, was pressed against the pane, peering in.

She saw him. Her lips moved, and shrill words ate into the room. "Milt! Let me in! I won't harm you. I only want to help you!"

He stood rooted to the floor, shaking his head foolishly from side to side, mumbling words that she could not possibly hear. "No. You can't. You mustn't. Don't you know what will happen if you come near me? Don't you know what happened to you father and to Latham and—and to the flowers?"

She was gone. Gone so abruptly that for a moment the imprint of her features seemed to linger on the wet glass. He stared, stumbled forward with both arms outflung, bony hands clawing space. "Oh God, I want you, Jan! I need you!" Then he laughed hoarsely, and tears filled his red-rimmed eyes.

She had seen the hideous transformation in him, and the shock of looking into his changed face had frightened her away. She would not come back now. That was a good thing. If she did get over her fright and come back later, it would be too late. Old Merritt had said three days, but he knew better. . . .

Then suddenly her face was again at the window. She peered in, stared straight at him. Her fist gripped a jagged stone that slapped the pane. Glass broke. She struck again and again, and more glass broke; wind-driven rain shrieked into the room, drenching the floor. The girl's bare arms, wet and gleaming, were on the sill; her head and shoulders loomed through the aperture.

Perry stared in gurgling horror. His eyes bulged, and he gaped at the mop of drenched hair that hung over her face. That face was white, too white. Something had drained the blood from it. Something horrible. . . .

He lurched backward, away from it.

He could not stop her now! If he laid hands on her or even went close to her, he would bring doom on the person he loved most in all the world. And if he let her clamber in through the window, she would stare at him for a moment in horror, and then, because she loved him, she would rush forward and try to help him!

"Go back!" he screamed at her. "You don't know what you're doing! Go back!"

But she came on, oblivious to his words.

PERRY whirled, lunged toward the kitchen doorway. In there he had dumped the supplies he had lugged from town. Madness seared his heart and told him a way out.

He heard the girl's feet thud to the floor behind him as he ran. But he was over the kitchen threshold then, and his flailing hand caught the door, flung it shut. The girl was shrilling his name hysterically, but the closing door muffled the tocsin of his voice.

The door had no lock. Frantically he flung a chair against it, wedged the chair-top beneath the protruding latch. That would hold her! He would have time enough. . . .

His supplies lay in a corner, dumped there in a heap. On hands and knees he flopped beside them, fought sudden sickness while he pawed through canned goods, clothing. Cold sweat trickled down his forehead and stung his eyes, as salt might sting a raw wound. His groping fingers found a small brown bottle whose scarlet label read: POISON.

He had taken the bottle from the medicine cabinet at home, and had thought then: "If madness does come, even old Merritt cannot make me endure it!" Now the bottle would save him from more than madness. It would save him the horrors of bringing doom to the girl who was out

there in the other room, thumping wildly at the door!

He swayed erect, and hoarse laughter gurgled in his throat. Jan was putting her shoulder to the door now. The chair was groaning a protest against her determined onslaught. Her voice came in a sob through the creaking barrier. "Oh God, Milt, let me talk to you! I won't harm you. . . ."

That—was funny. He stared at the door and laughed softly. What did she think? That he was afraid of her? That he didn't want her?

Want her! God, if she only knew how much he did want her! If she only knew how much he would give just to take her in his arms for one short minute before—

He looked down at the brown bottle and shuddered. His thin fingers clawed at the cork, but it was wedged deep in the brown-glass neck and would not loosen. Across the room, the door was groaning open!

He stepped suddenly backward, gripped the bottle in trembling fingers and slapped its thick neck against the iron edge of the stove. Glass broke and gashed his hand. His lips sucked a deep breath that shook his emaciated frame from head to foot.

Then, as the door burst inward and the girl stumbled toward him, he upended the jagged neck of the bottle in his mouth, tipped his head back, and drank.

Janice Jordon stopped with a jerk, stood swaying on spread legs and stared. The scarlet word POISON hung on a direct line with her wide eyes. She screamed.

The scream came from the depths of her soul and shrilled like a living thing through the storm-racked kitchen; but Perry did not hear. Agony came and went in his bloodless face. He lurched backward; the wall stopped him.

Leaning there like a propped-up corpse, he returned the girl's stare—and smiled. A look of contentment dislodged the pain in his eyes. The brown bottle dropped from his limp fingers.

With a bubbling sigh he slid to the floor and pitched forward, arms out-flung. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Corpse Returns

PERRY did not see Janice Jordon stumble forward and sink to her knees beside him. He did not see tears form in her eyes and splash on his gaping mouth as she turned him over and bent above him, sobbing out the torment in her heart.

Hysteria claimed her for a moment. Her slender hands clawed his shirt open; she pressed her damp cheek against his chest, listening for a heartbeat. Then a grim calmness came over her—the same strong fortitude which had steeled her forefathers when they had fought seemingly insurmountable odds on Jason's Knoll. She bowed her head above him, and a prayer whispered from her pale lips.

"Please God, let him live. I love him so. . . ."

And then the blood of hardy pioneer ancestors ran red in her trembling body. For hours she worked over him, not frantically, not desperately, but with a deliberate stolidity that brought results.

When he opened his eyes at last and stared up at her through the mist that fogged his brain, a sob welled from her lips and she whispered almost inaudibly: "Thank God!"

Perry scowled, could not remember. Dully he peered into the face above him, turned his head and gazed at his blurred surroundings. He saw pine logs smouldering in a fireplace, saw a broken win-

dow where blankets and a faded quilt had been stuffed to keep out rain. Then, vaguely, he was conscious of familiar sounds—the clamoring howl of wind and the ceaseless thunder of rain beating at walls and roof.

She had carried him from the kitchen to the living-room and somehow managed to lift his dead weight onto a couch. She had dragged that couch nearer the fire, and kept the fire going, and—brought him back to life.

The rest was but a haze of furtive memories, somehow black with evil. There had been a bottle. The cork would not come out, and he had broken the bottle against the stove. . . .

He put a trembling hand on the girl's arm. Somehow he was not as sick as he had been. He was weak, pitifully weak, but that devouring ache had gone out of his body. That gnawing pain, as of demon hands inside him clawing viciously to reach his heart—it was gone now.

He tried to make words, but the words that choked in his throat were incoherent, foolish. "Oh my dear," he mumbled, over and over. "Oh—my dear. . . ."

"You're not to talk," she told him firmly, and frowned down at him. But a smile of immeasurable happiness worked its way through the frown, and her eyes were glowing. "You're to lie still and get your strength back. The very idea, thinking you can take poison one minute and be up and about again the next instant!"

"The next—instant?"

"Well, it's been a bit longer than that, but you're still not yourself. Close your eyes now and try to sleep."

She closed his eyes for him, but he opened them again and looked steadily into her hovering face. He had been right about that face. It was not normal, not glowing with warm health as it should be. Something had sapped the color from her

cheeks and put a dull glazed look in her eyes.

"You're not well," he whispered.

She was silent for a moment. Then: "You mustn't worry about me."

"But you're not well!"

"It's nothing. Nothing at all." She turned her face from his unblinking gaze. "I'm just tired."

Black dread wormed into his heart. Her denials meant nothing; loving him, she would not confess the truth. But he knew. She had been white and pale when she had peered in through the window, hours ago. *That* paleness might have been brought about by her effort of fighting through the storm. This gaunt hollowness of her cheeks, this dead glare that hung now in her eyes, was something else!

Old Merritt's curse. . . .

He pushed himself up on rigid arms. "You can't stay here, Jan! You *can't!* Oh God, don't you see what's happening to you?"

"Nothing is happening," she said firmly, and pushed him down again. "I'm just tired. In a little while I'll be perfectly all right."

"No, no—"

"Will you be *still!*"

"Oh, my dear—"

She smoothed his hair back, and the touch of her fingers made him shudder. Her hand was cold and damp against his forehead. But she did not know; she did not realize. . . .

A crafty gleam came into his eyes. He sighed, made an effort to seem relaxed. Quietly he said: "Listen, Jan. You could go back to town and bring a doctor. I'll give you the keys to my car. I'm not afraid to be left alone, dear."

She nodded. "I might do that later."

"Do it now. Take the keys and—"

"If you'll go to sleep, I'll consider it."

"Yes, yes—I'll go to sleep! I'll do anything you say. . . ."

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply and evenly. God, if only she would heed his suggestion and leave him! It would take her a long while to fight through the storm and reach the car, then drive to Fiskeville and return. But that time he could be gone—gone away, anywhere, where she would not find him!

And it might not be too late! The doctor would see that something was wrong with her, and would take care of her. Perhaps, under a doctor's care, she could fight old Merritt's curse. . . .

He feigned sleep, released his grip on her ice-cold arm and let his hand slide limply to the couch. With his eyes shut he sensed, rather than knew, that she bent closer to peer into his face. Her breath was cold on his cheek. Then, a moment later, he knew that she had risen from the couch, and he lay utterly without motion, listening to the slow click of her heels as she paced cautiously across the room.

She was going—leaving him. Elation surged within him and he had to suppress the cry of joy that welled against his lips. She would get away in time. . . .

Warily he opened his eyes, peered beneath drooping lids. Then he frowned. The girl had not gone to the door, but had paced stealthily toward a window and was standing motionless, one hand on the faded curtain, as she stared out through the rain-washed glass.

Fear was on her face!

PERRY lay tense, the fingers of both hands clenched in the couch cover beneath him. Something Jan saw out there had frightened her. What could it be, in the height of such a storm? Had someone followed her to the lodge?

The answer came with nerve-racking abruptness. Above the wail of storm-

wind and beating rain, the door quivered to a sudden heavy thud, as of a clenched fist hammering sluggishly for admission. Janice Jordon pressed closer to the window, stared out, and took a sudden step backward. Her lips opened; the cry that jangled from her throat was a scream of stark terror, a vibrant note of fear that wailed wildly through the room.

But the scream was of short duration. With sudden courage the girl hurled herself at the door, both hands outflung to seize the heavy iron bolt. That bolt was out of its socket. Evidently, while Perry had lain unconscious, the girl had opened the door and gone outside. Probably she had gone out to repair the broken window. . . .

She was too late now. Before her groping hands could reach the bolt and slam it home, the door jarred open, clattered violently against the wall. Eyes wide with horror, Janice fell back, screamed again as her gaze encountered the drenched, dripping shape that filled the aperture.

Driving rain came with the intruder as he stepped forward. The storm howled about him, beat at him in mad fury. But Milton Perry had no thought for the storm. Staring with enormous eyes at that hunched, drooling shape, he heaved himself off the bed, lurched erect on unsteady legs and flattened in horror against the wall.

Slowly the intruder advanced, reached out with fearful lack of haste and forced the door shut behind him. Leprous white fingers closed the bolt, snapped the dangling padlock and withdrew the key. Turning, the invader raised his head to peer with sunken eyes at the terrified girl. And then, with equal deliberateness, he swayed his bloated body and leveled his gaze at Perry.

That face, drooling water from its hideous cheeks, was a ghastly grey horror, a corpse-face risen in unholy tri-

umph from the black depths of the grave. That bloated, rain-soaked body was the same living-dead shape which had stood in darkness on the veranda of Milton Perry's cottage, cursing him.

The intruder was Benjamin Merritt!

The terror-shriek that welled to Perry's lips died unuttered. His back to the wall, he stood wide-legged, the splayed fingers of his outstretched hands clawing the wall-timbers. Less than twenty paces from him, across the room, Janice Jordon seemed incapable of movement, seemed unable to cry out.

A snarl curled the intruder's foul lips; his evil gaze swept the girl's rigid figure. "So—you came to share your lover's fate, my dear. You came to be with him in his hour of agony." Low laughter croaked from his throat. "I expected as much. I am not surprised."

He advanced a step, stopped again. The room's darkness, spawned by the storm without, seemed to swirl about him like a living winding-sheet as he glared across the chamber into Perry's bloodless face. Water dripped from the down-turned brim of his sodden hat and the falling drops beat time to his guttural words.

"Were you foolish enough to think you might escape the curse of Benjamin Merritt? Never, Milton Perry. Benjamin Merritt himself has come to make sure the curse does not fail!"

Shadows masked the leer that creased those uncouth features. Sodden shoes scraped the floor; Merritt's hunched body sidled forward. Slowly, relentlessly, his arms snaked out and those leprous white hands, curled like albino spiders, reached menacingly toward Perry's throat.

For an instant terror held Perry rigid. Then out of that same terror was born a desperation that gave him strength to lunge sideways. He had no eyes for Janice, yet knew that she stood stricken with fear, her slender bosom heaving with the

ebb and flow of her breath, her eyes bulging, her face drained of all color.

Clawing the wall, Perry strove frantically to escape the ghoul's attack. Escape? How could one escape a creature from the dead, a monster who was alive and yet had no claim to life? How could one gaze into that rotted death-mask and even *hope* to escape? Yet for the girl's sake he had to fight, had to find some way. . . .

He moved, but the oncoming fiend moved with him, continuing that hellish advance. Twin spider-hands reached out.

Perry sucked breath, leaped wildly for the kitchen doorway. If he could make it, hurl himself into the other room, he might find some weapon with which to defend himself. If that cadaverous shape lived, it could be robbed of life, beaten to bloody pulp!

His fingers raked the door-frame, but he was too late. Other fingers, cold and wet, fastened from behind in the flesh of his throat. He screamed, and the scream came from the innermost depths of a soul racked with terror. Then, blindly, he was fighting.

He fought, but had no strength. His clenched fists beat against the leering corpse-face that hung above him; his nails raked rotten flesh, clawed at the demon's eyes and mouth—but took no toll. Inexorably those leprous fingers tightened in his throat, strangling him, and the hungry, fearful face hung within inches of his agonized eyes. He gasped for breath, caught none. His efforts grew weaker.

Then, from nowhere, a hurtling shape fell upon the monster's hunched back; slender hands sought to claw those murderous fingers from Perry's neck. His bulging eyes, glazed with pain, saw the determined face of Janice Jordon; as if from a great distance he heard the shrill words that jangled from the girl's lips.

"You let him go! Let him go or I'll kill you! Oh God—"

Old Merritt's crushing fingers released their grip, flung Perry aside. With a violent snarl the fiend whirled on braced legs, caught the girl in his embrace and slapped a wet white palm against her face. So savage was the blow that the sound of it was like the slap of a wet towel against tortured flesh. Janice stumbled backward, cried out in agony.

That scream was Perry's undoing. Blind with rage, he stumbled forward. And a clenched fist leaped to meet him, blasted his face and hurled him back against the couch.

Weakly he struggled to rise, and could not. Darkness, choked with the shrieking voice of the girl he loved and the low, guttural laughter of the hell-spawned ghoul before him, sucked him into a black maw where silence reigned supreme. . . .

HE thought at first that death had claimed him, that the curse of old Benjamin Merritt had at last brought an end to the torturous ordeal of living. His eyelids seemed weighted, would not open. His body was numb with a numbness that must surely be part of eternal rest.

Then, somehow, his eyes twitched open and he was staring—staring at a strange figure that stood erect before the black maw of the fireplace. Bewilderment fogged his brain and he tried to lean forward, to peer through the grey mist that hung before his face. But his body would not move.

That figure, too, was surely a part of death. It could be nothing else. Yet it stood in familiar surroundings. The fireplace, the heavy pine-log walls, the bare, dusty living-room of the lodge. . . .

But why should a near-naked woman be standing there, staring at him with eyes so very wide, so very full of fear? Who was she?

Realization came slowly as he gazed at the girl's pale flesh, stared in bewilderment at the firm whiteness of her half-uncovered breasts, the gentle curves of her thighs and legs. Bits of white silk were all that adorned that lovely body. How could a girl be so lovely, so very lovely, and yet be so terrified about something?

Abruptly, then, full consciousness returned, and horror stabbed his soul. "Jan!" The word choked in his throat as he tried to lunge forward.

Cruel ropes dug into his arms and ankles, holding him back. With wide eyes he stared down at himself, saw that he was roped in a straight-backed chair whose rigid legs were forked through the iron cross-bar of the couch.

He was a prisoner! But where was the corpse-faced horrible who had overpowered him? Mutely he stared around the room. It was empty except for himself and for the girl who stood nearly naked against the fireplace.

She, too, was a captive. Rusty chains encircled her bare ankles and were locked around an iron bar that extended the length of the fireplace. Other chains secured her slender wrists. . . .

He recognized those chains. They had been unhooked from some of the many steel traps that lay in a cupboard in the kitchen. But where was the fiend who had discovered them there and made such unholy use of them? What—what did the monster intend to do to Jan?

Words gurgled in Perry's throat and he strained forward, whispered the girl's name. "Jan! Jan! What has he done to you? Oh God, if he's harmed you—"

The girl, too, found a voice, after staring at him for a soul-racking eternity. "He hasn't harmed me, Milt. Not—yet. But I can't get loose. I've tried so hard—"

"Where is he?"

"He—he went—"

The answer came from another source. A sound of scuffing footsteps rasped above the moan of the storm, and Janice was suddenly rigid, gazing past Perry's bound body toward the kitchen doorway. With an effort, Perry jerked his head around. Through that doorway came the hunched, menacing shape of old Merritt.

Hate blazed in Merritt's deep-sunk eyes as he planted himself before Perry's trussed body. The sodden brim of his hat still shaded his gaunt face, but Perry, staring upward in wide-eyed horror, saw those thin lips move, heard the guttural words that rumbled from them,

"I have made a fire in the stove. Soon it will be hot enough. Do you understand what I mean, Milton Perry? Soon it will be hot enough. . . ."

Foul laughter chuckled deep in his throat. The monster leaned closer; bloodless fingers tore Perry's shirt, ripped the undershirt beneath and bared the flesh of his heaving chest. Across the room Janice Jordon caught a sudden sharp breath of horror, anticipating what was to come.

"You think I am returned from the grave?" Merritt leered. "No, I am not that kind of creature. ~~Illness~~ ~~did~~ this hideous thing to my face and body, Milton Perry. ~~Illness~~ that resulted from the shock that seized me in the courthouse, when you aroused my righteous fury. But I did not die. They thought they buried me, but they buried an empty box!"

He laughed, and the laugh was a succession of throaty croaks, barely audible above the voice of the storm. "Tonight is mine, Milton Perry. For years I have loved a beautiful creature who would have none of me. Now she stands there, naked—" A bony forefinger stabbed toward the fireplace—"and in a little while she will come to me willingly, and be grateful for the chance. When the fire is hot enough. . . ."

He paced slowly backward to the kit-

chen doorway, his glittering eyes maintaining their unholy glare of triumph, eagerly devouring the expression of terror that stiffened Perry's face. Then he was gone.

With strength that he did not know he possessed, Perry strained at the ropes that held him. The effort was futile. Perspiration stained his forehead, ran from his face and dripped on his bare chest. Across the room Janice Jordan gazed at him with imploring eyes, and her lips worked soundlessly as if praying to a merciful God to give him strength.

Then footsteps were again audible. Old Merritt reappeared in the doorway. This time, one of those leprous hands was outthrust, gripping a pair of long-handled pliers. And in the biting jaws lay a three-inch steel nail that glowed with pulsing redness in the semi-dark of the room!

Incapable of movement, Perry focused his unwavering gaze on that glowing spike and felt the blood in his veins turn to water. He knew now the significance of those guttural words: "Soon the fire will be hot enough. . . ."

Slowly the monster advanced. And that scarlet shaft, pulsing like a naked, bloody heart, moved toward Milton Perry's bared chest!

CHAPTER SIX

Branded by Death

TERROR put strength in Perry's emaciated body. Incoherent words shrilled from his lips, not pleading for mercy but wildly threatening old Merritt with death and destruction. Madly he strained at his bonds, writhed with such force that the chair groaned in protest under him.

But the bonds held. The long-handled pliers, with that red-hot nail gripped in their jaws, came nearer. . . nearer. . . The nail made contact.

Tortured flesh writhed as the glowing steel pressed home. Madness leaped in Perry's eyes, blazed in his brain. In agony unbearable, he clenched his teeth to hold back the shriek that welled against them. An acrid odor of burning flesh choked his nostrils. The blood in his rigid body ran hot, carrying pain to the farthest nerve-ends.

Then the sizzling sound ceased; the glowing nail retreated, leaving a charred, smoking wound in tortured flesh. Old Merritt's lips curled in a sadistic leer of anticipation.

"Is it so very hard to bear, my friend? But wait! This is only a sample. Next time my little red finger of torment caresses the throat. And then, unless this beautiful creature requests me to be merciful—" He turned his head, grinned fiendishly at the sobbing girl who stood by the fireplace—"unless she is kind to you and begs me to desist, *I burn your eyes out!*"

Like a great ape, Merritt waddled forward, glared into the girl's stricken face. "You see my dear, I have desired you for a very long time. I even entertained hopes of making you my wife. But you refused me and gave your love to another." His leering lips curled on a snarl; one of his leprous hands glided forward to touch pale flesh that shrank from his caress.

"This night is mine, my dear. I planned it very carefully. No, it was not alone for you that I planned it. I had other motives which I may confess later, when you are nestled in my arms. But—" and the words rumbled nasally from lips that barely parted to release them—"this night shall be the consummation of all my desires. This night I shall destroy your unworthy lover and take you in my arms, and in one night I shall crowd all the satisfaction and delight that I had hoped to spread

over long years. Now—will you come to me willingly?"

Janice Jordon had courage. Loathing, not terror, filled her smouldering eyes. Fists clenched, she crouched like an enraged cat against the fireplace. "You—you beast!"

"But you will soon change your mind, my dear. Wait and see!"

With a shrug, Merritt turned, paced slowly past Perry's bound body and vanished into the kitchen. Again, significant sounds found their way into the torture-room, to curdle the blood in Perry's veins and drain color from Janice Jordon's face. The girl stared at Perry, cried out in a broken whisper, "Oh God, what shall I do? He'll kill you unless—unless I promise—"

"If he lays a hand on you," Perry snarled, "I'll tear his rotten heart out!"

Then, from the very absurdity of his vow, he wanted suddenly to laugh, to go mad. . . .

In the doorway, old Merritt stood watching, then scuffed slowly forward. Once again those long-handled pliers gripped a glowing shaft of metal. Perry's eyes widened, stared at the implement of torture until his bulging eyeballs themselves were streaked with scarlet.

"No, no!" he sobbed. "Dont—"

"It is not for you to say, my unhappy friend." A low chuckle accompanied Merritt's vibrant words. "It is for her. Perhaps she is willing to see you writhe in torment. Perhaps even the smell of burning flesh will not move her. Yet she loves you, and I think that when she sees those dark eyes of yours transformed to sightless black pits of burned flesh. . . ."

No sound came from Perry's tight lips as the glowing nail made contact. His body stiffened with a convulsive jerk; the cords in his neck stood out like livid whip-welts. But he did not scream.

Slowly, relentlessly, the heated torture-

tool left a trail of agony across the quivering flesh of his neck. Then, rising slowly, it hung suspended before his eyes, so close that the heat seared his throbbing eyeballs and singed the dark lashes above them.

If those leprous hands moved a quarter-inch nearer. . .

EVERY nerve in Perry's body shrieked a mad cacophony of terror, yet no sound left his quivering lips. Better death a thousand times over, even a death as hideous as this, than that the girl he loved should agree to this black-souled fiend's demands! But why did his eyes refuse to close, to blot out the impending agony? Why did soul-chilling numbness creep through him now, freezing him in the face of hideous death?

He wanted to scream words of defiance, but could not. The tongue in his mouth was a bloated lump of flesh jammed against his teeth. His lower lip was almost bitten through, and the trickle of hot blood was salt as acid, dribbling into his throat.

A quarter-inch more and that glowing nail-point would sear his eyeball. There would be a moment of blinding pain—then merciful oblivion. And, if he lived, he would never again see sunshine, or people talking, or the face of the girl he loved. . . .

But that crimson point came no nearer. Old Merritt was speaking in mocking tones to the girl at the fireplace.

"It is for you to say, my dear. If you come to me willingly, I grant your lover his sight—and his mind. If you refuse, this lovely red finger of mine will caress his eyes and you will smell flesh burning—and the agony will make a gibbering idiot of him. What is your answer?"

No trace of color remained in the girl's face. White as chalk, she stared at the rigid mask that was the face of the man

she loved. A liquid sob shook her body. She looked down at herself, at her nakedness, raised her head slowly and gazed in horror at the corpse-faced fiend who desired her. If she spoke the word that would save her lover's life, those leprous hands would. . . .

"What is your answer?"

"Oh God, what must I promise?"

"To be mine. Mine for tonight."

"You—you mean—"

"I mean you must promise to be mine.

Mine!"

Stark terror gripped the girl's soul. Her eyes closed, as if to blot out hideous visions that stormed her brain. Bravely she fought for self-control, made her rigid body cease its violent trembling. Her lips parted to whisper her answer.

But Milton Perry spoke first.

"Don't do it! If you love me, don't sell your soul to him. Jan—"

Old Merritt shrugged. The glowing nail moved a fraction of an inch nearer to Perry's gaping eyes. "I am waiting, my dear. And I shall not wait much longer."

"Don't do it, Jan! In the name of God, don't promise—"

"Oh God, I must!" Slowly the girl turned, focused her gaze on old Merritt's leering face. "I—I—"

"Don't do it, Jan!"

"I—promise—anything you say," the girl moaned. "Anything—you—ask."

The words came as if wrung from her throat by hands of torture. The fiend's answer was slow in coming, too, and was a mirthless laugh, barely audible. Milton Perry shuddered, moaned dully and went limp in the chair that supported him. Very quietly, old Merritt withdrew the instrument of torment and stepped back.

Outside, storm-wind whined a death dirge of black mockery, and gusts of wind-driven rain rattled against shut windows. No other sound disturbed the suspense-

laden silence. But in Milton Perry's soul a voice of despair shrieked in soundless agony, and madness clawed at his mind.

It was over—all over. No matter what happened now, the girl he loved would keep her promise. She had given it; she would keep it. He knew her well enough to know that.

This night, that lovely body would belong to the monstrous creature who stood there in semi-darkness, chuckling now in obscene triumph. Those leprous hands. . .

Slowly, very slowly, old Merritt moved toward his promised victim. The girl cringed from him, stifled a cry of horror. But the bony hands did not reach out. Motionless in the pale glow of the fire, Merritt returned the girl's stare, laughed mockingly.

"There is no hurry, my dear. First, let me show you something."

The gaunt hands reached up, flung aside the sodden felt hat that had so long shaded those rotted features. The thin fingers curled, ripped downward, tearing away decayed flesh. Then, with deliberate lack of haste, the stooped shoulders straightened, slid clear of the shapeless black garment that had covered them.

"And now, my dear, perhaps you will be even *willing* to spend this night with me. Look!"

The fiend drew a deep breath, inflated his sunken chest. Turning, he gazed squarely into the girl's face; and that face filled slowly with amazement. Milton Perry, staring from across the room, went suddenly stiff and gripped the chair-arms with nerveless fingers.

For the creature who stood there in the fireglow—stood there straight and tall, stripped of the sodden black outer garment and drooping felt hat—was no longer the dead-alive specter of Benjamin Merritt. That leering face was no longer a sunken, rotted mask risen from the grave. It was a sallow, smiling face, good-

looking save for the unholy lust that transformed it. And the man's hands, rubbed clean of the chalklike substance that had whitened them, were lean-fingered and normal.

That gloating, hungry-eyed fiend of hell was Everett Latham!

LATHAM laughed softly.

"You see, my dear," he said, "I planned this very carefully, from the beginning. It was I who gave old Merritt the happy idea of the death-curse and urged him to join Ora Fiske's tribe of fanatics at the courthouse that morning. It was I who invited him into a restaurant, an hour or so before the excitement began, and dropped caffeine tablets into his coffee. His heart was already weak, and I hoped that the extra caffeine, plus the coming splurge of excitement, would kill him. It did, very effectively—and to my good fortune, in such a way that your lover thought himself guilty of Merritt's dramatic demise."

Mocking laughter spilled from Latham's lips as his hungry eyes drank in the girl's loveliness. "Then, my dear, I built a definite scheme of action and followed it through methodically. I murdered Martin Gregg because he objected to my being taken into the newly-formed manufacturing project. I usurped one of your father's tell-tale shoes, planted it on the hotel fire-escape, and framed him for the killing. And while your worthy father brooded in jail, I went to console him and gave him cigarettes that poisoned him.

"It was necessary, my dear, that I exterminate your family. I have succeeded. Your father is dead; your mother is dying of the shock. You will die before I leave here. And I—as perhaps you may recall—am next in line to inherit a very sizable fortune from your beloved father. There will be the Fiskeville Bank, and the home you have lived in, and—but it is a very

worthwhile stake, I assure you. And worth working for."

He shrugged crookedly. "Disguising myself as old Merritt was really very simple. I've studied sculpture, you know. I'm really quite clever with clays and stains, and I knew Merritt intimately enough to ape his mannerisms as well as his appearance."

Slowly Latham turned, peered at Perry. "And you, in your ignorance, made me a prominent member of your new organization, old man." The "old man" had a mocking ring to it. "With you out of the way, I shall find it rather easy to work myself into full control, both of the organization and its funds! You were a fool, Perry, to put so much faith in the power of an old man's curse. You were a further fool to think that I was made deathly ill by my supposed efforts to help you.

"I poisoned you that night. As old Merritt's resurrected corpse, I gave you three days to live. Then I dropped poison into the very coffee you drank twenty minutes later to soothe your nerves. A slow-acting poison, gradually producing sickness and death. Later I succeeded in administering the same dose to your sweetheart."

Perry's bloodless lips formed a snarling answer but abandoned it. Poison? It had been poison, then, not the curse, that had made him so deathly ill. Perhaps the suicide potion he had spilled into his own throat had acted as an antidote. But Janice—if she, too, were poisoned. . . .

He sat like a propped-up corpse, staring with eyes that refused to close. Even now, the girl he loved might be near to death! She had been ill when she had first fought her way through the storm, seeking him. If she were not taken to a doctor soon. . . .

He groaned aloud at the thought. No doctor would ever again see that lovely

body alive. Latham would have no mercy.

"You see," Latham said, "I shall come into my own this night. By morning, the Jordons will be extinct; I shall inherit their money and their possessions. Milton Perry will have vanished, presumably the victim of an old man's curse, and I shall have control of an up-and-coming business enterprise. Also, I shall have obtained a full measure of revenge upon Perry for his cruelty in robbing me of the girl I desire. And while he looks on in torment, I shall possess his loved one for a few hours of indescribable bliss."

He swung about, leered at Perry. "She is beautiful, no? As beautiful as those lovely flowers of yours, before I poured acid on their roots. And when I am finished with her, she too will fade and die—before your eyes."

The smile faded from Latham's lips. Abruptly he stepped toward the near-naked girl who stared at him in horror. "You made a solemn promise. If you break it, I shall continue the torture of your sweetheart where I left off. Are you ready to keep your word?"

The girl made no answer. Her reply lay in the sudden droop of her head. She had given her word: she would keep it no matter how great the agony. It was the reply Milton Perry had expected.

Like a madman, Perry surged forward in the chair that held him. Shrill words spilled from his throat, smothering the pitiful sobbing sounds that ebbed from Janice Jordon's pale lips.

"Damn you, Latham! If you so much as put a hand on her—"

Latham's only reply was a soft laugh, laden with triumph. He took a step forward, reached down and unfastened the chains that encircled the girl's ankles. Without even turning his head to favor Perry with a glance, he freed her arms, stepped back and murmured softly:

"Tonight, my dear, is ours. Yours and mine. Come. . ."

She stood rigid, staring at him with wide eyes that begged silently for mercy. But no mercy lay in that lustful gaze.

"Come!"

SLOWLY, as if weighted to the floor, Janice Jordon moved toward his waiting arms. And in the agony-racked brain of Milton Perry, something snapped.

A lurid oath spewed from his foam-flecked lips as he strained forward. Blind fury gave him the strength of a madman. The chair beneath him cracked with a splintering crash and broke clear of the restraining bar of the couch. With an effort more than human, he wrenched one foot up and out, fraying the rope that held his ankles. The rope broke.

What happened then was the result of blind instinct. Head foremost, he hurtled across the room, shoulders hunched, knees high. The shattered chair still clung to him; his arms were doubled behind him, lashed at the wrists. But he needed no hands. The fury of his charge carried him forward with the force of a battering-ram. His lowered head crashed with bone-breaking impact into the pit of Latham's stomach.

As if bent by giant hands, Latham staggered backward, retching.

The wall stopped him, but he had no time to sidestep the furious onslaught of his assailant. Again Perry's head and shoulders drove home with sickening force, before outstretched hands could form a barrier. Breath shrieked from Latham's lips; his face purpled. He staggered on limp legs, clawed the wall for support as he stumbled sideways.

Perry stood swaying, gathering strength for a final charge. The snarl that quivered his lips was the battle-cry of a jungle killer defending its mate. He lurched forward.

Behind him, Janice Jordon cried shrilly: "Wait! Wait, Milt! He'll kill you!" Cold hands touched the wrists that were bound behind him, worked frantically to loosen the ropes that encircled them. Across the room, Latham was rigid on widespread legs against the wall, and the man's right hand, seemingly half-paralyzed, was fumbling desperately to pull something blunt and heavy from a pocket that refused to untangle.

Perry's wrists jerked free. Still snarling, he hurtled forward. In Latham's trembling hand a revolver jerked up, swung level with the torture-marked chest of its intended victim!

Just once the gun belched, filling the room with a sudden staccato roar that drowned Janice Jordon's terror-scream. The slug made a sobbing sound past Perry's convulsed face. Then his clenched fist pistoned to the mark; his left

hand shot up, raked the revolver from limp fingers.

Again and again, as Latham fell, Milton Perry swung the gun with mad fury, until the agonized face of the man before him was a red mask of terror. The gun slid from his fingers then and he swayed erect, looked down without compassion at the shapeless dead thing on the floor.

Then he turned and took a sobbing, near-naked girl in his arms, and whispered: "It's finished, beloved. If what he said is true, there's poison in your system and we need a doctor. But after that, it's—finished."

Janice clung to him closely and did not speak. Outside the house, the wind sang a chant of triumph, and the impact of storm-driven rain, less savage than before, was like the gleeful clapping of a million tiny hands.

THE END