

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

VOL. IV, NO. 1

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AUGUST, 1940



THE SEAL OF SIN

A Complete Novelet of Evil Powers

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

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Design for Doom

By ELI COLTER

Author of "One Man's Hell,"
"The Crawling Corpse," etc.



In his right hand Arthur gripped the bronze hammer

*An Ancient Bronze Tool Evokes
Weird Visions of Violence As
Maitland Struggles to Change
the Bloody Course of Fate!*

MY FIRST experience of the kind occurred April, 1937. Nothing had ever intimated to me that I might be psychic. I had never entertained any such ideas concerning myself. I'd never been interested in psychic phenomena, nor had any desire to experience them. Any such tendency on my part would have seemed highly amusing. A man of my temperament and pursuits wooing the realms of psychic phenomena? It would have seemed distinctly potty. Why dash madly thither and you striving to establish communication

with another world? I was jolly well satisfied with my own, content with my comfortable fortune. I'd amassed it myself, after I came to America with Eben. I was pleased, too, with my roomy house and my unmolested privacy inside my eight-foot adobe wall. Eben's presence in the house couldn't disturb anyone. Gentle and charming fellow, Eben. I dare say we get on together tremendously because we're so much alike. More so than brothers usually are, and inclined to hold the same attitude toward life, Eben being only five years younger.

That day in April, 1937, Eben had gone across the street to chat with our step-brother, Arthur Maitland, who is married and likes Eben's company. Arthur had a crude habit of jibing at Eben and me for being old bachelors, but the less said about Arthur's wife the better. Not an entrancing subject.

Forty-five isn't exactly senile, and Eben looked more like thirty than forty. And Arthur's charming lady served as an ever-present reminder of the benefits and advantages of the single estate. But Arthur carried his twenty-nine years and matrimonial handicap with admirable aplomb. His robust humor was irrepressible, and Eben fancied running across to chin with him occasionally.

I WAS in my living room looking over one of my collections of ancient tools and weapons. Arthur found it extremely entertaining that I spent so much time with my collections and books—which I held to be entirely my own affair, since I paid for my treasures with my own money. This particular lot of archeological specimens had always delighted me to an extraordinary degree. Especially the bronze hammer.

Ever since Eben and I moved to southern California to be near Arthur I became increasingly proud of my American items. The hammer was affirmed by reputable archeologists to be an Aztec tool, and I have always had a collector's fondness for believing in the authenticity of his acquisitions.

Both the handle and the head of the hammer were of bronze, all in one piece. The handle was short. The head was large and blunt, at least three inches across the face. The whole thing was skillfully executed and astonishingly heavy. Arthur once remarked that you could bash a man's head in two with one neat blow of the thing.

I stood there looking at the hammer, admiring it, noting the thin patina which centuries had deposited upon it. Age had turned it almost black, smudged delicately with green. I was thinking to myself that time is the one artist who works with supreme restraint, mellowing, softening, enriching his subjects. I reached out a hand, acting on the impulse to pass my fingers over the smooth face of the hammer head. And my fingers had barely come into contact with the ancient bronze when it happened.

An instant before, the California sun had been shining through the window, cheerful and bright. The sky had been clear, without a cloud. Unusually warm for spring, even in southern California. My hand touched the hammer—then, as I say, it happened.

I felt a queer ringing sound in my head. The sky went dark. I wasn't standing in my living room any more. I was sitting out in the *patio* under the big date palm by the pool. I was holding a book. A gust of wind struck me and blew over the page I was reading. Rain began to fall out of the sky.

Arthur came striding through the tall iron gates set into the adobe wall, wearing his old khaki hunting jacket, a rifle over one arm. (He owns no end of hunting togs, but he's hopelessly wedded to that khaki jacket.)

"Why don't you go in out of the rain, Tor? I got two rabbits." He waved a hand and sang out at me. I could see the little brutes' feet sticking out behind his arm.

THEN the queer ringing sound went through my head again, and the delusion was gone. Amazing! The hallucination couldn't have occupied more than two seconds. I had reached

out to touch the hammer—then I was in the *patio* and Arthur was coming through the gates. Then I was back in the living room. My fingers hadn't traveled half across the smooth face of the hammer head. And Arthur was not there. Decidedly not. Arthur was across the street in his own house, with Eben. And no rain was falling. The sky was bright and the sun was shining through the windows.

It had me stumped for a minute, then I had to laugh at myself. The explanation was so ridiculously simple.

I'd been warned years before that I couldn't depend too confidently on my heart. It is one reason I'd never married—besides Eben's needing me. He'd always found life rather bewildering, and had no one to look after him but me. I couldn't shirk my responsibility onto a step-brother as long as I lived. Besides, Arthur would have his go at it after I was dead. Not that he'd encounter any annoyance in looking after Eben—Eben is the mildest of men. He didn't even resent my leaving all my money to Arthur so that it would be properly seen to.

"You're jolly right, Tor, old fellow," he assured me. "If you'd left it to me, I'd probably run through it in a few years." He would, too. Spending it on, and for, chaps whom he judged needed it worse than he. Swell fellow, Eben.

He knew, of course, that I had been warned about the condition of my heart. But a capricious cardiac organ had never been a source of worry to me. One way of shuffling off is quite as good as another, and making a quick job of it is infinitely preferable to a boring stay in bed, I should say. I'd shrugged aside the specialist's dictum as a bogie unworthy of a second thought. I wasn't frightfully impressed by the statement that my heart was lacking in stamina and likely to play tricks on me. I'd never had any evidence of its treachery till that day. But after an instant's moderate cogitation, I concluded that what I'd experienced must have been a slight heart attack. The ringing sound in the head, the mind wandering—

I dismissed the occurrence as of no importance, and returned my attention to the bronze hammer. Naturally, I didn't mention the incident to Eben when he came home.

I forgot it completely for six weeks. As completely as if it had never been. And I had no further attack.

THE first week in June, I went out to sit in the *patio* and read under the big date palm by the pool. My Irish setter, Bruce, was lying half asleep at my feet. The sky darkened suddenly, but I thought nothing of it. The sky often turns dark in southern California in the spring.

I went on reading. I'd completely forgotten the bronze hammer incident and my supposed heart attack. A gust of wind turned over the page I was reading. With astonishing abruptness rain began to fall. That wasn't awfully unusual either. Rain will fall out of an almost clear, spring sky in California, start pelting down with as little warning as if old Jupiter Pluvius had upset his sprinkler can. So I didn't move. The rain wasn't as yet coming through the palm fronds, and the shower might be over any minute.

Then Bruce barked once, without lifting his head from his paws, and wagged his tail. I looked up to see Arthur coming in through the iron gates set into the adobe wall. He'd been hunting. He had his rifle over his arm and he was wearing his old khaki jacket. I could see the little brutes' feet sticking out behind his arm. Here in actuality was the exact scene I had visioned six weeks ago! I felt my spine chill as he raised a hand and waved at me. I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

"Why don't you go in out of the rain, Tor? I got two rabbits."

Then he hurried on toward the house to see Eben, and I sat there staring after him with my mouth open. I wasn't alarmed—I was merely astounded by the revelation and puzzled as to the reason for the meaningless piece of business. Clearly, I'd suffered no heart attack. I'd been granted a glimpse into the future. Only a blithering idiot could have

failed now to recognize the character of the experience. But in heaven's name, what was it for? It had been thrust upon me to what end? It was so trivial, so purposeless. No earthly excuse for it that I could see then.

I didn't tell Eben.

I thought it over for several days, and finally decided that it was, as they say, one of those things. It held, I decided, no significance and most likely would never happen again.

But it did happen again, near the end of that year, 1937. Another similar incident, of somewhat longer duration but quite as trivial. I began to wonder whether there might ultimately prove to be a purpose in the amazing business and I was mildly curious, although not actually perturbed.

THEN early in 1938 it happened for the third time. I was in my study. From that room there is no view save of *patio*, pools and gardens. I was reading Kipling. Bruce was asleep in front of the grate. I started to turn a page, and the queer ringing sound went through my head. I knew what to expect by now, so I sat still, waiting.

Then abruptly I was looking out the window toward the street. The adobe wall encloses the house and all the main grounds to the sides and rear. Only the narrow front strip of formal approach lies outside the adobe wall. From the living room alone can one catch a glimpse of the street onto which the house faces. I was standing in the living room before the mantle with my hand stretched toward the bronze hammer.

From that position I could gaze under the boughs of the China-berry trees to the curb. I saw gathered there the children of Fred Jermyn, who lived nearly a square distant from me. I saw Bruce go romping across the lawns to play with the Jermyn lads. I heard a shot. I went dashing out of the house to the street, and came upon ten-year-old Dickie Jermyn, standing terrified on the sidewalk with a gun in his hand. He was looking down at Bruce. The dog was lying dead on the paving with a bul-

let through his brain. I felt sickish.

Then the ringing sounded in my head again. I was back in my study, just turning the page of my book. I still felt ill. And then I remembered something startling. The gun little Dickie Jermyn had been holding was one of a collection of mine, an ancient dueling pistol hanging on a display board near the bronze hammer.

I daresay Eben thought I'd gone a bit balmy. But he ventured no comment when he saw me take the gun down and go out with it, nor when he saw me return some time subsequently without it. I didn't explain that I'd gone to a nearby dam, hired a boat, rowed out to the middle of the reservoir above the dam and dropped the pistol into the deepest part of the lake, load and all. I'm tremendously fond of Bruce.

I thought then that I'd solved the meaning of those peculiar flashes into the future. I'd concluded they must be intended to grant me opportunity to avert misfortune and disaster. Otherwise, of course, they were pointless.

It was in August of 1938 that I happened to be in the living room scrutinizing the bronze hammer again. I'd stopped to finger it and admire it numerous times since seeing that distressing forewarning of Dickie Jermyn and the gun. I had no fear of the accident's ever coming to pass since I'd dropped the dueling pistol into the lake. I'd kept Bruce close. Just now I'd left him asleep in my study. Eben was in his own room writing letters. I could hear my man Dobbs moving about in the next room, humming to himself. Admirable fellow, Dobbs, but he will hum.

I caught the sound of children's voices outside. I found myself looking through the window, into the street beyond the hanging boughs of the China-berry trees. The Jermyn lads were gathered on the curb. Bruce went romping across the lawn toward them.

I started for the door, running. The shot came before I was out of the room. I knew what I would find, but I kept on running. Bruce was quite dead. He'd got it through the brain.

Dickie Jermyn was sobbing, and he held in his hand—the dueling pistol I'd dropped into the lake.

HE LOOKED up at me, utterly demoralized with fright, begging for clemency. He hadn't meant to kill the dog. He hadn't dreamed that the old gun would shoot, after it was lying in the water like that. He had been rowing with his brothers on the lake above the dam that afternoon, fishing. They'd brought up the old gun, their hook caught between the trigger and the trigger-guard.

"Please don't send me to jail, Mr. Maitland," he pleaded. "I wouldn't have hurt dear old Bruce for anything!"

I took the pistol away from him, and went down on one knee and put my arm around him and told him to stop crying. These things happened. I didn't blame him, but he must see that he wasn't to play about with old guns any more. Then I sent him home. He went, feeling a bit cheered, but still sobbing, followed by his tongue-tied brothers.

I put the pistol into my pocket and carried Bruce into the *patio*. I told Dobbs to bury him decently. I wasn't quite up to it at the moment.

I can't say what prevented my telling Eben. No conscious ratiocination on my part. He had to know Bruce was dead, how he had died. He was shocked for me and exasperated at the Jermyn children. But he learned nothing about what gun Dickie had found, or of the pre-vision I'd had of Bruce's death. I simply felt I shouldn't tell him, and I didn't. I kept the disturbing part of the affair to myself.

I won't say I didn't do a good bit of thinking about the matter. Each incident in the growing train was appreciably more serious than the one which had preceded it. If these strange excursions into the future were being bestowed upon me that I might avert disaster, why hadn't my efforts succeeded to that end? Perhaps I hadn't been careful enough in disposing of the pistol—and I didn't want Eben to see it in my possession again. I gave it away to a fellow collector. I got into the habit of moving

one item and another, getting rid of them and changing them about, so Eben wouldn't attach any importance to occasional disappearances among my specimens.

The next upsetting experience came along in January, 1939. I was standing looking at my tool-and-weapon display in the living room, when it struck me suddenly that the bronze hammer had consistently figured in all these warning illusions. At the time of the first one, I'd been fingering the bronze hammer when I'd received my uncanny glimpse into the future. At the time of the second one, I'd taken the hammer down to heft its weight, recalling Arthur's facetious remark that one blow of it would bash a man's head in two. The third time, I'd been in my study, but the predicted death of my dog was to occur while I was again standing admiring the bronze hammer.

Here once more I was halted before the thing. And for the fourth time I heard that ringing sound go through my head.

FRED JERMYN was a straightforward and honest chap, but, like Arthur, he'd never been able to amass any considerable amount of money. He was one of my few close friends, and I frequently lent him my new blue limousine when he wanted to entertain a larger party than his own small car would accommodate. He drove carefully, and always returned the limousine in as good condition as when he'd borrowed it.

In this fourth unaccountable vision of the future I saw the blue limousine. Fred Jermyn was driving it, and he was unaccompanied. I saw the car swerve out of control and crash itself into a parked truck, killing Jermyn instantly.

The illusionary state lasted but an instant. Then the ringing sound filled my head again. I was back before my mantel, staring stupidly at the bronze hammer. And Dobbs appeared in the doorway to say that luncheon was served. I wanted to shout a jubilant hurrah. For, of course, I was tremendously relieved and reassured.

I went out to greet Eben, feeling decidedly bucked. I was certain now that I had solved the enigma and knew what it was all about. The purpose of these pre-visions was to maneuver me into a position where I could save Fred Jermyn's life. It was all very simple. I would never let him have the blue limousine again. And that, as they say, would be that.

The next day I purchased a maroon sedan, and this car I stood ready to lend the chap whenever he wanted it. I made a trivial excuse about refusing him the blue limousine, and he accepted my word for it without rude curiosity.

The summer went by with felicitous calm. In October I left the blue car standing in front of the garage while I was away for a bit of a chat with another collector who lives only a few squares from me.

There's no good prolonging the denouement—the car was stolen in my absence. I notified the police. The theft was broadcast, and the thief, alarmed, deserted the car, parked miles distant on a side street. Fred Jermyn came along and recognized my stolen motor. He got into the blue limousine to drive it home. . . . I daresay you've guessed the rest. They brought him home battered almost beyond recognition. The blue car was utterly demolished. The truck it struck was completely turned over.

I did become upset, then. The entire chain of events seemed so futile and disagreeably useless. I grew a shade morbid concerning the bronze hammer. For a ha'penny I'd have melted it down and scattered the slag. I was deterred from this only by the absolute conviction that it would avail me nothing. If that hammer had any purpose in my future, somebody would find the fragments, melt them back together and refashion the tool. I wouldn't be able to rid myself of it. That one grim verity my pre-visions had taught me beyond all possibility of doubt. I could foresee that these events were scheduled to happen, but by no conceivable scheming could I prevent their taking place.

I had by now espoused a settled

conviction that the next pre-vision would be the climactic one and the last. I went about waiting for it.

It came in February, 1940.

I was behind my house in the porch gallery, reading again, when the ringing sound went through my head. I knew—without having the least understanding of how I should know—that here and now would be revealed to me the final purpose of all these baffling forewarnings. Then came the revelation itself, much longer than any prior incident.

THE ringing in my head ceased. I was now sitting in my study, my back toward the door, scrutinizing an ancient script. I was suddenly aware that someone had entered the room soundlessly. I felt a wave of acute alarm. At the same time I felt also a sense of inertia, and in a flash I realized that the wine had been drugged. I'd been almost asleep. All my body was flaccid with the effect of the drug. I could barely turn my head around.

Arthur was almost upon me. In his right hand he gripped the bronze hammer, swung high to crash upon my skull. I had no opportunity to defend myself. The hammer fell, with so stunning an impact that the blow cracked the skull bones.

Then I was standing just beyond Arthur, watching him in amazement as he struck again and again, hearing clearly the words he was muttering in low-voiced fury.

"Damn you, are you dead? I'm tired of living like a pauper, waiting for you to die. I should wear myself out making money when you've got such slews of it to leave! You with your bad heart! Us thinking you'd drop off any day and leave us rolling in cash. You'd go on living forever. I'm tired of waiting, do you hear?"

Naturally, he did not say all this quite so smoothly and coherently as I write it, you understand. He talked very disjointedly. Panting, between blows. I hadn't realized the fellow could hit so hard. It quite astonished me. And I was infinitely amused at the silly persistence with which he continued bashing away, when the

first blow had been entirely sufficient for his purpose.

He desisted, finally, and stepped back. He wiped the perspiration from his mouth and forehead with the back of his hand. Something of a chore, polishing off a step-brother, when it requires that amount of effort. I doubt that I'd have the zest for it myself. I wondered what he'd do next. He dropped the bloody hammer into the deep side pocket of his old khaki hunting jacket. He leered at the body, then he began talking again. I hadn't imagined he was such a fellow for talking to himself.

"Most fools make the mistake of trying to hide their tracks too well, and calling attention onto themselves by that very action," he was muttering. "You won't catch me slipping up that way!"

He turned and went out into Eben's room. I followed him. Eben was asleep on his bed. It was almost a daily habit with Eben, to lie down for a nap after he and I had indulged in our afternoon glass of port. Eben was a light sleeper; the least sound in the room would waken him. But I know he wouldn't waken now too easily. He had drunk much more of the drugged wine than I had. Arthur didn't even glance at him. He got a shirt of Eben's, and reached toward a heavy paperweight on Eben's desk. The paperweight was one I'd given Eben, another ancient relic. It was a squat stone idol set in a bakelite base. The stone head of the paperweight was about the size of the head of the bronze hammer.

I watched Arthur with lively speculation, not at all anxious about Eben. I knew he intended no physical violence toward Eben. He picked the paperweight up carefully in his handkerchief. He went back to the room where he'd left the body.

I had to admire the fellow's nerves. The thing wasn't an engaging sight. But he didn't turn a hair, mind you. He walked up to it and thumped the paperweight against the bloody skull. He rubbed the right sleeve of Eben's shirt against the same gory mess. Then he returned to Eben's room,

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(Continued from page 87)

wrapped the paperweight in the shirt and tossed them both into Eben's closet. Eben was still soundly asleep.

ARTHUR calmly walked out of my house and across the street to his own. I wasn't a trotter's length behind him. The ingenious fellow simply walked up the stairs to the attic room on the third floor, which he'd fitted out for his guns and hunting paraphernalia. He took off his jacket and hung it up with his other hunting togs. He was chuckling to himself.

"If anybody saw me stop by," he muttered, "I merely went in to see Eben and Tor as I often do on returning from a hunting trip, knocked, got no answer, and came on home. Nobody will have any reason to search my house. Some day when the noise has died down, and Eben's gone to the hot seat, I'll quietly go hunting again and dispose of the hammer. Nobody'll ever wonder what became of it, not even Eben. Tor was always changing things about. Art, old boy, you're a smart guy. I have to hand it to you!"

Still chuckling, he went back down the stairs.

I did not then exactly follow him. I merely found myself downstairs in his house. He was standing reading a newspaper. I seemed to realize that a little time had elapsed. I went up and glanced at the paper over his shoulder. It was dated March 10, 1952. There were staring headlines before my eyes. One read:

**EBEN MAITLAND ARRESTED
FOR MURDER OF BROTHER**

The article below the headline went on to say that Eben Maitland had that morning been arrested on the charge of murdering his brother, Tor Maitland. It stated further that Arthur Maitland, who had inherited all his brother's wealth, had declared that he would spend the last cent to save Eben. (Evidently he had neglected to mention the fact that Eben and I were only his step-brothers.)

But Mr. Arthur Maitland could accomplish nothing for the defense no matter to what lengths he might go,

the press writer concluded. There was not the slightest loophole of escape for Eben Maitland. Dobbs, the brothers' houseman, had discovered the body. He had immediately gone in to arouse Eben, who was on his bed, apparently asleep. The death-dealing weapon had been found in Eben's closet along with his blood-stained shirt. The weapon, a heavy stone paperweight, was clotted with blood and hair from Tor Maitland's head. Its bakelite base held no fingerprints save those of Eben Maitland.

To declare that he had remained asleep while someone stole in and out of his room, removed the paperweight, killed his brother with it, returned to daub his shirt with blood and hide the paperweight and shirt in his closet, all without waking him, was utterly absurd. Especially in view of the fact Dobbs had admitted reluctantly, that Eben was an unusually light sleeper and awakened at the slightest sound. Eben seemed like one shocked dumb by horror and despair, patently the air of a guilty man.

The poor chap hadn't known the port wine was drugged, of course, any more than I myself had known. And I hadn't thought to mention to him that Arthur had brought the wine. I heard Arthur laugh as he crumpled the newspaper in his hand.

Then the ringing came in my head again. The vision was gone. I was alive and well, on my chair in the porch gallery, with a book in my hand.

ISAT erect and laughed aloud. Now, at last, I knew the reason for this train of strange visitations.

I shall have a great deal of quiet amusement during the coming years, watching Arthur and imagining the expression that will cross his face when he sees how thoroughly I have bested him. I am convinced that the next twelve years shall prove quite the happiest period of my life.

I have done three things. I have made a verbatim copy of this document and placed it, sealed, in the hands of my lawyer, to be delivered to the chief of police on March 10, 1952, after Eben is in jail, safe from

Arthur's vindictive retaliation. I have added this note, to the police chief:

My dear sir:

You will arrest Arthur Maitland for the murder of his step-brother Tor Maitland. You will procure from the third floor of his house his old khaki hunting jacket, in the right pocket of which you will find the ancient bronze hammer which was the murder weapon. As soon as you have incarcerated Arthur Maitland, you will free my excellent brother Eben and tender to him this document.

Tor Maitland.

The second thing I did was to make out a new will, bequeathing all my earthly possessions to Eben. This will is to take effect March 10, 1952, and is also locked away in my lawyer's care. If Eben spends it all on chaps who need it worse, he'll have a grand time doing it.

The third thing? That is what shall furnish me with so much quiet amusement in the next twelve years to come. After my vision had gone from me, I remembered one added bit from the newspaper article. It was this: there was one slight discrepancy in the evidence against Eben Maitland. On Tor Maitland's forehead were unexplainable marks, as if the death instrument had borne upon its surface a deeply engraved cross. The head of the paperweight was smooth, but this was considered of little moment. The evidence in full was so utterly conclusive. So—the third thing I have done—

I have spent considerable time, smiling to myself with much relish, in filing the mark of a cross deep into the head of the bronze hammer.
