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DOCTOR DIGGORY'S GLASS GRAVE

By

FREDERICK C. DAVIS



CHAPTER ONE

Mountain Pariah

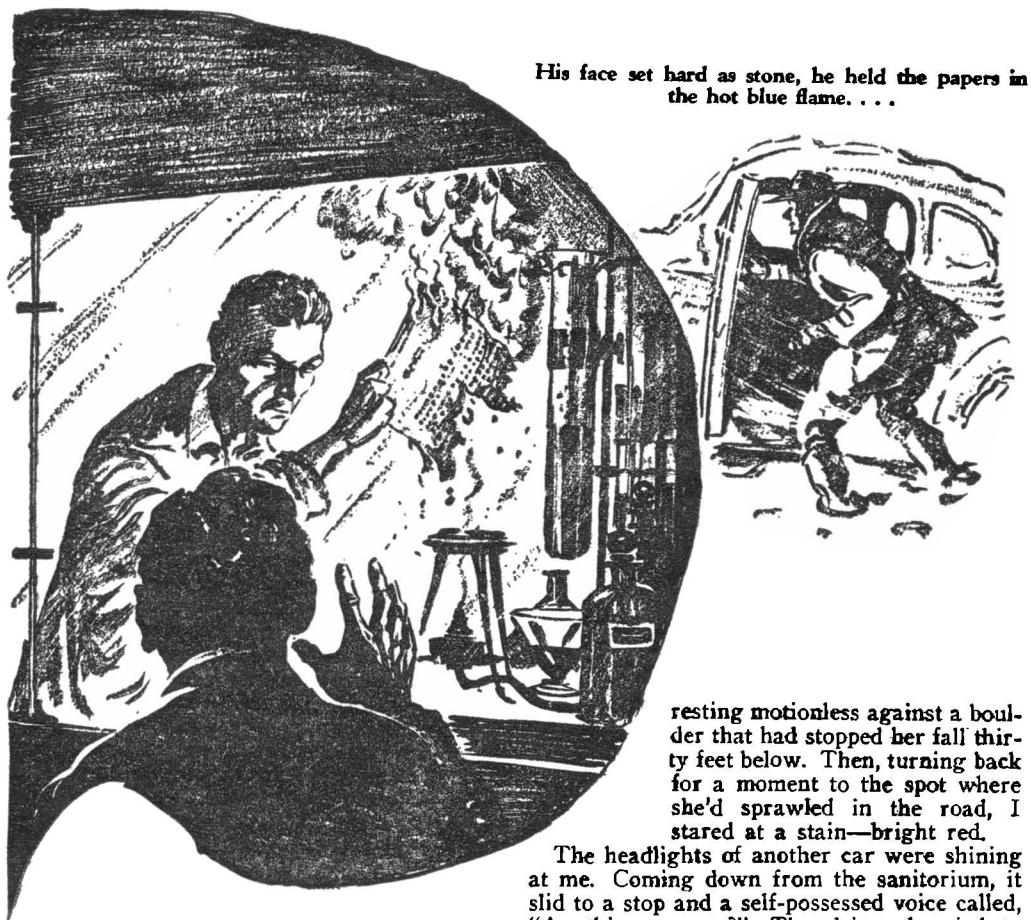
I'D HAD a night off from the strange job that kept me busy at all odd hours and now I was heading back. The highway winding up into the mountains from Cowlesdale was solid white with hard-packed snow. The grade grew steeper near the fork. Here the main road turned toward Dr. Walton Cowles' Sanitorium, a high-fenced cluster of buildings situated on a little plateau. It was visible in the high distance from the town below and seemed to be a sort of monarchy in itself. I'd never been inside its grounds. My destination lay in another direction, along the branch road on the left.

Just as I began to swing the car I glimpsed a flutter of motion in the beams of my headlights. I stopped to peer at a small figure on the main road. It was someone running haltingly down the hill—a girl. Stumbling as she forced herself along, her path wavering drunkenly, she staggered to a stop, as if exhausted, and fell.

Alarmed, I swung back and sent my car upward, the chains grinding, while she lay there. I was still fifty yards away when she lifted herself weakly to her knees, then to her feet. The glare of my headlights seemed to

• • Dramatically Bizarre Novel of Living Death • •

A voluntary prisoner in a transparent tomb fashioned by his own hand, could strange, silent Dr. Diggory free himself from his own private hell long enough to brand as merciless murderer the town's most beloved benefactor?



His face set hard as stone, he held the papers in the hot blue flame. . . .

blind her, to throw her into an unreasoning panic. She twisted about as if seeking a way of escape, then went tottering straight across the road. Before I could shout a warning she'd dropped again. This time she'd tripped and plunged headlong down a dangerously steep bank.

I snapped on my spotlight and angled it down. From the edge of the road I could see her—a dark, shapeless mass in the deep snow,

resting motionless against a boulder that had stopped her fall thirty feet below. Then, turning back for a moment to the spot where she'd sprawled in the road, I stared at a stain—bright red.

The headlights of another car were shining at me. Coming down from the sanatorium, it slid to a stop and a self-possessed voice called, "Anything wrong?" The driver hurried to join me—an erect, briskly moving man with the bearing of one accustomed to taking command and giving orders.

He was Dr. Walton Cowles, sole owner and director of the famous sanatorium. Patients were brought to this institution from a thousand miles around—big business men suffering nervous collapse, border-line mental cases and the like. A gold mine, that high-class, private insane asylum of Dr. Walton Cowles—the biggest business in Cowlesdale,

if not the entire county, and it made Dr. Cowles the biggest of the local big-shots.

"There's an abandoned car almost blocking the road on the curve above," he said crisply. I'd never met him. He probably knew who I was, but he treated me like a complete stranger. "Has there been an accident?"

"A girl down there, doctor," I said quickly. "She's been hurt—she fell. You'd better look at her."

He resented the suggestion that I might be telling him what to do about it. "Certainly. Lead the way."

The girl still hadn't moved. We turned her over and saw first the smear of blood on her chest. It steamed a little in the bitter air. There was a rip in her sweater, a bullet-hole. Then we gently stroked the clinging snow off her dead white face.

I knew her. She was Nurse Nora Forbes.

ALMOST an hour later I turned the car off the branch road and stopped it in front of the little white house that sat completely alone on the mountainside, lights shining from all its windows. This was where I worked and lived. A strange job and a strange life.

I remembered the day when I'd first come here, when I'd first become entangled in the web of the mystery to which only one man on earth held the answer.

Dr. Gordon Diggory had said, "No questions, Jim. That's the one hard-and-fast rule I have to make about the job. Absolutely no questions."

It hadn't been easy, even then.

For one thing, Gordon Diggory hadn't said this to me directly. It wasn't his voice I'd heard speaking, but a reproduction of it. Wires had carried it from his laboratory, where he was perched on a stool beside the big bluestone sink, into the outer office where I was standing. He'd spoken into an intercommunication unit and his words had twanged from the little loudspeaker of a second unit placed on the desk near me. In itself, of course, that was one queer thing I might have asked him about. Why did he talk to me electronically, with a doorless wall between us, rather than face to face?

However, we could see each other clearly. The upper half of the intervening wall was plate glass. It partitioned the large room into two sections of unequal size. The rear part, and the larger, was crowded with Gordon Diggory's research equipment. The front part, in contrast, was comfortably homelike, less an office than a living room. There was no passage between them—no communication at all, in fact, except for a small glass panel which he rarely opened, and the concealed wires of the intercommunication system, over

which he conversed with his occasional visitors. From Dig's laboratory, a door led to his small but complete living quarters in the rear of the house. Carrying out his insistence on absolute separation, he had provided for me a more comfortable upstairs apartment.

He smiled at me through the glass wall—a comradely smile. He wore an acid-stained smock and his shoulders were stooped with fatigue. His eyes, dark as midnight in his pale face, were intense—almost fierce.

"This is the way it must be, Jim," he said, quietly. "You'll work in that room. I'll work and live in this part of the house and there'll always be this wall between us. It's an unusual arrangement, of course, but I'm sure we'll get along well together, provided you remember not to ask personal questions. Well, Jim? Do you still want the job?"

Anybody else would have hesitated, and with good reason. This strange retreat of Dig's, halfway up a mountainside, was so severely isolated that there wasn't another human habitation in sight. The job, odd enough in itself—being a sort of combination secretary and errand-boy for Dig—would mean I'd become something of a recluse while associating with a self-made pariah of a scientist who, the buzzing tongues in Cowlesdale said, was probably not quite sane.

But really this job was made to order for me. Although I'd had to give up my lean law practice in the city, I needed to keep myself occupied, not too strenuously. My lungs, both spotted now, would heal best in this crisp, clear air. I'd heard plenty of queer things about Gordon Diggory, whom I hadn't seen in four years, but I'd known him well ever since boyhood as an intensely earnest and brilliant chap, and I was a long way from believing he could be mentally off balance.

Strange as it was then, it had grown stranger. It was February now, and in three solid months I hadn't once seen Gordon Diggory when that glass wall wasn't between us. He did go out occasionally, but always when there was no chance he'd meet anyone. Sometimes, coming back from town, I'd find his foot-tracks in the snow where he'd tramped along a lonely trail and back, for just a short distance. But he never left the house when I was there.

I'd learned to control my curiosity because I'd come to understand that some powerful force beyond his control had exiled Dig to this mountain retreat. Whatever it might be, he closely defended his secret, never for a moment dropping his guard. It affected him deeply. I felt it must be something so horrible that he had resolved no one else on earth must ever learn the truth.

At times, when he worked cheerfully be-

hind his glass wall and seemed quite normal, I forgot myself and slipped—asked a personal question, banteringly, without realizing I'd asked it—and then his face would freeze and his fierce, dark eyes would bore at me while I blurted out an apology and felt myself withering.

At other times he became intolerably restless. When his experiments weren't progressing he'd prowl about his lab like a miserable caged beast; during the small hours of the night I'd hear him pacing wretchedly upstairs, in his part of that divided house, like a bitter man sentenced to imprisonment for life with no smallest hope of a reprieve. Then his sounds of suffering would keep me awake too and make me wonder what ghastly thing it was that had shut him so completely out of the world and made him so relentlessly its slave.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Mission

NOW I had startling news for Dig. Rushing in, I looked for him in the lab. It was a glittering accumulation of equipment—beakers and flasks in neat rows on the tables, bottled chemical reagents precisely aligned on the shelves, trim ranks of books above his desk. Crowded into its corners were a refrigerator and an incubator for his cultures, a huge sterilizer and groups of cabinets. Dig had evidently been working, but at the moment he wasn't there.

I snapped the switch of the intercom and called through it. "Dig! . . . Dig!" I heard footfalls behind the glass wall and he appeared wearily in the doorway connecting with the kitchen. My news must have been written across my face. He strode forward intently, his eyes sharp with black lights.

"Nora Forbes," I said over the wires. "I found her on the upper road. She'd been shot. It can't be anything but murder."

Gordon Diggory stood still as an image. His thin face seemed to become more gaunt. The fierceness of his eyes grew almost terrifying. Then, decisively, he turned to the telephone. His voice crackled as he asked for 405, Linda Vale's home.

No answer. Dig turned back, full of agitation so sharp that I became bewildered and almost afraid of him.

"Dr. Cowles drove back to the sanitorium to call the police," I said. "Chief Dixon and Coroner Wray came up. They've already taken the body into town—not wasting any time. They acted as if they've a good idea what's behind it."

That seemed to hit Dig even harder. His voice shot out of the loudspeaker.

"Get into town right away, Jim. Go straight

to the Vale place. Never mind if nobody's there. Break in if you have to."

"Break in! Good Lord, why?"

"Lew's office." Dig was speaking tersely of Linda's brother. "Search it. Somewhere you'll find a number of large, brown, sealed envelopes. Each will have a date and a name written on it. Get them. Bring them here—unopened."

I stared at him. "You're asking me to commit illegal entry and burglary. Shouldn't I know the reason behind it?"

"No questions! Do it, Jim! Now—before it's too late!"

His eyes were a command I couldn't ignore.

"Explanations later, then," I said quickly, and left.

LINDA VALE—Nora Forbes—these were the women in the life of the man who'd cut himself off inexorably from the world. Only tonight, during my few hours off duty, I'd been talking about them and wondering . . .

I'd gone down to Cowlesdale earlier this evening to spend the evening shooting the breeze with Bob Kirk. Like myself and Gordon Diggory, Kirk was a Cowlesville lad. Our best undertaker, he was young and amiable. We liked to sit in his back parlor and drink beer and talk. I always had to have my corny little joke. "How's business, Bob? Pretty dead, eh?" He was such a nice guy, he'd laugh every time.

As usual, the conversation had gotten around to Gordon Diggory. Although I couldn't ask Dig questions, I could ask Bob Kirk, and I did, plenty, but without getting much satisfaction.

"Saw Linda last night," Kirk said. "She was with Dr. Walton Cowles, at the Grotto bar. They're always together, these days. I asked her about Dig again, for the twentieth time, point blank." Kirk frowned. "She honestly doesn't know why Dig went so deep into that personal Siberia of his."

"A lovelier woman never lived," I said. "Linda was Dig's girl 'way back in her pigtail days. They were engaged to be married and the date was all set. Then, suddenly, Dig tears his whole life apart and throws it away, including Linda—everything except his research."

After finishing his internship Dig had gone to China for a year of valuable experience in a Red Cross hospital. He'd been taken seriously ill there, and when he'd grown strong enough to stand the trip he'd been sent home. After a long recuperation here, he'd begun his private practice in the city. He'd been named to the board of Highwood Hospital and was well along a career as one of the state's best surgeons. Suddenly, a week before the day set for his marriage, he'd re-

signed from the hospital, closed up his office, abandoned his practice, jilted Linda and retired to his mountain hide-out. There he was still, and there he intended to stay, apparently, as long as he lived.

"Had anything unusual happened on that day when Dig decided to chuck everything?"

"Linda told me once that one of his patients died—a close friend, too," Kirk said. "Well, of course, that happens to the best of doctors. After all, my business is founded on the well-known fact that nobody's immortal. Anyway, Linda's certain Dig couldn't have been at fault that time."

"Then what the devil made him do it?"

"It must be an obsession, or a phobia, or something like that. I think Dig's turned into an extreme type of hypochondriac. He had a close call in China, you know. That experience probably planted in his mind an unreasoning, uncontrollable fear of contamination, of contracting an incurable or fatal disease."

I shook my head. "Mail comes in to him. Food's brought to his door. Besides, Dig cultivates all sorts of virulent bacteria and viruses for his experiments. He's trying to develop a new germicide, you know—something like penicillin, but even better and easier to produce in quantity. He tries it out on those cultures of his—the bacteria of pneumonia, tuberculosis, the social diseases, everything. Of course he handles them with proper care, but he's never shown any abnormal fear of them."

"Good Lord!" Kirk said, sitting forward with a sudden thought. "Do you suppose, then, that it's the reverse—that Dig's afraid of giving some terrible disease to someone? Is it possible that Dig's a—leper?"

I laughed outright. "Not a chance! Leprosy breeds in filth—lack of soap, air and sunshine. An ordinarily clean person doesn't catch it. A doctor never would, simply because he's continually scrubbing up with antiseptics. Dig is certainly not a leper."

"Why is it he never even sees anybody except you, then. And Linda once in a while, when she drops in?"

"Linda and Nora Forbes," I said. "That's another queer thing. Nora used to be his nurse in the city. Now she's on the staff of Dr. Walton Cowles' sanitorium. Once a week, on her day off, she drives into town and on her way back she comes in to see Dig. She never has anything special to say, but she always has a letter for him."

"A letter?"

"At least it's something written and sealed in an envelope—no stamp, no writing on it, just plain. She gives it to him through that little glass panel, then goes away. I've seen him pore over those letters by the hour, and I've noticed they're always carbon copies."

I drained my glass. "Thanks for the beer,

pal." And at the door I asked Kirk jokingly, "You say business isn't so good?"

"Only fair. Fewer people are dying these days, it seems." He chuckled patiently. "Good night, Jim."

"Fewer people are dying these days," Bob Kirk had said.

It was only ten minutes later that I found Nora Forbes lying on the bank of the road, huddled in death.

THE Vale home, a fine old place sitting near the center of Cowlesdale, had a separate entrance on which a sign hung: "Lewis Vale, M. D." Linda's brother was the youngest physician in town, a conscientious sort. No one answered my ring, but fortunately I was saved the illegal task of breaking in. The door was unlocked.

Lew's consultation room, usually neat and orderly, seemed a bit disturbed tonight. One of the desk drawers was pulled out several inches. Opening it farther, I found no large brown envelopes. None in the other drawers either. Next I turned to Lew's file cabinet of correspondence and case histories. While I was poking through it the telephone rang—so insistently that I risked answering it.

"Jim!" Dig's voice was tense with anxiety. "Have you found them?"

"Somebody else got to them ahead of me. One of his desk drawers has been forced open. A very neat job—scarcely a mark made. There's a space inside the drawer where the big brown envelopes were, but they're gone now."

Dig's voice came again, a driving force behind it. "They've got Lew for it already."

"The police? Got Lew for murdering Nora Forbes? Good Lord, why should they?" That being a question, probably one of a forbidden nature, I choked off "All right, you seem to know. What next?"

"You're a lawyer, Jim—the only lawyer in town who's independent, who won't knuckle under." What Dig meant by that, I didn't know exactly "Offer your services to Lew. Will you do it? I'll pay your fee. He needs you, Jim."

"Forget the fee," I said. "But sooner or later, Dig, you and I have got to reach an understanding. I can't handle this case properly if you hold out on me."

"Get back here as soon as you can, Jim," he said.

I drove three blocks to Cowlesdale's square which was flanked on one side by the court house and the municipal offices. I headed for the office of District Attorney Robbins.

In the outer room Linda sat beside Dr. Walton Cowles, her eyes clouded with worried bewilderment. Although widely known, prosperous and a power in our community, Dr.

Cowles was not yet forty. Generations ago his family had settled this part of the country; both the county and the town were named after them. With few exceptions everybody kowtowed to Cowles. I wondered just how far the law would dare to move against Lewis Vale with Dr. Cowles practically engaged to his sister.

When I knocked at the door of the inner office District Attorney Robbins appeared—a middle-aged, dusty-looking, shrewd-eyed man. I explained my purpose and he admitted me with a shrug. Inside sat Chief of Police Joe Dixon—sluggish, brutal-faced—and Lew.

Lewis Vale, dark and trimly built, was bristling with defiance. Even his gaze at me was a challenge.

"I'm your lawyer, Lew, if it's all right with you," I began. "We'll have a private talk about it and—"

"Private talk?" Lew said. "I've nothing to hide. I'll have my say right here."

"I'm being intimidated and framed," Lew Vale went on in a tone of denunciation. "I had no reason whatever for killing Nora. Just the opposite. She was giving me inside information about the Cowles Sanitorium. We'd learned too much about it. That's why she was killed, and that's why I'm being threatened with a murder charge. I'm to understand that I'd better keep quiet, or else. But I'm damned if I will!"

Lew Vale had spoken with vehement conviction. Apparently he had a strong reason for making this startling accusation. I hoped to God he had, for it was utterly reckless.

"Hold it, Lew," I cautioned him quickly. "Such wild talk won't do you any good here. We'll go over it together privately—"

"The hell with that!" Lew blurted. "I know the truth doesn't matter here—not with Dr. Cowles pulling the strings. He can commit murder and get away with it, with these dummies of his in office. And he can put the pressure on me damned hard. But I'm not shutting up. What I've learned about Cowles' Sanitorium, and the reason for Nora's murderer, is coming out in spite of them all."

This was going to be damned tough to handle. I admired Lew Vale for speaking up so fearlessly; yet the nature of his defense filled me with dismay. But Chief Dixon and the

D. A. weren't alarmed at all. The chief's small, pigish eyes blinked at Lew, and Robbins sighed, frowning.

"That's the way he's been raving ever since we brought him in," Robbins muttered to me. "I've had enough of it."

He politely asked Dr. Cowles to step in. Linda, badly shaken, came with Cowles, gazing at her headstrong brother sadly and incredulously. The doctor seemed concerned principally for her.

"Dr. Cowles," the D. A. said, with marked deference, "this man is making the ridiculous charge that Nurse Forbes, as a member of your staff, had learned something—"

A suave gesture of Dr. Walton Cowles' hand stopped the D. A. "Nurse Forbes," he said smoothly, "was a rather unstable young woman. As a psychiatrist, I'd taken notice of her unpredictable moods. Her imagination ran away with her at times and she was frequently untruthful. In fact, I'd decided she was unfitted for her responsibilities and I was about to discharge her. Whatever she may have told Dr. Vale—"

He gazed almost pityingly on Linda's defiant brother.

"Needless to say, if the authorities here wish to investigate my sanitorium, I'll welcome it. In fact, irresponsible as Dr. Vale's statements may be, I insist that an official inquiry be made. I'm certain it will show these charges to be utterly baseless."

Lew Vale actually laughed, mockingly. "Don't bother! Your official hirelings will paint you whiter than a lily. For my part, I'm sticking to my story, no matter how hard you choose to crack down on me. And I'll back it up with documentary proof."

Documentary proof? He must mean those big brown envelopes which had been locked inside his desk! He wasn't aware, of course, that they had already disappeared. Stolen! I stared at Dr. Walton Cowles, and at the D. A., and at the chief of police, for the first time feeling that Lew might actually be telling the truth. And I also stared at him, realizing he was counting upon defending himself with evidence he no longer possessed.

"Dr. Vale," Robbins said, his manner turning surly, "for a few minutes let us talk facts. It's a fact, for example, that Nurse Forbes

frequently visited your office and your home, but not for professional purposes. You've admitted this much. The rest is obvious. You're a married man, whose wife is overseas with the Red Cross. Nora Forbes was in love with you. Being emotionally overwrought, she'd insisted that you divorce your wife and marry her; she'd nagged you about it so intolerably that finally in desperation, and in order to avoid a nasty scandal, you had to kill her.

"As a corroborative circumstance, there's the fact that your revolver, which you usually kept in your office, is missing—missing because, of course, you got rid of it after shooting Nora Forbes. That, Dr. Vale, is the case which the State—"

"It's a damned lie, all of it!" Lew Vale snapped.

"That," the district attorney resumed levelly, "is the State's case against you, Dr. Vale. You're under arrest for murder in the first degree."

CHAPTER THREE

Untouchable!

"LEW'S in an impossible spot," I said through the glass wall. "He'll never clear himself by making recriminations against the man who's the dominating power in this county."

"Even Linda doesn't believe Lew's charges against Cowles," I went on. "Lew can't back them up. By this time those documents of his have been destroyed. Cowles has such influence that any investigation of his sanitorium will give him a clean bill of health. He needn't be afraid of anybody. Yet I've a feeling that he is afraid. Otherwise he wouldn't be letting the so-called law put Linda's brother through the wringer. He's operating against somebody *through* Lew."

Suddenly I remembered those letters which Nora Forbes had brought to Dig every week.

"You! He's working on *you*, Dig!" That was the answer. "All right. Now I've got to ask questions. Everything depends on them. Go back to the beginning, will you, and give it to me straight!"

Dig's eyes were bright as dark flames. He said quietly, "You remember Dr. Irving?"

Dr. Thomas Irving had first aroused Dig's interest in medicine. From a humble beginning in Cowlesdale he'd advanced to a heart specialist's lucrative practice in the city, and as a sort of patron of Dig's he'd helped to send him through medical school. A year ago, however, he'd suffered a complete nervous collapse and had been committed to—I recalled it with a shock—Dr. Cowles' Sanitorium.

"You also remember Mrs. Irving?" Dig

asked next, his tone still dangerously quiet.

Soon after her husband's commitment, plump Mrs. Irving, jewel-bedecked and frivolously scornful of scandal, had begun romping about with a slick, penniless hanger-on twelve years her junior. They're living royally on the wealth Dr. Irving had accumulated over a lifetime of hard work.

Dig took up a copy of today's *Cowlesdale Sentinel* and pressed its front page against the glass wall. There was a terse black headline, DR. IRVING SUCCUMBS, and the words, "...cerebral hemorrhage."

Dark flames still burned in Dig's eyes.

"When Dr. Irving was committed to that sanitorium his so-called nervous collapse made me suspicious. After I closed up my office in town, Nora took a job on Cowles' staff because I asked her to. She hated the conditions she found there and wanted to help clean them up. Keeping her eyes and ears open, she saw and heard things that wouldn't have meant much to a less intelligent nurse. Questionable practices, Jim. Every week she brought out detailed information about specific instances."

"To Lew Vale."

"You know that Lew also owed a debt of gratitude to Dr. Irving. Besides, Lew's militantly honest; he was eager to work with me on this. Nora took her reports to him—for certain special reasons."

There Dig was holding something back.

"Lew typed them out, had Nora sign them and put them into safekeeping, to wait until we'd accumulated enough evidence. Each time Nora brought me a carbon copy."

"I've got to see those copies."

Dig unlocked a cabinet and brought out a sheaf of closely typed onionskin.

"Give them to me," I said. "Pass them out."

He shook his head firmly. "I can't do that. I'll hold them against the glass."

PUZZLED, and itching to get my hands on them, I read them through the pane. The first report concerned Dr. Irving, and its first page filled me with cold amazement. I nodded, and Dig turned to the next page. Line by line my indignation mounted. By the time I'd finished the last page of the twentieth report, each dealing with a desperate case, I'd absorbed the nastiest story I'd ever seen.

I'd already known that the lunacy laws of this state were lax, so that the testimony of a husband or a wife, plus the signature of any physician, could bring about a commitment. Appearances of insanity could be falsified, and once a man or a woman had been jockeyed into a madhouse, and coerced into signing a power of attorney, he or she was legally buried alive. But I hadn't suspected what reprehensible trickery was practiced, or

how stark greed had operated behind such cases, often without a spark of mercy shown the helpless victim.

Nurse Forbes' reports contained startling phrases. "Power of suggestion used to persuade the patient he was mentally abnormal. . . . Chloral hydrate in his coffee to make him hazy in manner and only half conscious. . . . Then *Cannabis Indica*, also secretly administered in his food, to produce delusions, fits of rage, actual madness. . . . The most powerful hypnotic known, paraldehyde, at time of commitment. . . . Patient kept drugged and treated consistently like an idiot, so that he began to wonder if he really was sane. . . . After months of imprisonment he became timid, frightened of everything around him, and lost all hope of ever being released. . . .

"Hysteria in the case of this woman easily induced by drugs. . . . Forced to associate with patients who are actually insane. . . . Hocus-pocus of obscure terms used to deceive those who inquire concerning her—psychoneurotic symptoms, extraversion, hysterical amnesia, schizophrenia, reintegration of personality, and so on. . . .

"Once this patient was committed, his wife divorced him on the grounds of insanity and married a younger man. . . . This woman was persuaded to sign a power of attorney giving her playboy husband free access to all her wealth. . . . This girl, about to come of age, was committed just prior to the time when the executor of her estate would otherwise have had to make an accounting to her. . . . This highly successful executive was released only after he'd agreed in writing to make an enormous property settlement on his wife upon her coming divorce. . . ."

Ugly stuff, ugly.

"Lew's right!" I blurted. Suddenly I remembered. "This wasn't Nora's regular day off. She must have slipped out, headed for town to tell Lew something about Dr. Irving."

"Dr. Irving's death might have been unintentional," Dig said, his voice ominously level. "Mistreatment, perhaps, too harsh for a man of his age. Or it may have been a deal with Mrs. Irving—Walton Cowles to get a good cut of what's left of her husband's estate."

"Dig, I've got to have those reports."

"I tell you, Jim," he snapped, "I can't possibly give them to you!"

I was losing my temper. "Why the hell not? There's no other chance to get Lew out of this, to pin all these dirty jobs on Cowles, and even this is a million-to-one shot. Without those reports I won't stand a ghost of a chance with the case."

"These reports," Dig said, his voice crackling over the wires, "can never be introduced in court as evidence, absolutely never."

While I sat there, stunned, I heard a car climbing the road. The door opened and it was Linda. She gazed at Dig through the glass with reproof in her eyes, but bewilderment too. Since the abrupt breaking off of their engagement she'd turned to rebuilding her life without him, of course, but her heart wasn't in it. Her heart was here with Dig, on the other side of that impassable glass wall.

Then Lew appeared. "They've let me bring Lew here so he could talk to you, Dig," Linda said. "But I've got to take him back in a little while."

Dig had come close to the glass barrier. "I'm very happy to see you, Linda. And I'm glad you brought Lew." He gazed at her brother. "Jim tells me you won't back down an inch."

"You know why I'm standing my ground, Dig," Lew answered. "I can't honestly do anything else."

Linda spoke before Dig could answer. "I don't understand Lew, Dig. The things he's said about Walton are completely unbelievable to me. I know Walton. He's always been so kind to me, so considerate and thoughtful, I'm certain Lew is mistaken."

Lew smiled at her. "Linda, you're a woman, and you can't see the truth about Cowles because your emotions get in the way. I know why you brought me here. You want Dig to ask me to keep quiet. Then Cowles will let me get out of this mess and everything will be lovely except for the poor devils who get maneuvered into his crooked insanity mill. But I won't keep quiet even if Dig asks me to—which he won't."

"I'm playing it through, even though it means my finish, thanks to the great Dr. Walton Cowles." Lew still smiled. "I know exactly what will save me. Your friendship for me, Dig, and the love you still feel for Linda. Those are important factors, and Cowles is playing on them, Dig. He'll appeal to you for Linda's sake and mine—subtly, of course. Those copies of Nora's reports to be destroyed — your silence — that's what he wants!"

"The moment he gets it, this murder case will suddenly change; Cowles' official dummies will see it in an entirely different light, and I'll be freed." Lew squared his shoulders. "But don't do it, Dig. Never mind about Linda and me. Keep yourself the man of integrity you are now. Never do it. Never!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Switch in Time

PARKING a short distance beyond Bob Kirk's mortuary, I walked back. No other car stood near it. As I'd hoped, Coroner Wray

hadn't yet arrived to perform the post-mortem on Nora Forbes.

I went toward the rear door, looking in the windows. The private parlor where Kirk and I usually sat and talked was empty. Quietly I turned the knob and went in.

In the embalming room an inert figure covered with a sheet lay on the operating table. I looked at Nora Forbes' wan face. The bullet hole was a nasty little puncture in the center of her chest. I covered her again and stepped into the door of the supply closet at the side of the room. Squeezing in, I pulled the door until only a thin line of an opening was left.

Presently footfalls approached the rear of the house. The rear entrance was thrust open and a man hustled in, stamping snow off his feet. Kirk's voice mingled with the gruff tones of Coroner Wray. They entered the embalming room together, Wray carrying his black instrument case. A small, paunchy man, with a sly, insolent face, he was exactly the sort who'd sell out his profession for the sake of pocketing Cowles' hush-money.

"Unusually important case, Kirk," he said pompously. "Shouldn't be any chance of a misunderstanding. I want a witness, so stay right here."

He was making too much of a show of being careful.

Through the slit of the door I watched Coroner Wray insert the points of a long, thin tweezers into the wound. He probed, then nodded and said, "I've got it now." Beginning to lift the pinched tweezers, he cocked his head toward the hallway. "What was that? Someone coming? I don't want any interruptions."

Bob Kirk, good-minded guy that he was, fell for it. He turned from the table to look into the hall. Wray's manipulation was as deft as a magician's. In a flash he had the death slug out of the wound; he dropped it into his left palm and with the fingers of that same hand he inserted a different slug between the tweezers points. He'd brought that second bullet with him for precisely this purpose of switching it for the true evidence. Before Kirk turned back he'd inserted the false slug into the wound and was holding it there. Kirk had had his attention diverted for only a second, and so far as he could know Coroner Wray hadn't stirred a muscle.

"Nobody there," he said unsuspectingly.

Wray shrugged and lifted the tweezers. The planted slug glistened.

I felt a cold, furious impulse to slam out of that closet and pin the lie on Wray then and there, but it was important for me to witness the rest of this clever, crooked play.

The coroner affixed an official tag to the slug by means of sealing wax and had Kirk initial it for identification.

Where had that second slug come from? It had been test-fired from Lew Vale's conveniently missing revolver, of course. Obviously Lew's gun had been stolen by the same man who had taken his original copies of Nora's reports—a quick job, done immediately after Lew was removed from his office for questioning. Very probably the chief of police himself had done it, on telephoned orders from Cowles. Undoubtedly the stolen revolver would be conveniently "found" just before the trial. And now a slug fired from it for the special purpose of incriminating Lew had been expertly substituted for the bullet that had really killed Nora.

With an unnoticeable movement Coroner Wray dropped the true death bullet into his lower left vest pocket. The coroner strode out with his black case, Kirk following him. I heard the rear door close. Then Kirk went along the hallway toward the front of the building, unknowingly giving me a chance to slip out.

Coroner Wray was striding toward the center of town, his head lowered against the flying snowflakes. It was dark and late. No one else was visible along the street. The snow on the pavement made my footfalls soundless. Wray was half a block from the mortuary when I sprang.

I jumped him from behind, hooking my left arm under his chin and clubbing my right fist hard against his jaw. He dropped his black case, sagging against me. I dragged him to the side of the walk where the darkness was thicker.

Wray hadn't glimpsed my face and now he was unconscious. I flung his coats open. My fingers slid into his lower left vest pocket. It was empty.

He had already gotten rid of that slug. At some point between this spot and the mortuary he'd simply flipped it off into the snow without my seeing the move!

I started back in a cold fury, knowing even then that it was an impossible hunt. The snow was thick everywhere, on the sidewalk, in the gutter and on the street. The falling bullet would have made only a tiny disturbance on the fluffy surface, difficult enough to find in broad daylight; and already fresh flakes were covering it.

Skirting along, cursing the futility of the search, I looked back and saw Coroner Wray pulling himself up. I was forced to get out of sight. Running past the corner and heading for my car, I realized bitterly that the true death bullet was lost forever in the deepening snowfall.

Gordon Diggory sat at his desk on the other side of the plate glass, his shoulders sagging and his face haggard. He'd had no sleep last night, knowing beyond all doubt that Lew

"Vale's fate depended entirely upon the decision which he alone could make.

The case against Lew was rigged in such a manner that he'd go to the chair unless Dig saved him. And Dig could save him in only one way—with his silence. By bowing to Cowles' power and by permitting the lucrative evils of the sanitorium to continue, Dig could quickly get Linda's brother out of it.

"Dig, the truth in this case is obvious," I said, filled with hopelessness, "but as long as Walton Cowles lives, the truth won't do us one damned bit of good.

"Look at it," I went on. "There was something very wrong with Dr. Irving's death at the sanitorium. Whatever it may have been, we'll never learn now, but Nora Forbes knew. She slipped out and headed for town to report it to Lew. Her car was forced to stop at the curve. She was dragged out and shot. With that bullet lodged near her heart she went on trying desperately to get into town on foot. And I can prove, to my own satisfaction at least, that Lew Vale was not the one who shot her.

"How? It's very simple. To get to the spot where Nora was shot, Lew would have had to use his car. Coming back, he'd have had to drive straight past me. I'd certainly have seen him. There was no such car. To my mind that's absolute proof of Lew's innocence. But there's one thing wrong with it. My testimony isn't worth a hoot against the evidence framed on Lew and the falsified testimony which others are prepared to give against him."

Dig listened without stirring.

"Lew states he was in his office, seeing a patient, a Mrs. Cochran, at the time of Nora's death. Mrs. Cochran denies this. She says she left Lew's office a full fifteen minutes before the time of the crime. Mrs. Cochran happens to be the wife of the assistant county assessor. Naturally she doesn't want her husband to lose his job and his political future in Cowles' machine. Obviously she's lying, and her lie leaves Lew completely without an alibi. And there's not one damned thing we can do about it.

"There's another phony witness. Lew states he didn't leave his office at all last evening until Chief Dixon came for him, but this second witness has given the D. A. a sworn statement to the effect that Lew drove rapidly into his garage ten minutes after the time of the shooting. This man says he happened to be passing and saw Lew. His name is Bains—owner of the Bains Market, which sells tons of provisions to Cowles' sanitorium. Another lie we can't tear down! Add to all this the fact that Lew's revolver is missing, and that the so-called death slug will match his revolver when it finally turns up, and the D. A.'s got an open-and-shut case against him."

Dig simply stared at me, his face clouded.

"Now take it from Dr. Walton Cowles' angle," I continued. "We can't doubt that Cowles saw Nora slipping out of the sanitorium soon after Dr. Irving's death. Cowles must have suspected, or may even have learned definitely in some way, that Nora had been reporting certain dangerous information to Lew. Ordinarily he would have ordered one of his hired men to handle her. But this was too important and too urgent. Nora was already on her way to town. Cowles had to stop her himself, and he did, using one of the sanitorium guns, or one belonging to him personally.

"He might have left Nora there where he'd shot her, but she tore away from him and ran on. With colossal nerve, he went after her. Especially after finding me on the road, he had to make sure she died. If we hadn't found her dead, he'd have killed her with an injection under the pretense of helping her. And all along he was perfectly sure he could get away with it."

I moved back and forth, grim and furious.

"And what hope have we of seeing justice done in this case? None! Cowles owns this whole town and this whole county, including the biggest newspapers, the police, the district attorney and even the judges. Against such power as his, Lew Vale doesn't stand a chance. Or, rather, Lew stands just one chance, and that chance, Dig, is strictly up to you."

Almost imperceptibly, Dig nodded.

"Lew was dead right when he said that Cowles wants your silence, and that once he's got it Lew will be in the clear. And if you don't give it to him, what can I do for Lew? Nothing! You see that, Dig. Your choice must be either to yield to Cowles, or to fight him—and fighting him is hopeless.

"Lew's only defense is his counter-charges against Cowles. Nora can't testify to the truth of her reports, can't support him now. Lew has lost the original copies, so his charges must rest entirely on those carbons you have. They're unsigned, unwitnessed and unsworn. If I attempt to put them in evidence, the D. A. will prevent it, with the aid of a bought-and-paid-for judge handing down prejudiced rulings from the bench. On an appeal—"

Dig was shaking his head. "I've already told you, Jim, those copies of mine can never be offered as evidence."

I frowned at him. "They're our only possible weapon against Cowles, and an extremely weak one at that. Don't tell me not to ask questions now, Dig! I've got to know why those carbons can't be used as evidence—why you won't even give them into my hands."

For a long moment Dig sat with his eyes closed. He was facing something deeply pain-

ful, something he'd long dreaded. My question demanded a revelation of the secret he'd guarded so closely these many long months. The shadow of defeat on his face became even darker as he saw that he must answer—now.

He turned quietly in his chair, reached to the shelf above his desk and brought down a book. Carrying it close to the glass wall, he allowed it to open itself at a page which he'd evidently pored over countless times. Pressing it against the pane, he stood there wretchedly holding it while I read through the glass.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Through the Glass

THE heading was *Asiatic Cholera*.

My eyes, following the lines of type, grew wide. I read that Asiatic cholera was one of the most severe and fatal of all diseases, transmitted by a vibrio which was not air-borne, but communicated through personal contact, or through food, drink or some similar intermediary. The death rate was among the highest of all infectious diseases, death occurring within twenty-four hours at most; or, in an epidemic, the victim's collapse could come so suddenly and completely as to be fatal within one or two hours.

"Those few victims of Asiatic cholera who recover may become carriers. The carrier, apparently healthy, is actually a walking repository of the vibrio. It breeds in the gall bladder, but removal of the gall bladder, a difficult operation, may not successfully eliminate the condition, since the vibrio may then continue to breed in other organs. In practically all cases, once a victim has become a carrier he will remain one. Being an untouchable, it is quite impossible, of course, for a carrier to act as a physician or in any other capacity which brings him in contact with others."

I stared up into Gordon Diggory's miserable face. He needed to say nothing. It was quite clear. Asiatic cholera was the disease which Dig had contracted in China. Having recovered and returned to this country, he'd remained unaware that he'd become a carrier until the sudden death of that certain patient who had been his friend. I could imagine the horror he'd felt upon recognizing the dread symptoms. His hands, trained to surgery, had become lethal, so that his merest touch—

I understood now, of course, why Dig had had no choice but to abandon his practice, break off his engagement and make himself a prisoner here. With a start I recalled that although things had been brought in to Dig—mail and food, for example—he had never permitted anything to leave that baneful space

behind the glass wall. That was why he'd dictated all his letters to me, and had had me sign them, as well as his checks. This was the reason for everything I'd never before understood about Gordon Diggory, including the impossibility of his allowing me or anyone else to touch those reports.

"God knows, Dig," I said, profoundly shaken, "you're not to blame for this, and no man could possibly be more conscientious about it, but wouldn't it have been better to tell us at the very beginning?"

He smiled bitterly. "I prefer to be known as an eccentric, Jim, rather than as a walking pestilence."

He turned away and sat at his desk with his eyes closed while I stared at him.

My mind had suddenly become full of a burning wonder. Was it possible that Dig might be wrong about his condition? He'd seen only one patient die as a result of contact with his hands, so couldn't it be true now that he was no longer a carrier of the deadly disease? And if this were so—if I could prove it—wouldn't it bring to Dig a blessed release from his inexorable, self-imposed imprisonment? It was this hopeful thought tumbling in my mind that impelled me to reach to the closed panel!

Dig still sat there with his eyes closed. I made no sound. Pressing my fingertips against the panel, I slid it open noiselessly. Now I had a limited sort of access into Dig's forbidden region. I reached through—then quickly drew my hand back and thrust it into my leather glove I'd tossed on my desk so that I'd have no direct contact with anything I might touch on the inside of that transparent wall. Having taken this safeguard, I reached through again, to the top of Dig's desk.

There sat a water bottle with a drinking glass beside it. I picked up the glass, drew it out and quickly slid the panel shut again. My back turned to Dig to conceal it, I stared at the glass. Repeatedly it had touched Dig's lips. If Dig was still a carrier, then the vibrio of the dread cholera would be profusely present on its rim. I could take it to another laboratory, have it microscopically examined and then be certain. But now that I had it, I felt a surge of hopelessness. After all, Dig, himself a scientist, must have made sure repeatedly of his own condition. Actually, then, I told myself, this thing I'd done was merely a futile gesture.

I heard the sound of a car pulling into the yard. Dig stirred. Having no choice but to continue to conceal the glass from him, I kept my back turned, carried it to a closet on the far side of the room and left it there, tossing my glove into the fire crackling in the office fireplace.

Then I went to a window and saw Linda

Vale with Dr. Walton Cowles. District Attorney Robbins had also come. I couldn't doubt the purpose of this visit. From this point on, the case against Lew Vale must take definite shape in either one direction or the other. This was the time when Gordon Diggory must make his momentous decision.

I OPENED the door and they filed in, Linda deeply troubled, Dr. Cowles confidently poised, Robbins with his face set smugly. Dig rose behind his glass wall to peer at them. His voice came over the wires, saying how glad he was to see Linda again, and now it sounded ragged. He was as keenly aware as I was that this must be the showdown.

Dig and Dr. Walton Cowles sharply estimated each other, and Dr. Cowles spoke with an arrogant sort of courtesy.

"Dr. Diggory, I haven't come here to discuss the State's case against Linda's brother. That's a most unfortunate situation, of course, which the law must handle impartially." Undoubtedly he'd made this hypocritical speech in order to impress Linda. Certainly it didn't impress Dig or me except as a cruel and despicable falsehood. "I want to talk instead about the very serious charges which Lew Vale has made against me. It's my understanding that you're in some way supporting the very questionable position he's taking."

Dig rose. He said simply and noncommittally, "Go on, Dr. Cowles."

"I've nothing to fear from such preposterous accusations, of course," Cowles said calmly. "I'm quite capable of defending myself against them. But naturally, I'd like to know just where you stand in this matter."

Dig turned toward the cabinet in the rear corner, unlocked it and drew out the carbons of Nora Forbes' reports.

"In Lew's case, it's leading to regrettable complications," Dr. Cowles continued. "I don't know, of course, whether his attorney intends to enter a plea of insanity at his trial. In any case, the violence of his statements has led Linda to fear that he may be somewhat irrational. If he persists, she will engage several of the best available psychiatrists to examine him. Then, if their diagnosis is what I'm afraid it may be, she will commit him to my sanitorium where he will receive the proper treatment."

Dig and I both stared at Linda. Neither of us could doubt any longer that Dr. Walton Cowles, with his personal charm and his persuasive suggestions, had completely deluded her. Lew had called her blind, and she was—too blind to see that the psychiatrists' diagnosis of derangement was a foregone conclusion, that to commit Lew to Cowles' sanitorium would be to doom him to life imprisonment, if not worse. She was so profoundly shaken,

so completely under the evilly deceptive influence of Dr. Cowles that both Dig and I realized argument would be futile. Turning to gaze at Dig, I saw how deeply he pitied her—pitied her yet loved her.

"I feel, Dr. Diggory," Cowles was saying smoothly, "that perhaps Lew's mistaken attitude rises out of a misinterpretation of certain opinions you may hold. That is, if you happen to have an adverse opinion of me, Lew, in adopting it as his own, may have exaggerated it beyond all reason. In that case, it would be extremely helpful all around if his misconception of your position could be made clear to him."

Listening, Dig struck a match and turned the cock of a Bunsen burner. The blue flame whispered, scarcely visible.

"And if my opinion of your professional practices happens to coincide with Lew's, Dr. Cowles?" he asked. "You'll still feel perfectly confident that both Lew and I will be proved completely wrong?"

"Perfectly!" Cowles answered with sharp emphasis. "Completely! But I'd hoped you'd spare yourselves, and me, the necessity of that."

Dig eyed him. This was the moment when he must declare himself once and for all. He stood there, very still, holding the carbon copies of Nora Forbes' reports. His face set hard as stone, he held the thin papers in the hot blue flame of the Bunsen burner. Instantly they flared up. He held them, watching the fire leaping. Then, with a weary motion, he dropped them into the bluestone sink. They lay there, a film of moisture hissing under them, still burning.

Chilled, I realized that the reports themselves were worthless, and that this was a gesture on Dig's part—a gesture of final decision.

"Then, Dr. Cowles," he said quietly, "there's scarcely any reason for me to answer your question."

Although Linda seemed unaware of the meaning of his act, both Cowles and Robbins sat forward, smiling faintly with triumph, gazing through the glass wall and watching the reports turning into wisps of ash.

"I think," Cowles said, "that when Lew is made to realize how hopeless his position is without your support, he'll reconsider."

AT THAT moment, almost as if by prearrangement, the telephone rang. I answered it at my desk. Coroner Wray was on the wire, asking for the District Attorney. Robbins took over the phone, said "Yes" twice, then looked extremely astonished. He turned to Dig to say quickly, "Perhaps you'd like to hear this over your extension, Dr. Diggory. Will you repeat that, Coroner?"

As they listened, Robbins' face became too damned snug and Dig's twisted into an expression of disgust mingled with deep relief. Dig said nothing as he put down the phone. Robbins turned to Linda and Cowles with his very exciting news.

"Amazing! The best possible break for you, Linda. First of all, it wasn't Lew's gun that killed Nurse Forbes after all! In fact, Lew's gun wasn't really missing. Chief Dixon found it a little while ago in his dresser drawer, upstairs. Obviously Lew put it there instead of in his desk, the last time he handled it, and he must have forgotten all about it. But even better! Chief Dixon has found the gun that the death bullet really came from—in a snow-drift near the spot where Nurse Forbes left her car."

Linda listened, stunned with happiness, while Dig and I eyed each other.

"It's a gun from the sanitorium, one usually kept in the office of the superintendent. That discovery led Chief Dixon to another. Nurse Forbes was seen hurrying from the superintendent's office just before she left the sanitorium yesterday, and there isn't a doubt in the world that she'd taken the gun. There's only one thing to think now, Linda, especially since we know that Nurse Forbes had grown moody—she wasn't murdered at all. Instead, she killed herself."

Linda sobbed. Cowles and Robbins lavished their elation on her. I gazed cynically at Dig and saw him looking sick, physically and morally.

"Well, well!" Dr. Walton Cowles said expansively. "What a fortunate development! Robbins, you'll free Lew at once, of course! Linda, I'm delighted for you!"

And Lew? How happy would he be made by this "fortunate development?" Being only human, he'd feel vast relief to find a first-degree murder charge no longer hanging over his head, of course, but how would he feel toward Dig? He'd urged Dig, "Keep yourself the man of integrity you are!" and, instead, Dig had yielded. I remembered myself saying, more than once, "Cowles will dominate this county as long as he lives," and now Cowles had won another victory.

"A very happy occasion all around!" Dr.

Cowles was saying. "To make it complete, Dr. Diggory, I have a further piece of news which may interest you. I've asked Linda to become my wife and she has consented."

Dig sat stunned and speechless under this crudest blow of all.

Linda was speaking now. "Didn't you hear Walton, Dig? He and I are going to be married soon."

I had to break the brittle silence that followed. "Well, this really is an occasion to celebrate! We should all have a drink on that."

As I hurried to the closet at the far side of the room I heard Dig saying in a dead voice, "My congratulations, Doctor. Linda, I sincerely hope you'll be very happy." A moment later I turned back with a tray loaded with Scotch, soda water and five glasses, including one for Dig. Having mixed five highballs, I first placed one in Dr. Cowles' hand, then served the others. Dig opened the little panel and took the last, being careful not to touch the tray. Then I held up mine in a grim toast.

"Happiness," I said, "and your health, Dr. Cowles."

"Thank you, thank you," said Dr. Cowles, and he drank—from the glass that had been sitting only a few minutes ago on the desk of Gordon Diggory. . . .

Ten minutes later they were gone. I felt chilled, yet there was a glow in me, a fierce, hot glow of righteousness. Dig sat silent behind his glass wall. He leaned forward to place his empty highball glass on the desk—and he paused. He stared at the empty space beside his water bottle and suddenly his eyes rose to mine, dark and glittering.

"Dig," I asked quietly, "isn't there any chance at all that this condition of yours may—well, improve, or better yet—disappear entirely?"

His answer had the ring of steel. "Neither," he said. "Never."

I telephoned Bob Kirk.

"How's business, pal?" I asked him, as always.

"Still slow," he answered. "Very slow."

"Don't worry," I said. "It's sure to pick up a little tomorrow."

THE END

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