

Weird Tales

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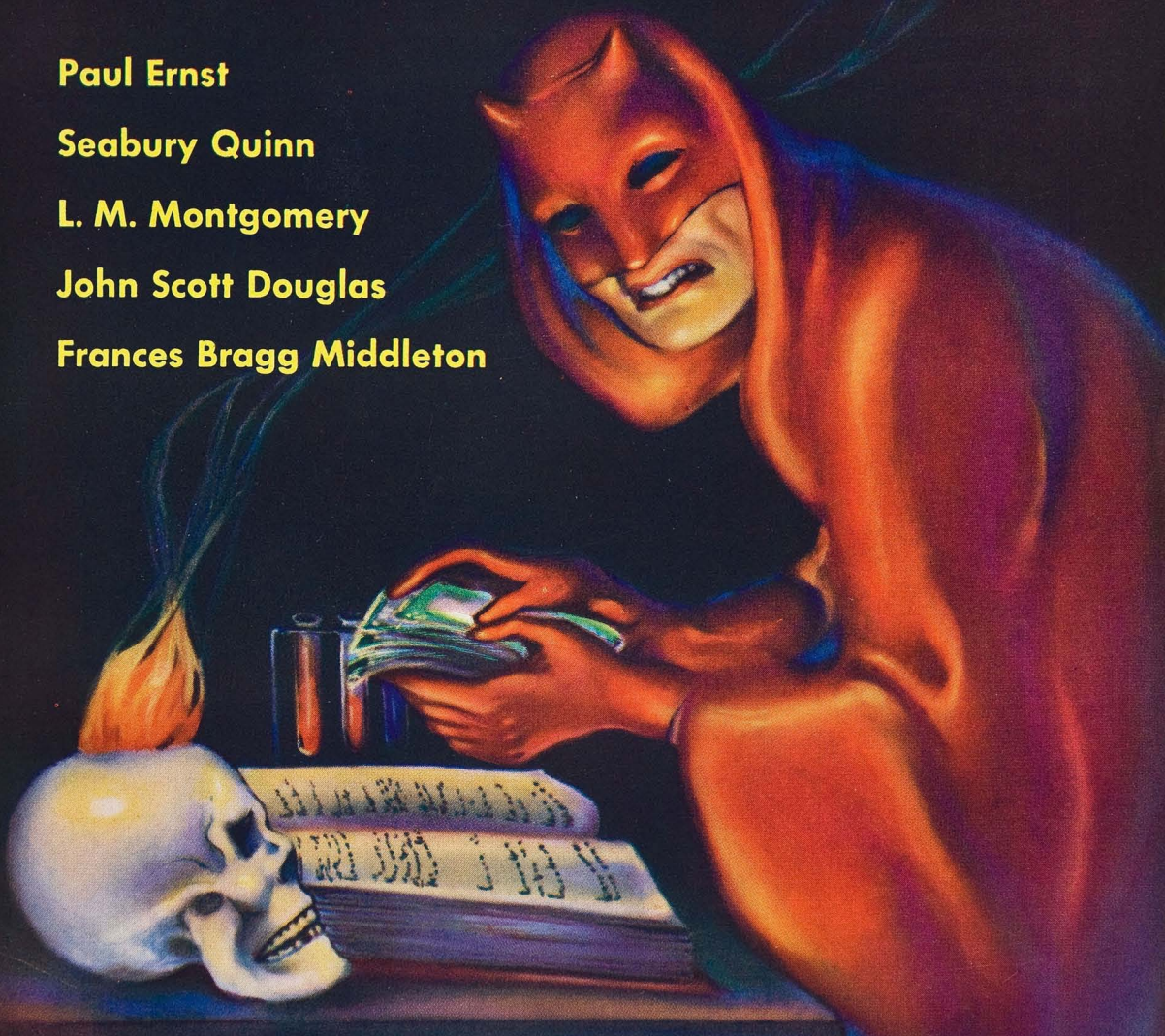
Paul Ernst

Seabury Quinn

L. M. Montgomery

John Scott Douglas

Frances Bragg Middleton



MEET THE SINISTER AND MYSTERIOUS
DOCTOR SATAN
THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST CRIMINAL

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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Volume 26

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Welcome, Ascott Keane," came his sardonic words.



WHO
IS THE
MYSTERIOUS
DOCTOR
SATAN
?

Doctor Satan

By PAUL ERNST

The world's weirdest criminal and strangest detective come face to face—a thrilling, fascinating and utterly different mystery-story

1. The Death Sbrub

BUSINESS was being done as usual in the big outer office of the Ryan Importing Company. Calls came over the switchboard for various depart-

ment heads. Men and girls bent over desks, reading and checking order blanks, typewriting, performing the thousand and one duties of big business.

Yet over the office hung a hush, more

sensed than consciously felt. The typewriters seemed to make less than their normal chatter. Employees talked in low tones, when they had something to communicate to one another. The office boy showed a tendency to tiptoe when he carried a fresh batch of mail in from the anteroom.

The girl at the switchboard pulled a plug as a call from the secretary of the big boss, Arthur B. Ryan, was concluded.

The office boy looked inquiringly at her as he passed.

"How's the old man?" he asked her.

The girl shook her head a little.

"I guess he's worse. That last call was important, and he wouldn't take it himself. He had Gladys take it for him."

"What's the matter with him, anyhow?"

"A headache," said the girl.

"Is that all? I thought from the way everybody was acting like this was a morgue, that he was dying or something."

"I guess this is something special in the way of headaches," the switchboard girl retorted, smoothing down the blond locks at the back of her head. "And it came up awful sudden. He walked past here at nine, two hours ago, and grinned at me like he felt great. Then at ten he phoned down to the building drugstore for some aspirin. Now he won't take a call from the head of one of the biggest companies in the city! I guess he feels terrible."

"A headache!" snorted the office boy.

"Well, why don't he go see a doctor?"

"I put through a call for Doctor Swanson, on the top floor of the building, ten minutes ago. He was busy with an appointment, but said he'd be down soon."

"A headache!" shrugged the boy again.

"And he can't take it! Wonder what he'd do if he got something serious the matter with him?"

He swaggered on, and the hush seemed

● Here is a new type of weird tale, and new thrills await you as you read about the sinister exploits of Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal. He is an immensely wealthy man, who has turned to crime to satisfy his longing for thrills. And he makes crime pay beyond the dreams of avarice; for if it did not pay, the game would not be to his liking. He swims to power with utter disregard for others, striking down those in his path cruelly, ruthlessly, inexorably, and weirdly. He is no ordinary villain, but is truly the Master Mind of crime, possessing scientific knowledge and power that make him unique among all the so-called "master minds" of fiction. He well merits the sobriquet of Doctor Satan. But he is opposed by another mind in many ways equal to his own: Ascott Keane, criminologist par excellence, known even to his intimate friends as only a millionaire playboy. He has turned to tracking down crime for the same reason that Doctor Satan has turned to committing crime—for the thrill of the game. This story is the first of a series of tales, each complete in itself, in which these two strange characters strive against each other. But whether Doctor Satan is preying on rich men in Wall Street, or ruthlessly spreading panic terror in Hollywood, or striking the winter tourist influx at Miami with ghastly death, we know that you will be fascinated with the harrowing adventures of Doctor Satan and Ascott Keane. And each of these stories is a genuine weird tale—eery, uncanny and permeated with an icy breath of horror like a cold breeze from the tomb.

to deepen over the office. A premonitory hush? Were all in the big room dimly conscious of the sequence of events about to be started there? Later, many claimed they had felt psychic warnings; but whether that is fact or imagination will never be known.

A hush, with a drone of voices and machines accentuating it in the outer office. A silence, in which the doors of the executives, in their cubicles along the east wall of the office space, remained closed. A quiet that seemed to emanate from the blank, shut door marked Arthur B. Ryan, President.

And then the hush was cracked. The silence was torn, like strong linen screaming apart as a great strain rips it from end to end.

From behind the door marked President came a shriek of pain and horror that blanched the cheeks of the office workers. A yell that keened out over the hush and turned busy fingers to wood, and which stopped all words on the suddenly numbed lips that had been uttering them.

Ryan's secretary, pale, trembling, ran from her desk outside the office door and sped into Ryan's office.

"Oh, my God!" the shriek came more clearly to the general office through the opened door. "My head . . . oh, my God!"

And then the screams of the man were swelled suddenly by the high shriek of the girl secretary. "Look—look——"

There was the thud of a body in Ryan's office, telling the plain message that she had fainted. And an instant later the agonized shrieks of the man in there were stilled.

For a second all in the general office were gripped by silence, paralyzed, staring with wide eyes at the door to the private office. Then the sales manager stepped to the open door.

A glance he took into Ryan's office. All outside saw his face go the color of ashes. He tottered, caught at the door to keep from falling.

Then, with the air of a man dazed by a physical blow, he closed the door and stumbled toward the switchboard.

"Phone the police," he said hoarsely to the girl. "My God . . . the police . . . though I don't know what they can do. His head——"

"What—what's the matter with his head?" the girl faltered as her fingers stiffly manipulated the switchboard plugs.

The sales manager stared at her without seeing her, his eyes looking as if they probed through her and into unplumbed chasms of horror behind her.

"A tree growing out of his head," he panted. "A tree . . . pushing out of his skull, like a plant cracking a flower-pot it outgrows, and sending roots and branches through the cracks."

He leaned against the switchboard.

"A death-tree, killing him, murdering him. Hurry! Get the——"

He lunged for her, but was too late. The switchboard girl had slid from her chair, unconscious. The screams, the atmosphere of horror, the look of terror on the man's face, had been too much for her.

Blindly, with fingers that rattled against the switchboard, the man put through the call himself.

THAT was at eleven in the morning of July 12th, a day that made criminal history in New York.

At eleven-ten, in a great Long Island home, the second chapter was being written.

The home belonged to Samuel Billingsley, retired merchant. It was a huge estate, high-walled. In the walls a new iron gate glistened, closing off the front driveway. It was a high gate, heavily barred—

the kind of gate that would be installed by a man afraid for his life. Beside that gate two men lounged. Each was big, heavily muscled, with a bulge at his armpit speaking of a gun in readiness.

At the front door of the house another man was stationed; and there was one at the rear, and still another patrolling the grounds. This last one carried a rifle.

The summer sun gleamed bright over the estate. The silence of the suburbs enveloped it, yet danger lowered like a black veil over the place.

A long low roadster slid to a stop before the closed iron gate. A young man, dark-haired, with dark gray eyes, sounded the horn. Reluctantly the gate was opened. The man drove the roadster in and started toward the house, but was stopped by the two guards who stood before the car with an automatic apiece covering its driver.

The young man glared.

"Well?" he snapped. "Who the devil are you? What are you doing here?"

"Same to you, buddy," rasped one of the men, coming closer. "What's your business here?"

The young man glanced at the new, high gate and back to the guards.

"I'm Samuel Billingsley's nephew," he said. "My name's Merton Billingsley, I've been away for a month—and I come back to be stopped at the point of a gun at my own uncle's house——"

"Take it easy," said the man gruffly. "We're the old—I mean we're Mr. Billingsley's bodyguard. Hired us two days ago. Orders were to investigate everybody driving in here. Have you got any proofs that you're his nephew?"

The young man showed letters. His annoyance was giving way to curiosity—and alarm.

"Bodyguard!" he exclaimed. "Why a bodyguard? Is my uncle's life in danger?"

The man shrugged. "I wouldn't know,

but I guess it is or he wouldn't have hired us. He didn't tell us anything except to keep everybody out of the grounds."

Merton Billingsley clutched at the man's arm.

"Is he all right now? Have there been any attempts on his life so far?"

"None yet," said the man, holstering his automatic. "And I guess he's all right—except he's got a headache."

"A headache?"

"Yeah. His high-hat butler came down here a half-hour ago, and said a doc had been called and we were to let him through. The old—Mr. Billingsley had a bad headache. The doc came ten minutes ago and is up in his room with him now. But aside from the headache, he's all right——"

Through the golden summer sunlight, like jagged lightning impinging on the ear-drums instead of the optic nerves, a scream lanced out. It was a thin, high shriek that drove the color from the faces of Merton Billingsley and the two guards. It came from behind a shaded window in the front corner of the great house.

"My uncle's room," breathed Merton. "What——"

He swallowed, and jerked his head to the two guards.

"On the running-board," he snapped. "We'll get to the house——"

The whine of gears drowned his words. With a guard on each side, the roadster sped down the graveled driveway and to the house.

The door opened as Merton got to it. A gray-headed butler faced him.

"Willys!" exclaimed Merton. "My uncle . . . what in God's name is the matter with him?"

The man shook his head.

"I don't know. He complained of having a terrific headache, sir. And I phoned for Doctor Smythe. Then, just a minute ago he screamed——"

Down the curved marble staircase to the front hall a man was stumbling—a middle-aged man whose eyes were wide and whose features were distorted.

"Smythe!" said Merton. "Uncle Samuel . . . tell me! Quick!"

The doctor stared at him. He moistened his lips.

"Your uncle is dead."

"Dead! But what happened to him? He was an old man, but he was in good health. What killed him?"

"A plant," whispered the doctor. "A kind of bush. Thorn-bush—God knows what! How awful! That thing, blossoming from his head—"

Merton shook his shoulder savagely.

"Are you insane? Pull yourself together! What's this talk of bushes?"

"A bush . . . growing out of his head!" whispered the doctor, moistening his pale lips again and again.

MERTON started up the stairs. Smythe, rousing himself, grasped his arm.

"Don't go up there, Merton! Don't!"

Merton wrenched his arm away.

"My uncle lies up in his room, dead—and you tell me not to go up to him!"

He took the stairs two at a time.

"I'm warning you," came the doctor's shrill voice. "The sight you'll see—"

But Merton went on, around the curve in the staircase, down the hall at the top.

The door to his uncle's room was closed. Impetuously he opened it and leaped inside the big bedroom. It was dim in there, shaded against the sunlight. But after a few seconds he saw it—his uncle's body.

It lay beyond the big bed, the corpse of a man of seventy, thin, clad in a silk robe. The body was twisted and distorted. But it was not the body that riveted the gaze of the dead man's nephew. It was the head.

The head was turned so that, though

the body lay on its-side, the face was pointed toward the ceiling. And from the top of the skull something was protruding. Merton's hands crept toward his throat as he looked at it.

A sort of bush, with leafless, sharp-pointed twigs branching out in all directions, grew from the top of the skull. It was like a hand with many small sharp fingers that had thrust up through the bone, with its thick, wrist-like stem rooting in the brain beneath.

A tree, quick with life though rooted in death! Quick with life? As Merton stared with glazing eyes, he saw the leafless, sharp little branches crawl out a little farther. *The thing was growing even as he watched it!*

With a low cry, he turned and ran from the room.

2. Ascott Keane

IN A Park Avenue penthouse two men were seated in a great room fitted out as a library. The room was lined with books, in sections which were unobtrusively but precisely labeled as sections of shelving in public libraries are labeled. "Science," one of the largest sections, crammed with books, was tagged. Another read, "Mythology;" a third, "Occult." Then there were "Psychology," "Engineering," "Biology," many others, each containing dozens of volumes.

The focal point of the big, lofty chamber was a huge ebony desk. It was at this desk that the two men were seated, one in a leather chair beside it, the other leaning back in a swivel chair from before it.

The man in the visitor's chair was about fifty, expensively dressed, a typical big business man with the suggestion of a paunch that comes with success and a striving after more millions instead of physical fitness. But there was one thing

about this business man that was not typical. That was the expression on his face.

Fear! The blind terror of an incoherent animal caught in a trap beyond its comprehension!

His face was gray with fear. His lips were pallid and his hands were shaking with it. The sound of his ragged breathing was clearly audible in the almost cathedral-like hush of the great library.

The man sitting proprietorially at the desk watched his visitor with almost clinical detachment, though sympathy showed in his deep-set eyes. A man to attract attention in any gathering on earth, this one.

He was a big man, but supple and quick-moving. His eyes, deep under coal-black eyebrows, were light gray; they looked calm as ice, as if no emergency could disturb their steely depths. He had a high-bridged, patrician nose, a long chin that was the embodiment of strength, and a firm, large mouth.

His mouth moved, clipping out words with easy precision.

"You say you got the note yesterday, Walstead?"

Thus casually he addressed Ballard W. Walstead, one of the richest men in the city.

"Yes," said the man in the visitor's chair.

"Why did you come to me with it?"

"Because," said Walstead, raising a trembling hand in a repressed gesture of pleading, "I thought if anyone on earth could save me it would be you. Oh, I know about you, though I realize that not a dozen people in the world are aware of the real life of Ascott Keane. These few know you as one of the greatest criminal investigators that ever lived—a man whose achievements have something almost of black magic in them. They know that you've raised a hobby of criminology

into an art that passes beyond the reach of genius."

Ascott Keane's calm, steely eyes stared steadily into the frantic depths of the other man's pale blue ones.

"I am a dilettante," he murmured. "I inherited a fortune, and I loaf through life playing with first editions, polo ponies and big game hunting."

"Yes, yes, I know. That's the picture the world has of you. The picture you've deliberately painted. But I tell you I know your capabilities! You've got to help me, Keane!"

Keane's long, strong hand went out.

"Let me see the note."

Walstead fumbled in his pocket and drew out a folded sheet of paper. Handling it as though it were a deadly serpent, he handed it to Keane, who spread it out on the desk.

"Ballard Walstead," Keane read aloud. "You are hereby given a chance to purchase a continuation of your rather useless life. The price of this continuation is the round sum of one million dollars. You may pay this in any way you please—even in checks, if you like, for if ever you attempt to trace the checks you will die. And if you refuse payment you will die even more quickly.

"You will disregard this as a note from a crank, of course. But by noon tomorrow you will know better. You see, I have given two other men, Arthur B. Ryan and Samuel Billingsley, a choice similar to yours—and I believe they are going to defy me. Read in the afternoon papers what happens to them, Walstead. And believe me when I say that the same thing will happen to you if you do not meet my price. Directions will be given to you tomorrow noon as to where and how you are to pay the money. Your obedient servant, Doctor Satan."

Keane looked up from the paper.

"Doctor Satan," he repeated. Into his

steel-gray eyes came a hard, relentless glint. "Doctor Satan!"

"You know him?" asked Walstead eagerly.

"I know of him. A little. You read in the papers this afternoon of what happened to Ryan and Billingsley?"

"Yes," whimpered Walstead. "My God, yes! And that's what will happen to me, Keane, if you won't help me." He shuddered as though drenched with icy water. "A tree—growing out of a man's head! Killing him! How can such things be done?"

"That is something only Doctor Satan can answer. Did you get instructions about where to pay the money this noon, as is promised in this letter?"

In answer, Walstead drew out another bit of notepaper.

"Walstead:" Keane read. "Leave the money either in thousand-dollar bills or in checks up to twenty thousand dollars apiece, in the trash can at the corner of Broadway and Seventy-Sixth Street, tonight at nine o'clock. If checks, make them payable to Elias P. Hudge. Signed, Doctor Satan."

Keane's eyes searched Walstead's again.

"Are you going to do it?"

"I can't!" exclaimed Walstead hysterically. "I'm a wealthy man, but my affairs are in such a state that to take a million dollars in cash from my business would bankrupt me! I can't!"

KEANE's long, powerful fingers formed a reflective pentroof under his long, powerful chin.

"You're going to defy Doctor Satan, then."

"I must!" cried Walstead. "I have no choice."

Keane's fingers moved restlessly.

"This Doctor Satan must have known your affairs were such that you couldn't

meet his order. And he must have foreseen that you would have to refuse his demand. . . . Were you in your office when the second note was delivered?"

"Yes."

"Who delivered it?"

Walstead shivered again.

"That is one of the deepest mysteries of all. No one delivered it."

Keane stared.

"Nobody delivered that note!" Walstead repeated. "I was alone in my office, reading over some papers. I turned away from my desk a moment. When I turned back, the note was there, on top of the other things. No one had come in. The window was closed and locked. Yet the note—was there. It—it was like witchcraft, Keane!"

Keane's fingers, stilled for a moment, moved restlessly again.

"You may be speaking more truly than you know, Walstead. After you received the note, what did you do?"

"I stayed in my office till four-thirty. Then I went down to the building lobby, and saw the afternoon papers. Screaming headlines about the deaths of Ryan and Billingsley. After that I came here as fast as my chauffeur could drive me."

"Did anything unusual happen to you on the way?"

Walstead shook his head.

"Nothing. I got into my car at the office building, was driven straight here, and got out in front of your building."

"No one said anything to you? Or, perhaps, jostled you?"

"No one," said Walstead. Then his lips tightened. "Wait a minute. Yes! A man bumped into me just as I was coming into this building entrance."

Keane's eyes narrowed till all that was apparent of them was two gray glints.

"Can you describe him?" he said quickly.

"No. I didn't pay any attention to him

at all, after I saw he had no weapon in his hand and meant me no harm. His shoulder brushed against my neck and cheek, and then he was gone, after apologizing."

Keane got up from his desk. His eyes were more inscrutable than ever.

"I'll do all I can to help you," he said. "Suppose you run along now, Walstead."

Walstead jerked to his feet with frenzy and perplexity in his face. He was almost as tall as Keane, but didn't give the appearance of being nearly so big.

"I don't understand, Keane. Are you throwing me over? Aren't you going to act with me against this Doctor Satan?"

"Yes, I'm going to act against Doctor Satan." Muscle ridged out in Keane's lean cheeks. "You go along home."

"I'd hoped you would let me stay here, with you, till the danger was past——"

"You will be in no more danger at home than you would be here," replied Keane, with odd gentleness in his tone. "My man will show you to the door."

With the words, Keane's man appeared; a silent, impassive-looking fellow who handed Walstead his hat and stick. Walstead, with many protests, went out. . . .

"**B**EATRICE," Keane called softly, when he was alone in the big library again.

A section of the shelving, lined with books, swung smoothly away from the wall, forming a doorway. Through it came a girl with a shorthand notebook and a pencil in her tapering hands. She was tall and beautifully formed, with dark blue eyes and hair that was more red than brown.

"You sent him away!" she said, eyes at once accusing and bitterly disappointed. "You wouldn't help him. You sent him away."

"He is past help," retorted Keane.

"The stranger that jostled him in front of the building—that stranger was death. Perhaps Doctor Satan himself, perhaps a helper."

"How can you know that?"

Keane breathed deeply.

"Doctor Satan must have known in advance that Walstead could not pay his demands. Hence he must have planned to use him from the start as a sacrifice—a third horrible example of what happens to wealthy men who defy him. The man who jostled him planted death's seeds in him. He will die within the hour, with one of those unearthly shrubs forcing its way up through his skull."

"Still—you sent him away."

"I did, Beatrice. Suppose he died here? The police! Many questions! Detention! And I don't want to be delayed. I have work to do now that makes any of my former tasks seem like unimportant games. Doctor Satan! With three rich men dead, no others will defy him. He'll loot the city—if I can't stop him."

The girl, Beatrice Dale, Keane's companion as well as secretary, fingered the notebook in which was recorded the talk between him and Walstead.

"Who is this Doctor Satan, Ascott?" she said. "I don't seem to remember that he has figured in any of your former work."

"He hasn't. Doctor Satan is a new phenomenon. I've been expecting to hear from him ever since I heard the first whisper of his existence a month ago. Now, with these three weird, fantastic murders, he makes his bow. Who is he? Where does he hide? What does he look like? I don't know—yet."

He began pacing up and down before his big ebony desk.

He chanced to be looking at the chair when it happened.

The chair, also ebony, was pushed a few feet back from the desk. It was tilt-

ed back a bit, with the felt pad slightly awry from the movement of his body as he had left it.

It squatted there, a dark, inanimate thing at one instant. At the next there was a soft *pouff* of sound—and the chair leaped into blue incandescence. Lambent flame played over it, so hot that it blasted the faces of Keane and Beatrice five feet away. For perhaps four seconds the blue flame persisted. Then it died out as suddenly as it had appeared.

And the chair was no longer there. In its place was a little heap of fine ash, smoldering on the carpet.

Keane gazed slowly into Beatrice's horrified eyes.

"I don't know about Doctor Satan yet," he repeated coolly, "but apparently he knows a great deal about me!—Well, what is it, Rice?"

Keane's man stood in the library doorway, staring first at his master and then at the tiny heap of ash that was all that was left of the ebony chair.

"Mr. Walstead just died, sir," he said. "It was in the lobby of the building, just as he was about to step into the street. He's lying down there now." Rice's eyes flashed bleakly. "There's something pushing up through his head, sir. Little sharp spikes of something, like branches of a little tree, or bush."

3. *Doctor Satan*

THREE miles away, in a windowless, black-draped room, a figure bent over a metal table in the attitude of a high priest bending over an altar.

The figure looked like one robed for a costume ball, save that in every line of it was a deadliness that robbed it of all suggestions of anything humorous or social.

Tall and spare, it was covered by a blood-red robe. Red rubber gloves swathed the hands. The face was con-

cealed behind a red mask that curtained it from forehead to chin with only two black eyes, like live coals, showing through eyeholes.

Lucifer! And to complete the grim travesty of resemblance, two horned red projections showed above the red skull-cap that hid the man's hair.

Before him, on the metal table, a thin blue flame died slowly down into a sprinkling of yellowish powder from which it had originally been born. The blue flame was the only light in the room. By its flicker could be seen three other men, crouching around the walls and watching the flame with breathless intensity.

One of these three was a young man with an aristocratic but weak and degenerate face. The other two were creatures like gargoyles. The first was legless, with his great, gorilla-like head, set on tremendous shoulders, coming up only to a normal man's waist. The second was a wizened small monkey of a man with bright, cruel eyes peering out from a mat of hair that covered all his features.

The blue flame on the metal table died out. The red-clad figure straightened up. A gloved hand touched a switch and the room was illuminated with red light.

"Ascott Keane," said the man in Satan's costume, "has escaped the blue flame."

The three men around the walls breathed deeply. Then the younger, with the weak face, scowled.

"How do you know that, Doctor Satan?"

"If the flame had consumed him," Doctor Satan said, his voice harsh and monotoned, "the blue fire would have burned red while his body was devoured. It did not burn red."

The younger man walked toward the table. He moved with a curious air of cringing defiance. The other two men

were frankly in awe of the red-clad one. The younger man tried to throw off that awe.

"How do you control the flame, Doctor Satan?" he asked.

The coal-black eyes burned into his through the eyeholes in the red mask.

"It is all in here," Doctor Satan said at last, pointing to an ancient roll of papyrus spread flat on a stand near the metal table. "The ingredients of the flame were compounded first in Egypt, five thousand years ago. To these ingredients are added powdered bits of the person of the one to be consumed by the flame. Finger-nail parings, hair, bits of discarded clothing, for instance. Then when the powder is burned, the person burns, though a thousand miles of distance separate him from the blue fire."

"Yet Keane escaped," said the young man, watching Doctor Satan narrowly.

"I had no bits of Keane's person to place with the chemicals. He is too shrewd to have allowed hair or nail clippings to be smuggled from his home. I had only a sliver of the chair in which he customarily sits. Obviously, he wasn't in the chair when I touched off the fire, and so escaped death."

THE young man lit a cigarette. The frightened defiance of his every gesture was heightened by the manner in which he lit it. The coal-black eyes showing through the eyeholes narrowed a little.

"The death tree, Doctor Satan," the young man said. "How do you work that?"

"It is a species of Australian thorn-bush," Doctor Satan said without hesitation. "Rather, it was, till with a certain botanical skill I altered it into a thing that flowers in two hours or less, rooting in a man's brain. The only drawback is that the seed, a tiny thing that floats in

air, must be inhaled by the victim, to lodge in the nasal passage and later work its way up to the brain."

"You have more seeds of this tree?" said the young man, fingers shaking as he raised the cigarette to his lips.

"Yes," said Doctor Satan. His manner was strange, his voice almost gentle. But there was a deadliness in the very gentleness, like the deadliness with which a cat toys with a mouse. The monkey-like little man with the hairy face, and the legless giant with the huge shoulders, stirred restlessly in their positions by the wall.

"Why didn't you use the flame on Ryan and Walstead and Billingsley?" questioned the young man. "That would have been easier than killing them with your devilish thorn-bush."

"Easier," conceded the grim figure in red, "but not quite so spectacular. I wanted those three to die as fantastically as possible, so the requests I make on other rich men will be more quickly granted."

A chuckle sounded from the lips under the red mask. Doctor Satan walked to the stand on which the papyrus rested. He pulled out a drawer and took from it ten bundles of currency. In each bundle were thousand-dollar bills. And the band around each bundle proclaimed that each contained a hundred such bills.

"The first contribution," Doctor Satan said. "From William H. Sterling, the philanthropic manufacturer of automobiles. One million dollars."

The young man stared at the heap of currency with glistening eyes. A fortune, in such small compass that it could be concealed under a man's clothes!

But now, at the same time, he seemed suddenly to sense the mockery of Doctor Satan's geniality, and of his apparent frankness in disclosing his affairs. Color drained from his face. And more drained

from it at Doctor Satan's next words.

"You know a great deal about me, don't you, Monroe?"

Monroe swallowed painfully, then straightened his shoulders in his former frightened defiance.

"Yes," he said, a bit too loudly. "I know a lot. I know your real name—a family name familiar to everyone in the United States. I know your philosophy of life: how you, an enormously wealthy man, tired of all the thrills that money can buy, have turned to crime. I know you as a cold-blooded monster who, under the masquerade of Doctor Satan, intends to make your crimes pay as part of your lawless game. I know how you have studied the occult and the scientific, in preparation for this debut. And now I know how you control two of your murder tools—the blue flame and the tree of death."

Doctor Satan's eyes bored into Monroe's till the younger man gripped the edge of the metal table for support.

"Yes, you know a lot, Monroe," he almost crooned. "More than anyone else living. You wouldn't think of betraying me, would you?"

"Not if you treat me fairly, Doctor Satan," faltered Monroe. "But if you try to double-cross me, you are lost. In a safe deposit box which is to be opened by my lawyer in case an 'accident' happens to me there is a full account of yourself——"

His voice trailed off into a frightened squeak at the look in Doctor Satan's coal-black eyes. The red-clad figure appeared to loom taller and taller, till it almost filled the room. And now all the defiance was gone from Monroe's posture, leaving only the fright.

"What are you—going to do?" he panted. "What——"

Again his voice trailed off. But this

time it ended in a thickness like that of beginning sleep.

Doctor Satan's eyes, glittering, ruthless, held Monroe's eyes. Doctor Satan's hand passed slowly before Monroe's face. The monkey-like man and the legless giant watched from the wall.

"You are asleep." Doctor Satan's voice sounded somnolently in the silent, windowless room.

"I am asleep," breathed Monroe, wide, glassy eyes fixed on the red mask.

"You will tell me all you know and all you hope to do."

"I will tell you all I know and all I hope to do."

"What were your plans concerning me?"

FOR a second Monroe's still features twisted, as though even in hypnosis his will fought to avoid answering that question. Then his lips moved mechanically.

"I was going to inform the police how to find you when you collected your next looted million. Then I was going to take the money you got from Sterling, and the seeds of the death tree and the chemicals for the blue flame, and collect more money myself."

"It is enough," said Doctor Satan, still in that almost gentle voice.

The monkey-like man and the legless giant looked at each other. Doctor Satan had pronounced a death sentence.

Doctor Satan spoke to them, eyes never leaving Monroe's face.

"Girse. Bostiff."

The two moved toward Monroe. The monkey-like man known as Girse hopped like a deformed ape. Bostiff hitched his giant torso over the floor with his thick arms, using his calloused knuckles as feet.

"The iron box, Bostiff."

Bostiff hitched his way to one wall, pushed back the sable drapes and drew

from a three-foot niche a coffin-like box that gleamed dully in the red light.

Doctor Satan's hand went out. He plucked three hairs from Monroe's blond head. He laid the hairs on a small pile of the yellowish powder on the metal table.

"You will lie down in the box, Monroe," he droned.

The blond young man walked with jerky steps to the metal coffin and lay down in it.

"The lid, Bostiff."

Picking up the massive iron cover of the coffin as easily as though it were a pot lid, the legless giant put it on the box. Then, without further orders, he dragged the metal coffin back to its niche in the wall and slid it home in the surrounding stonework.

Doctor Satan picked up a pinch of the yellowish powder and crumbled it sharply in his fingers. The tiny heap on the table burst into blue flame. The three blond hairs writhed and were consumed. . . .

The end of the metal coffin, showing from the niche, was suddenly red-hot, then glowing with white incandescence. Slowly it faded to deep, hot red in color, and back to black.

Girse and Bostiff watched stolidly. If ever an investigator opened that box nothing would be found but a pinch of ashes. A pinch of ashes that had been a man, planning to betray the master.

Doctor Satan's voice sounded, harshly, calmly.

"Danger has been eliminated from within. Now no one on earth knows my real identity. It remains only to eliminate danger from without."

Bostiff spoke, his dull eyes fixed on Doctor Satan's mask.

"The danger from without, master?"

Doctor Satan's eyes glowed green.

"Yes. The danger that lies in Ascott

Keane." The name crackled out in the still room. "There is the only danger I recognize. The police? Ludicrous! Private detectives? Bodyguards hired by wealthy victims? They are children! But in Ascott Keane lies a threat."

The red-gloved hand touched the light switch. Slowly the red bulbs faded out, bathing the room in a lowering darkness like that of a lurid, rapid sunset.

"But the threat of Ascott Keane is to be removed at once. Walstead saw him. Walstead showed him the note. Keane will act on that knowledge—and with that action he will be trapped."

Pure darkness held the windowless room. In the darkness Doctor Satan's voice concluded.

"Ascott Keane shall die."

Then there was silence, broken only by the sound of breathing. The breathing of two men: Girse and Bostiff.

Doctor Satan was gone.

4. *Satan's Trap*

IN FRONT of a triple mirror before which was a bench holding hundreds of tiny pots and jars, Ascott Keane worked deftly. His fingers flew from jar to features, pot to face. And as they flew his face subtly altered. Already it was no longer the face of Keane. It was a countenance which to Beatrice Dale was vaguely familiar—though she could not yet name it.

"That hideous death shrub!" she said. "I can't yet see how it is used by Doctor Satan."

"You've seen Indian fakirs make a tree grow in a pot, haven't you?" said Keane. "Usually it's a miniature orange tree. They make it grow before your eyes, and pick an orange from it. Well, Doctor Satan's wizardry is something like that; only he utilizes a form of thorn-bush that flowers in human substance instead of earth."

He reshaped his lips with a collodeon-like red lacquer, and the girl cried aloud. Keane's face was that of Walstead. Line for line it was Walstead's slightly puffy countenance that was reflected in the mirror. A close friend of the dead millionaire would have been deceived.

"What are you planning to do, Ascott?" asked Beatrice.

Keane began pinning thin pads to the lining of his coat to give his lean strong body the bulk of Walstead's puffy body.

"Doctor Satan said in his note to Walstead to put the money in a trash can at Broadway and Seventy-Sixth Street. Very well, I'm going to take Walstead's place. Made up as him, I'll drop a package in that can—and wait to see who picks it up."

Beatrice shook her beautiful, coppery brown head.

"Walstead's death isn't out in the papers yet. But surely Doctor Satan must know that the man is dead. Or are you hoping to fool him?"

"Doctor Satan," said Keane dryly, "hardly has to wait to get his information from the newspapers."

"Then he'll know that the man who looks like Walstead, and who drops the package in the trash can, can't possibly be Walstead."

"That's right," said Keane, drawing on the padded coat and scrutinizing himself in the triple mirrors.

"But he'll guess it's you! And he'll almost certainly try to kill you!"

"That's what I'm hoping," said Keane, putting on a hat of the type worn by Walstead.

"But Ascott——"

"It's like this," said Keane. "Doctor Satan hasn't met me yet. I think he'll underestimate me. So I am rather stupidly disguising myself as Walstead and going to the place where Walstead was to have gone, in the hope that Doctor Satan

will trap me. In that event"—his jaw squared—"I think he'll be sorry."

He stepped away from the mirrors. And it was not Keane who moved—it was Walstead!

In an antique Italian cabinet there was an extra wide drawer. Keane pulled this out. In it was a rolled papyrus that closely resembled the papyrus that had been spread wide in Doctor Satan's black room. Beside the papyrus was a little stone jar.

Keane opened the jar and took from it a bit of greenish paste, which he touched to his forehead, the soles of his shoes, and the palms of his hands.

"Marvelous beings, the ancient Egyptians," he said softly. "I recognized the blue fire that burned my chair—and would have consumed me if I'd been in it. The fire burned in many a temple along the Nile. But what the Egyptian wizards concocted they usually made fruitless by further research."

Beatrice caught his arm, her eyes fearful.

Keane pressed her hand. "Don't worry about me, my dear. I'll be back soon, and I think I'll be back with news that this Doctor Satan, new peril to a city as yet ignorant of his existence, has passed on to the hell he should have been sent to long ago."

He walked to the door, moving as Walstead had moved. His eyes met the girl's deep blue ones. Then he was gone, to be trapped by the creature who had brought to a new science of criminology all the knowledge of ancient magic and modern research.

NINE o'clock! Upper Broadway was crowded with night shoppers and movie-goers. Among the crowds near Seventy-Sixth Street moved a tall, slightly paunchy man who kept his face shadowed by the brim of his hat, a face that many in the city

would have sworn was that of a ghost—of the dead Walstead.

On the northeast corner of Broadway and Seventy-Sixth a trash can showed. The man disguised as Walstead crossed to the can.

Under his arm was a small parcel done up in newspaper. He dropped the parcel in the can, and walked on. Without a backward glance he rounded the next corner.

But once around the corner, Keane stopped and went back, moving like a shadow.

He peered through the double angle of a corner plate-glass window at the trash can. And he saw a sinister miracle.

The can was of wire, with interstices in its walls through which the contents could be seen. When Keane had tossed the package into it, the can had been half full of refuse. Now the old papers and odds and ends of trash seemed to be melting away, like water draining down through a hole. Lower and lower the contents sank—till finally the can was empty!

Keane shook his head a little, eyes gleaming like ice.

"Transmission of substance through empty air!" he breathed. "One of the secrets of nature no man is supposed to have unlocked! You're a terrible adversary, Doctor Satan!"

None in the crowds so close to the can had noted the way the refuse slowly disappeared from within it. But Keane had caught it all. Moreover, he had seen that the trash had disappeared first from the north side of the can, as though it were flowing in that direction, melting into thin air as it flowed.

The north side of the can. Toward him.

Keane slunk into a doorway. His quick eyes roved over the Broadway crowd. And in a moment they rested on a figure

that tensed his body as a hound's body is tensed at the scent of a fox.

A tall, shambling man, across the street from the trash container, was walking slowly toward the Seventy-Second Street subway entrance. Under his arm was held a parcel done up in newspaper.

Keane's lips thinned. Doctor Satan was making sure he saw the parcel and followed the carrier!

He stepped unobtrusively from the doorway and into the Broadway crowds, where he followed the tall, shambling figure to the subway entrance. Was the tall figure that of Doctor Satan himself? Or was it one of his helpers? Keane did not know. But he did know that he would have shot the man down in cold blood, on the chance that a diabolical career would have been nipped in the bud, had he not been fully aware that no weapon as crude as an automatic could prevail over an opponent like Doctor Satan.

THE tall figure got off the subway at a Greenwich Village station. Keane followed, a block behind.

His body was taut as a stretched tendon. He knew he was to be trapped, to be brought to a carefully devised death. He knew that Doctor Satan had, for the moment, dropped all other plans to concentrate on removing him so that he could follow his criminal career unhampered.

Could he stay unharmed in that trap till he had overcome the man? Was his intellect the equal of that which could cause solid matter to dissolve and reappear in another spot?

He was prepared for violence as he walked along the dark Village street after the tall figure. He was ready for anything from a bullet or knife in the dark to an attack and abduction by masked men springing on him from dark area-

ways. But he was not prepared for the thing that actually did happen.

At one moment he was following the tall figure. At the next the figure ahead had disappeared—and Keane was still moving forward, though he had willed his body to halt while he gazed around to see where the figure could have gone to! Moving forward, against his will, against the conscious command of his brain!

Keane strove to stop, to walk to right or left. He could not. His muscles were driven by another's will.

And now another thing happened—a thing even more frightening. He began to lose his sight.

The dark street, the partly lighted buildings lining it, the sidewalk before him, all slowly faded from his sight. But his body kept moving slowly, surely forward.

In a moment he was blind. He could see not one thing. But his feet seemed able to see. They bore him on without a stumble, raising for curbs, lowering him for gutters.

Thus with no man forcing him, apparently, blindfolded as surely as if thick cloths were tied over his eyes, Keane moved to the will of Doctor Satan, toward the trap.

He felt himself turn. Under his hand was an iron railing. He felt himself going down steps. A door creaked open in front of him. He walked on, totally blind, and heard the soft creak, and a slam, behind him.

More stairs downward. Hands outstretched to scrape along the moist walls of a passage like a low tunnel. Steps again. A clang over his head as though a stone trap-door had been battened down above him. Finally a swish of drapes, and a harsh, monotoned voice that made every nerve-end in his body twitch.

No need to speculate on the ownership

of that voice! Its vibrant arrogance and deadly coldness told him. It was the voice of Doctor Satan himself. And he was in the grim masquerader's hidden headquarters.

5. *The Two Titans*

SLOWLY Keane's eyesight returned to him, to telegraph to his mind weird, nightmare pictures.

Black-draped walls closed him in. Lounging against one wall were two men—a man with a giant's torso and no legs, and a creature with a hairy, ape-like face in which were set bright, cruel little eyes.

Across from them was a metal brazier, set on a high tripod, in which a small flame flickered. In the center of the room was a metal table, bare save for a small pinch of yellowish powder. And over this table was bending the man who had spoken—a figure that set the blood to leaping in Keane's veins as his heart thudded with sudden acceleration in his breast. A tall figure robed in red, with a red mask over the face, red gloves on the hands, and a red skull-cap from which protruded small mocking imitations of Satan's horns.

Doctor Satan turned from the metal table. His black eyes burned at Keane through the eyeholes of the red mask. The mask quivered a little as the lips behind it moved.

"Welcome, Ascott Keane," came sardonic words. "We are honored that you should have gone to such trouble to visit us in our modest lair."

Keane's face, looking, in the red glare that illuminated the room, like something cast in bronze, remained impassive. Wordlessly he watched the diabolical figure in red.

The mockery faded from Doctor Satan's voice. His harsh tone was edged with steel as he said:

"You committed suicide when you re-

solved a month ago to devote your life to destroying me. Oh, yes, I knew of the resolve the instant it was made. I have ways of knowing what is in men's minds; though I concede that you were able, shortly after that, to shield your brain from me. Tell me, Ascott Keane, what warned you of my existence?"

Keane stood straight and tall before the red-robed figure. His resemblance to Walstead faded, in spite of make-up, with the altering of his expression. He was Keane again, regardless of collodion-painted lips and padded clothes.

"A month ago," he said, "I talked with the son of a bankrupt friend of mine. The boy, a wild and not very strong character, said nothing significant. But I too can read a little of what is in men's minds. And in his I caught a glimpse of a figure in Satan's red masquerade. I got a hint of the man's background and motives: a rich man, still young, jaded with purchased thrills, with no more humanity in his heart than a snake—out to become the world's leading criminal. A man whose whimsical choice of a name, Doctor Satan, could not have been more apt in expressing the ruthlessness of his purpose. A sleek beast, playing a monstrous game. A thing to be stamped out as soon as possible."

The black eyes gleamed through the satanic mask.

"Young Monroe, you are talking about. Fortunately he did not know my identity at that time. And now no one will ever know. Monroe is no longer in a position to talk. And some papers he left behind with his lawyer have been destroyed within the hour."

Again the arrogant voice hardened.

"So you decided to be the one to annihilate me. Noble Keane! But the roles will be reversed. It is you who will be annihilated. I marked you at the start as

a man to be killed. Wealthy yourself, with a fairly analytical mind, you have entertained yourself for years by scotching crime. But your career ends, with me, Keane. It ends now, in this room."

Girse and Bostiff slowly left the wall they had been lounging against. Girse came with quick, small steps to Keane's left side. Bostiff hitched his great body, with swinging movements of his huge arms, to Keane's right side.

Keane still stayed motionless. Futile to attempt to overpower Doctor Satan physically: it could not have been done even had the gigantic Bostiff and the agile Girse not been there in the black-walled room.

The walls of the trap he had entered were strong walls; and its teeth were sharp teeth, from which there seemed no escape. But Keane's gray eyes were steadfast on the masked face of Doctor Satan and there was no weakening of resolution in the square line of his jaw.

Doctor Satan repeated an order he had given once before on that day.

"Bostiff," he said softly, "the iron box."

The legless giant hitched his way to the wall, drew back a sable drape, and pulled from the niche in the stonework the coffin-like metal box.

Doctor Satan stared at Keane with green-glinting eyes. The stare held, minute after minute. Keane's eyes slowly glazed.

"You are asleep," droned Doctor Satan at length.

"I am asleep," breathed Keane.

Girse and Bostiff stared at each other with savage expectance on their faces.

"You will do whatever I command," Doctor Satan said.

"I will do whatever you command," said Keane, like an automaton.

DOCTOR SATAN'S red-gloved hand went out toward Keane's head. He plucked three hairs and laid them over the small mound of yellowish powder on the table. Act for act, he was duplicating the scene in which a treacherous disciple had been reduced from a man to a pinch of ashes.

"Take the lid from the box, Bostiff."

The legless giant lifted the iron cover from the coffin. Within it could be seen scattered fine ash.

"Keane, lie down in the box."

The black eyes gleamed with a feral light as Ascott Keane slowly walked to the box and lowered his body into it. Keane lay there, gazing up with wide, glazed eyes.

Bostiff placed the lid back on the box.

His dull eyes went from the box to the niche in the wall.

"No," Doctor Satan answered his unspoken question, "we'll not put the box in its crypt. Leave it where it is. I want to watch this."

The red-gloved hands clenched with eloquent triumph and revenge. The red-robed figure towered in the room. Then Doctor Satan turned to the metal table.

He picked up a bit of the yellowish powder and crumbled it between powerful fingers. The tiny heap on the table burst into clear blue flame.

The eyes of Doctor Satan and his two servants turned toward the metal box in which lay Keane.

Swiftly the box glowed dull red, cherry red, white-hot. Its rays beat against the faces of the three, set the sable drapes to billowing a little.

And in that white-hot metal coffin a thing of flesh and blood was lying—or had been lying when the blue flame began to burn.

The metal box lost its fierce white glow. The heat rays beating from it faded

in intensity. Doctor Satan's red robe stirred with the deep breath he drew.

"And so ends Ascott Keane," he said vibrantly. "The one obstacle in my path. I can be a king, an emperor, now, in time."

He turned to Girse and Bostiff.

"Go. I have no more need of you."

Bostiff hitched his huge body silently toward an end wall. He drew aside a drape and opened a door. Girse followed him out of it.

ALONE, Doctor Satan went to the cabinet and drew from a drawer the ten bundles of currency containing one hundred thousand-dollar bills apiece. The bundles disappeared beneath the red robe. His hand went toward the switch that controlled the red illumination of the room.

But his finger did not touch the switch. His hand remained suspended in the air, while he watched the iron coffin. And his red-robed body was as immobile as that of a statue.

The lid of the coffin was moving.

Slowly, steadily, it raised, to slide from the box and clang against the floor.

A hand and arm appeared above the edge of the box, which was still black-hot. The hand was unharmed. The coat sleeve above it was charred a little at the cuff; that was all.

Another hand and arm appeared, and then the body of Ascott Keane from the waist up as he sat in the coffin.

Silently, rigidly, Doctor Satan glared at him. And Keane got out of the coffin and stood beside it. Wisps of smoke rose here and there from singed garments. But his flesh was not even reddened by the fierce fire, and his gray eyes bored steadily at the black eyes behind the mask.

"What the Egyptians discovered," he said softly, "they rendered fruitless by succeeding discoveries. I read the origin

of your blue flame in your first attempt on my life, Doctor Satan. And I took the precaution of using as armor some of the green paste the old priests used against the consuming fires of their enemies."

He took two slow steps toward the red-clad figure.

"You should have watched your flame, instead of the iron coffin, Doctor Satan. You would have seen then that the flame burned blue throughout. And it should have burned red if my body was devoted."

The breathing of the red-masked man sounded in the tense hush of the room. His eyes, glaring at the man who had escaped a fate that would have overwhelmed any other mortal on earth, were frightful.

"Now we are alone, Doctor Satan. You have considerably sent your men away, as I hoped you would do. We'll see if your powers are as strong as you think they are."

The glare faded from Doctor Satan's eyes, leaving them glacially cold.

"I'll not underestimate you a second time, Ascott Keane! The death shrub—the blue flame—you are armed against those. But I have other weapons."

"You'll never use them," Keane growled deep in his throat.

And then his hand shot up.

Around Doctor Satan's red-robed body a softly glowing aura suddenly formed. It was like a ball of pale yellow light which enclosed him, a lambent shell against the red rays of the room's illumination.

A snarl came from Doctor Satan's lips, sounding muffled, as though the lambent shell had actual substance and could stifle sound. He straightened, with the aura moving as his body moved.

His hands moved, weaving strange designs in the yellowed air. And slowly the aura faded a little from around him.

Tendons ridged up on the back of Keane's outstretched hand. Perspiration studded his forehead with the intensity of his effort to overwhelm the figure in red.

That aura which he had flung around the red-robed body was one of the most powerful weapons known to occultism: a concentration of the pure form of electricity known as the Life Force. Mantling a living thing as it mantled Doctor Satan, it should drain out life, leaving behind nothing but inanimate clay. Yet it was not harming this man!

SLOWLY, relentlessly, the aura continued to fade. And then Doctor Satan's hands rose and leveled toward Keane.

Strange duel between two titans—two men who probably knew more of Nature's dark secrets than any others on earth. Odd battle, with Keane, the force of morality, gradually being beaten down by the force of evil.

For now Keane's rigid arm was sinking as the yellow aura almost disappeared from around Doctor Satan. Slowly he sank to his knees, as if a great weight oppressed him. And, as though this great weight was that of some intangible sea which could suffocate as well as weigh down, he began to gasp for breath. Louder and louder his agonized breathing sounded in the room. Doctor Satan's black eyes glowed with triumph.

Keane could see nothing—could feel nothing. Yet it was as if some colorless, invisible, tremendously heavy jelly were gradually hardening around him.

The red lights grew dimmer, though Doctor Satan had not touched the switch. Keane felt that he was almost lost.

With enormous effort he brought his arms up, spreading them wide at his sides.

"Mother of God!" he whispered.

Like a living cross he was, in that position; with trunk and head the upright, and arms the horizontal bars.

"Mother of God!"

Doctor Satan's snarl was that of a beast. His eyes took on their feral green light, with a fiendish disappointment embittering their depths.

And the great, invisible sea that was beating Keane down gradually receded from around him. But as it receded, so dimmed the red lights, till the two men were in blackness.

"This time you preserve your life," Doctor Satan grated in the darkness. "Next time—you leave your life behind!"

There was a thud of sound, like a soft explosion.

"Next time," began Keane, struggling to his feet and forcing his body forward through the last traces of the deadly, unseen sea.

He stopped. He was alone in the black-walled room.

Slowly the lights came up again, as though shining ever more clearly through

a psychic, thinning fog. Keane began wrenching the black drapes from the walls.

He found a door and opened it. Ahead of him he saw a low passage with steps at the end.

He ran down the passage, up the steps. In a moment he was in the street, clutching the iron railing he had felt when he came here blinded.

Cursing softly, he looked up and down the sidewalk. There was, of course, no sign of the red-clad figure.

"Defeat," he groaned.

Doctor Satan had made good his escape. And with him had gone one million dollars, fruit of his first fantastic crime.

"Defeat!"

Keane's wide shoulders sagged, but only for a moment. Then they straightened.

The first round was Doctor Satan's. But there would be another time. And then, knowing a little more of the manner of being he was pitted against, he could fight more effectively—and win.

**Another startling encounter between Ascott
Keane and Doctor Satan will be published
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