

# Strange STORIES

VOL. II, NO. 3

CONTENTS

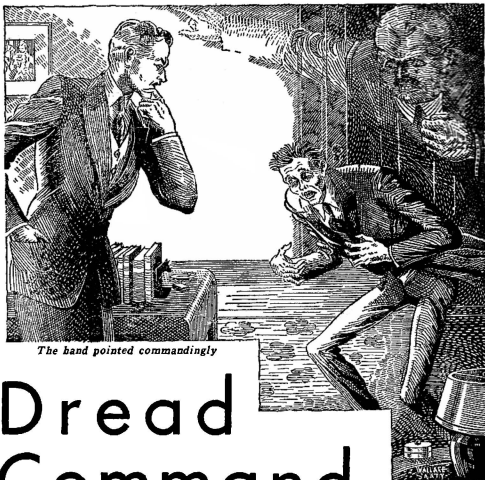
DECEMBER, 1939

<b>THE CRAWLING CORPSE</b>	<b>Eli Colter</b>	
<i>High on a Rocky Knoll, Hidden from the Eyes of Men, a House of Incredible Evil Rots in the Mire of Souls Forever Damned! [A Complete Novelet of Bizarre Sorcery]</i>		12
<b>A BOTTLE FROM COREZZI</b>	<b>Mark Schorer</b>	
<i>In Roman Dungeons, Conspirators Plot Against the Despised Borgia</i>		30
<b>THE MAN WHO LOOKED BEYOND</b>	<b>Carol Boyd</b>	
<i>None Are So Cursed as Those Who See Too Much!</i>		37
<b>VIGIL</b>	<b>Hampton Wells</b>	
<i>The Fatal Book Held a Soul-Destroying Threat Within its Pages</i>		46
<b>THE SOUL OF THE CELLO</b>	<b>Maria Moravsky</b>	
<i>Haunting Strains of Melody Weave a Strange Web of Song</i>		56
<b>FOR LOVE OF A WITCH</b>	<b>Manly Wade Wellman</b>	
<i>A Lovely Seeress Conjures Up Weird Magic to Further the Conquest of the Wilderness! [A Complete Novelet]</i>		62
<b>A GIFT FOR UNCLE HERMAN</b>	<b>August W. Derleth</b>	
<i>Ellsworth Barnes Keeps a Final Grim Tryst with Fate</i>		80
<b>THE GRIP OF DEATH</b>	<b>Robert Bloch</b>	
<i>Two Hands—and a Throat; Ten Links in a Necklace of Death</i>		85
<b>VOICES IN THE WIND</b>	<b>Robert Emerick</b>	
<i>Other Things Besides Chickens Come Home to Roost</i>		92
<b>PASSING OF ERIC HOLM</b>	<b>Will Garth</b>	
<i>A Book of Black Magic—and a Weird Thing from the Sea!</i>		101
<b>HE WHO SPOKE</b>	<b>Bernard Breslauer</b>	
<i>The Face of the Sphinx Was the Face of Richard Carey</i>		105
<b>DREAD COMMAND</b>	<b>David Bernard</b>	
<i>Fancy Mixed with Grim Fact Makes a Disastrous Brew</i>		107
<b>THE ROOM IN THE ANNEX</b>	<b>Tally Mason</b>	
<i>Voices, Dusty with the Past, Reach Across Time!</i>		116
<b>THE BLACK ARTS (A Department)</b>	<b>Lucifer</b>	120

STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second class matter November 2nd, 1936, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, 3.15; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Beach Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, West, Thrilling Mystery, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Westerns, Thrilling Love, Sky Fighters, The Lone Eagle, Everyday Adventure, G-Men, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Detective, Popular Love, Popular Western, Masked Rider Western Magazine, Startling Stories, Texas Rangers, Range Riders, Detective News Magazine, Thrilling Spy Stories, The Rio Kid Westerns, Black Book Detective Magazine

Ronald Simms Discovers that Fancy Mixed  
with Grim Fact Makes a Disastrous Brew!



*The hand pointed commandingly*

# Dread Command

By DAVID BERNARD

*Author of "The Piper From Bhutan," "Jekal's Lesson," etc.*

**T**HE man had deliberately followed me to my door.

Lurking there, in the telephone pole's shadow, his cadaverous face was directed up at my window. This ragged creature was no mere panhandler, as I had thought upon first noticing him slouching after me when I left the public library that evening. I debated the proper course to follow, annoyed, when the strange man decided for me.

He shuffled slowly across the street. The door banged downstairs. Slow, laboring feet scraped their way up the wooden stairs leading to my one-room apartment.

Fists tightening, I sidled grimly to the unlatched door as the steps halted. Possessing one hundred and seventy-five pounds of youth in good condition, I had no physical fear of the stooped, emaciated stranger. I called out for his mission.

"Mister Simms—Ronald Simms—please, I want to talk—"

He knew me! But it was the peculiar, almost uncanny pitch and hoarseness of his voice that affected me most. Speech seemed to be for him an effort made mighty by deep-laid weakness or malignancy. I inched the door open cautiously—and recoiled.

*Cadaverous* was a euphemism! His face was a sickening green; unwashed, unshaven for days; devoid of visible flesh; lifeless, save for two close-set, deep-sunken eyes lit with dark, feverish fire. Had he straightened, his scraggly pate would have brought him but a shade under my five-eleven. He could not have weighed a hundred pounds, he looked so emaciated.

"Sorry—" I eyed his shabby clothes—"I don't recall—"

"We never met." Pale lips quivered, settling into a smile's semblance. "Grool is my name, Mister Simms. Eric Grool. I know you, Ronald Simms, the author."

I smiled. The compliment—"Ronald Simms, the author"—was impressive and sardonic. I was a part-time writer. Part time because I had to have a job in order to live. I could verily paper a wall with the rejection slips two years' writing had earned for me. But *Bizarre*, the foremost magazine of weird fiction, had published two of my stories, the last of which, "The Possessed," had won me quite a bit of attention and praise.

"The library, tonight," Grool said, before I could ask how he knew my name and address. "Your name, I noticed it once before, too, on your library card." His strained voice caught with a violent cough. "I—I'm always interested in those who read books on the occult. I always wonder if maybe, like me, they're seeking help—the answer to a frightful trouble—trying, like me, to find help nobody can give—"

He paused, rubbing his forehead, then blurted: "I wander... My mind—it turns and turns—but I can't help it! He—he's doing it."

He mumbled apologetically, check-

ing his outcry. "Your name, on the card—you see, I remembered it. I couldn't forget it, since reading 'The Possessed' in October's *Bizarre*."

**I** NOTED suddenly Grool had come across the threshold while talking. He stared like a hungry animal at a pack of cigarettes on my table. A nod from me and he went for them as if they were food and he starved.

He flopped into my only easy chair, the cigarette flamed in one swift move. He inhaled until the butt glowed brightly. Reluctantly he let the incredible inhalation of smoke escape from his lungs, and then, breaking his strange monologue with frequent draws of smoke, he went on:

"When I read your story, I said to myself—Ronald Simms knows what he's talking about. Not like the doctors—the fools! Ronald Simms can help me."

Five chilling bones gripped my wrist as Grool leaned forward. "You will help me—won't you?" he cried. Astonished at the strength of that skeleton's hand, I said, "Well—just what is it? How can I help you?"

"He—he's driving me—I—" Grool seemed to be fighting tears. "I'm like him, the poor man in your story—"

A chill swept up my back. You'll recall, if you read my story, that it dealt with the ancient occult teaching that the universe is populated by beings of a material more ethereal than what we call *physical*. One of these unseen yet very real creatures employs the protagonist in my story as a tool, literally forcing into him a new and malevolent personality. I shook my head at Grool.

"Perhaps, Mr. Grool—if you saw a doctor—"

"Fools, I told you. The things I—and you—know, they laugh at! The cursed fools laugh when I tell them what he's forcing me to."

"Who is?"

Grool's feverish eyes flared even more. Like a worshiper cowering before his Nameless Unseen, he lifted his quivering arms and said huskily: "Morban—Butcher Morban."

I tried to put both contempt and

consolation in my stare. "If you read the news at all," I said crisply, "Butcher Morban got his deserved reward in the electric chair, one month ago—"

Grool interrupted wildly. "Do you think there's a thing I don't know about him?" He paused to croak in mirthless laughter. He hissed suddenly:

"From the first—the night he did his first horror—I knew. And not only because I lived with him—"

Two hands held my wrist this time; Grool leaned close, and like a long-repressed flood a ghastly story broke from his distorted lips.

The monster, Leon Morban, whose unspeakable ax murders had won him the sobriquet "Butcher," had been Grool's uncle. Ten years back, "I was still a young man," Grool went on, "I was working in Pennsylvania, earning little more than nothing. My mother and father—they died years before. I was glad to come here to work for Morban in his junk business. Maybe my trouble began when I became like a slave, but he bossed and kicked and beat me so, from the start. He and—his wife—"

"His wife?" I shuddered. "She was—"

"The Butcher's first victim."

I recalled vividly the monster's history. Leon Morban's wife was found, dismembered, bloody, in a deserted lot. The prosaic junk dealer was unsuspected. Weeping, he vowed to track down his wife's slaughterer. Only after six additional known butcheries, when he had been arrested and doomed by incontrovertible evidence, did Morban expose his true self. You who followed the trial will recall how he leered insanely in court, deeply pleased at the chance to tell how his first murder and mutilation had whetted his "inner hunger, whipping up my desire to kill, kill."

Grool shook his head, as if that could rid him of terrible memories. He half shouted: "And just as I knew, that first night—I knew it every other night. Every horrible one: the colored man, the little girl, the old doctor—and others, I tell

you, that the police still don't know!"

I shrank away. "You—you knew—and kept silent?"

"What could I do? What could I do? I knew—yet not in the sense the world means by *knowing*—I knew, I saw him kill her—his wife. I—then I woke up when he came in and began washing his hands. He beat me into unconsciousness. When the detectives came I had to tell them what he told me to tell them."

"And the other times?"

"I saw each one, each time—yet it wasn't seeing—"

"What? Your words don't make sense!"

"But it's the truth. The police—I tried to tell them, that was after the fourth one—they laughed at my 'dreams.' Yet everything I dreamed—though it wasn't dreaming, I tell you!—everything was exact with what he told at the trial."

**W**HILE Grool fumbled with match and cigarettes, I weighed the patent sincerity of the man against the pitiful incongruity of his story. I said dryly, "You were, of course, in bed all the while, each time you say you *knew* and *saw*?"

"Yes. But it was both—sleeping and waking. After a while I began to understand somewhat how I could do it."

I began to regret having let Grool go so far, but I asked: "What?"

"Why—how I could see and feel it all the way I did. The time, for example, when that Negro was—hacked. Of a sudden, there he was, coming slow, turning the corner. It was like seeing him through a telescope you're focusing—when suddenly, there! you see him. I saw him that way, the colored man."

His voice quavered as he went on. "I felt, as he came nearer and nearer, like a—a cannibal must feel—wild, starved, and for some mad reason angry at him. I felt, heard myself scream. The colored man, he tried to fight—and he was so young. I saw his face so clear; the street—even the ax, shining under the street lamp. And then—then, God save me!—his face burst—red—" Grool was sob-

bing, his voice jerking in harmony with his body.

"Yes, somehow, something made it all go on and on—swinging that ax, with all my power; swinging it up—down—" He fell limply into my supporting hands, biting his lip as if to repress what he was saying, but he spoke on:

"Then, it was like all the rest. I felt I had to get away. Had to. And I'd run, run, run. And then a terrible shock would go through me. And of a sudden, there I was, bathed in ice, my body numb, paralyzed—in bed."

His voice fell into an eerie whisper. "And next, I would hear him at the door. He'd come in—to wash his hands. I faked sleep—but every time he'd beat me."

Grool stiffened abruptly, an almost comical look overspreading his face. "Yet—I never knew where he hid the ax."

I STUDIED the haggard face and held back the uncomplimentary remark that rolled to my lips regarding Grool's mental health. I said instead, "I'm sorry, truly sorry for you, Grool—"

"They all are—sorry—so they say!" Grool cried bitterly. "But you—you can, you will—help me—"

"Help?" I murmured as he clutched my hands. "What can I do?"

"Save me!" His eyes went upward. He might have been gazing at something or someone perceptible only to his disordered mind. And then the mounting fright which quivered through his every nerve and muscle seemed to focus and find a point of egress in his voice.

"Him"—the words swept past his saliva-flecked, tremulous lips—"save me from him—from Butcher Morban!"

"He's dead. Control yourself—"

"No! No!" Shouting had to be buttressed by a violent head-shaking. "The body alone meets death; the inner man lives on. He lives, I tell you. The mind that rules me—lives! Each night I know—"

I realized suddenly that I was shouting, trying to argue this shaken,

sick creature out of his frightful belief, but he ranted on:

"In that strange time that they call dream, we meet—he and I meet—he with those horrible eyes—the wet, hungry mouth. 'Go out! Kill, kill, kill!' That's what he commands. And he tries to make me go to where he hid it. The ax! His bloody, murdering ax! I—I jump out of that sleep—and sometimes there I am, groping, groping—in the corners, the dark, cluttered places of the stable. I'm groping for it! And—God in Heaven—some night I—I'll find it. Some night—"

I got him out of my apartment—bodily. I had to. He was sobbing hysterically, on his knees, begging me to use my "knowledge" to save him from a doom he believed absolutely to be hovering like the plague all about him.

I shoved the remaining cigarettes into his pocket, and a dollar bill, which he tried feebly to refuse. But he would not go until I took his address and promised faithfully to visit him soon and do my best to help him. And when he lurched off into the night he left me with a gnawing sense of—well—guilt. Something akin to what is felt by the boaster whose pretensions are revealed in a moment of vital trial.

But the strange, and annoying, visit grew less vivid in memory as the cares of work and ambition beset me. Several nights later I returned home from work, looking forward a bit glumly to a new story for *Bizarre*—another story, excellent as it might seem to me and non-professional critics, which probably would be rejected for some unnoticed defect by *Bizarre's* perspicacious editor, Franklin Bard.

Entering my apartment, my gaze settled on the table where my mail always was placed by the landlady—and my heart sank with a sensation only a would-be-successful author can adequately appreciate. For there lay a large manuscript-size envelope, addressed in my own handwriting to me. Teeth gnashing, I lifted the manuscript from the large envelope.

A neat letter, with the letterhead

of *Bizarre*, was affixed to the story I had sweated over for fully two months and had mailed hopefully just ten days ago. "Dear Mr. Simms," the letter read:

There is good suspense in "The Great God," but the all-important eeriness of atmosphere seems inadequate. Somehow the yarn fails to convince. Sorry.

Very sincerely yours,  
Franklin Bard.

"Fails to convince!" I repeated that phrase a dozen times, stamping up and down my apartment. That, in essence, summed up Bard's reaction to the last twelve stories I had sent him. Discouragement had mounted to the insufferable point. To think that after publication of "The Possessed" I had thought my success was assured!

Then I noticed a small envelope on my table. It was a letter from Grool, maundering, begging, humbly reminding me of my overdue promise to visit him. I ripped it into shreds and stamped from my room, heading for the nearest bar.

There, under the influence of patient contemplation and highballs, the idea took root and flourished. I had, after all, sold two stories; Franklin Bard went out of his way to write me criticisms of those he rejected; the success of *Bizarre* marked its editor's wisdom. Probably I had been going too far afield from my own experience in culling plots for weird stories. This line of reasoning proved a path of swift and easy travel for my mind. Soon I left the bar, my steps directed deep into the overcrowded tenement district, following the address given me by Eric Grool.

**T**HE conglomerate mass of squalor and filth everywhere about me lent point to my thinking. Here, with more undoubtedly to come, lay the fertile ground for atmosphere—a quality my stories needed. Half-naked children, hundreds of them, were on the street, drawn by the warm night; their mothers lolled dazedly on stone steps, fire-escapes, shrieking at them. Older boys and girls danced, smoked, gambled in

noisy groups on curb and sidewalk, seemingly delighting in blocking my advance. Darker, dirtier, my surroundings grew as I neared the river. And all at once—there was the address.

Men—hopeless, sullen, unkempt, lurching from drink or disease—stared menacingly at my comparatively opulent clothes as I walked in from the sidewalk close by the waterfront, pacing toward the low garage-like structure that loomed inkily some fifty feet back there. The structure was a stable, trapped in the midst of awkward, bleak tenements; a prize of war, boastful proof of the sprawling city's conquest over rural life.

I halted before the stable's door, a spasmodic shudder riding through me—but not because of the gloomy shades, the ancient mustiness, the filthy cobwebbed panes. I recalled the scene, so much pictured in newsreel and tabloid; I was at the door of him who had brought unforgettable terror to the city, the lair of the x-slayer, Butcher Morban.

I fought down the impulse to move away, fast. I had come with a purpose important to me. I rapped briskly on the stout, frayed door.

No response, save a dismal reverberation from within. Once more—and now I heard his voice—sepulchral tones sounding from a monument to age and rot. The door creaked and clanked. Light hit my eyes. A bolt was worked out of place—and, staring stupidly at me, a corpse-face in an oil lamp's fitful rays, his bone of an arm beckoning, was Eric Grool.

I stepped in as he whimpered, "I didn't think you'd come." And as I crossed the threshold he rushed the door, heaving it shut, slamming its ponderous chain and bolt in place.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked sternly.

He gestured at himself. "I lock myself in. Oh"—he clutched my sleeve—"thank God you've come. I—I can't stand it much longer!"

I brushed free and walked down the dark chamber. Grool pointed at a heavy sliding door at the room's

far wall. "That leads to—the stable. In here," he waved at a single cot against the side wall, on which I seated myself, "I sleep—or try to." He lit a second oil lamp and turned to me.

"I've begged him—I try that now—begged him to stop. But he laughs, as if he knows that I'll soon, soon . . ."

"What?" I demanded, as he hesitated breathlessly.

"Find the ax!" He flared the end of a cigarette, drawing deeply.

**I** SHRUGGED hopelessly and commenced to take notes. Grool ranted on:

"Last night—I was conscious of a sudden that I was on Southern Road. I knew. The ice plant, the barbed fence, the old wharf. I was walking along, under the clouded full moon, all alone. I was after something, someone, but something seemed—not right, somehow. And suddenly I saw—her.

"A stranger, I guess; so young, sweet, she seemed lost. I drew back into the yard close to the ice plant. She came closer and closer. I could hear her heels clicking on the pavement. I—I tried, Mr. Simms, I tried, I tell you, to fight back that terrible feeling—that madness. But—even as I tried—I knew it was no use!

"I rushed forward all of a sudden. It—it's madness, I know, but as I did I knew I didn't have it—the ax! Everything—was right—but that. I was standing right over her. She—she screamed—God, how she screamed! She ran back and I tripped over a box. Then a whistle blew, and footsteps came running. I caught myself—and only knew that I ran and ran."

I looked up expectantly, finding myself, despite my note-taking, engrossed in Grool's vivid description. "And—"

"I ran—and as I did I kept saying to myself—just what you've said when feeling yourself waking from a horrid dream. I said: 'Thank God it was no more than a nightmare.' But"—Grool's hoarse voice became little more than exhaled breath—"then, as that icy shock pulled me

awake—I was *not* in bed. I was opening the door, the door through which you came tonight. I was coming in from the outside!"

"Wh-what?" My body went suddenly taut. Grool nodded fiercely.

"And—my—God—what if I had had it—the ax?" He sobbed softly.

I relaxed deliberately, taking time to light a smoke. I pitied this abject weakling, pitied him from the bottom of my soul. But, I rationalized as I glanced at the valuable notes his account had afforded me, the world held too much pitiable material; I had work to do.

His head snapped up, tear-filled, burning eyes on me as I arose.

"You—you're not l-leaving me?"

I hesitated. I tapped the notebook. "See—I'm keeping careful records—I have to analyze your case thoroughly."

I winced as he shook his head in that hopeless way. Perhaps, I rationalized further, this centering of faith in me was precisely what Grool needed. I urged him to that end.

"I'll be back—soon," I assured him. "You have food, money?"

He thumbed at an old vase. "The Butcher—he left money—"

An afterthought made me pause at the door. "If you have any more strange dreams—I mean," I added as Grool protested, "strange experiences, I wish you'd write them down and mail them to me—that is, if I don't see you before. Doing this, you see, will help me."

I left brusquely, welcoming the fresh outside air, my mind centered on nothing save that I had material for a story more fertile than I had ever hoped to unearth.

Dawn was not far off when I got to bed. My story was well under way. Grool and his horrendous uncle, altered but in name alone, were its protagonists. The opening scene was almost word-for-word as Grool had described that ghastly night when Morban had come home after the first crime. Motivation for the yarn was not hard. I made Grool inform on his uncle; at his trial, the uncle vowed revenge; and this revenge, from beyond the grave, became my story's

vital spark. This, I reflected sardonically as I fell into fitful sleep, made the story even more convincing than the real case of Eric Grool.

Grool followed my instruction to write to me; but the assistance my story received from his remarkably frank self-analysis was outweighed by the annoyance his pleading brought to me. A week passed, and by steady work each evening I had the story nearly finished. One night I was greatly disturbed by seeing Grool walking up the street toward my door. Luckily I reached my landlady in time; she sent him away saying I was ill.

The story, which had literally flowed from brain to script, seemed excellent on re-reading; but I felt a "punch" ending would increase its likelihood of acceptance. I hit upon using a third character, a teacher of psychology. Somewhat analogous to my own experience, Grool visits the teacher after reading the latter's article on psychic research. But (in my story) the teacher is an inconsistent person whose theoretical beliefs fade away before the skepticism induced by Grool's alleged experiences. In my story the teacher's skepticism literally backfires upon him in the end.

**A**N evening not many days later, I crossed the road to my house—there was Grool, waiting expectantly for me. I halted abruptly and must have shown my feelings in my expression. It was shocking enough to meet so unexpectedly one who has been with you in fantasy for so long; but there was the added mingled feeling of annoyance and infidelity.

He walked close to me as I fell back. He looked, though it seemed impossible, more haggard and emaciated than before. There was a quite unwonted boldness in his leer as he hissed:

"Don't say you're sorry for anything, Mr. Simms. I don't expect you to come to see me—or help me. You're busy—writing stories about the terrible inner world of the soul, using your fine mind and knowledge for your own profit. But nothing—can help me. I've found it!"

He stared almost savagely into my eyes as he said that.

Mustering my momentarily scattered energies, I snapped: "Fool! You're letting yourself fall into sheer insanity!"

"But it's so; it's true—" His voice broke; his boldness was gone like dew before a hot sun. His old whimpering self, he cried, "I woke, last night, again. There I was, up in the old loft. Somehow I had moved the ladder—climbed it—"

"Fool! Weak fool!"

"No, no, no! Weak—yes! But it's there, in there behind the white-washed wall. It's in there," he half screamed, "and I mustn't let myself fall asleep again because—"

I held him as he tottered, holding his nauseatingly thin arms. He mumbled as I reproved him, then at once he cried:

"You—you've got to do something! You said you'd help me!"

I bridled. "I don't *have* to do anything. You came to me of your own accord. I—well—you're just—crazy."

Grool's mouth went incredibly wide. He shook his head unbelievably. Appeal yielded swiftly to deep dismay in his burning eyes, then something akin to contempt, mingled with anger and resentment, succeeded it. I spun on my heel and walked to my apartment.

The next day my story was ready, shortened in re-writing to about five thousand words. I mailed it to Franklin Bard.

When a week elapsed and the large self-addressed envelope did not come back, I felt the first wave of encouragement. Stories deemed unfitted to *Bizarre* invariably were returned promptly. But similar encouragement had been mine so many times before, and in vain.

My landlady met me as I returned expectantly from work toward the second week's end. She grunted, thumbing upstairs:

"A man—I let'm into your room—"

"Didn't I tell you not to let him in?" I snapped.

"Not that fella," she answered; and a deep voice boomed from above on the landing:



"I'll do the talkin', lady."

An officious-looking individual, his wide-shouldered body framed in my doorway, eyed me with strange expectancy from beneath his low-brimmed slouch hat.

"Simms?" he rumbled, as I walked up the stairs. "My name's Naylan, Inspector Naylan."

What he added was lost on me, but the police badge my confused eyes glimpsed in his outstretched palm was sufficient.

But Naylan piled confusion higher by asking, in the same assured way he had asked my name, whether I knew Eric Grool; and adding, when I answered in the affirmative:

"Glad you take that attitude, Simms. Makes things lots easier for the two of us, Simms."

"Why—I don't understand—where is Grool?"

"In the morgue."

Naylan's tongue jutted into his cheek as I cried: "Grool—dead?"

The inspector shrugged deliberately and turned to lift a newspaper outspread on my desk. Coming home late the previous night I had scarcely glanced at the paper, leaving it on my desk. Calmly the detective rapped one ponderous fist across the front sheet.

"Interestin' readin'—heh?"

My gaze fixed on the bold headline, a scarehead I had barely noticed:

#### FIEND HUNTED IN MUTILATION OF GIRL

"Wh-why show me this?" I stared querulously at Naylan.

Again that omniscient jutting of Naylan's cheek. He answered, after I had questioned a dozen times more, and scrutinized his nails all the while he talked.

"Grool—he's been in and out of maybe eight station houses in the last month or so, sayin' somebody's been makin', forcin' him to kill—and with an ax—" He coughed and stared into my eyes. "I guess," he rapped the paper again, "we should've taken him serious."

"You mean—Grool did this?"

Naylan emitted a roar of laughter

that vanished fast. "You agree, don't you?"

He added as I shook my head dazedly, "We passed him off as a nut. Bellevue had him and said he was harmless. We get hundreds like him every year. But we tailed him as routine. We naturally found out you and him was pretty close—"

"Why bring that up? Why all this?"

Naylan dropped the newspaper and lifted up my note pad and several carbon-copy sheets from my last story. "Been readin' while waitin', Simms. Very, very interestin', heh? Bloodthirsty, too. And funny you should write about Grool—name's here, too"—he tapped the pad—"and a nice story about ax killin's—"

"That's fiction," I cut in.

I got a full minute of Naylan's tongue-in-cheek treatment, then:

"Why don't you open up your mail, Simms?"

**H**E nodded at a long, awkwardly wrapped bundle on my table. I stepped toward it as though drawn by some force unseen. Undoubtedly I was feeling hopelessly enmeshed in some dark plot far beyond me, and hopelessly afraid.

The awkward bundle was crayoned with my name and address. Naylan seemed daring me to open it. With a sudden movement I slipped off the coarse twine, ripping off the several layers of brown wrapping paper. A cardboard box—an old florist's package, I think—broke loose, and there before me on the table the *thing* lay exposed to view!

On the broken cardboard—telling mutely its terrible tale—a bloody, grisly forearm. The appendage—the hand and forearm I finally learned—of that innocent girl whose murder and mutilation had been screamed forth in the paper's lurid headlines.

I didn't faint. Naylan attended to that. And when he was fully satisfied that I wouldn't, and that I had viewed that ghastly blood-stained remnant from a hundred different perspectives, he pushed before my harrowed eyes the note that had been enclosed in the unspeakable bundle:

My dear Friend:

It will, I'm sure, please you to know that tonight I found the ax. For this I owe you my eternal thanks. Before I take my worthless life as partial atonement for what I have done (see, now I no longer will need your valuable aid!) I send you the proof you so evidently had to have.

Your pupil,  
Eric Grool.

"Stupid," Naylan's voice struck my dizzy senses like a harsh, knifing blast. "The postal men spotted this bundle no sooner'n it come through." He handed me my hat. "Now I guess you better come along with me, Simms."

I turned like one in a nightmare. At the door Naylan said:

"Here's a letter you can have." He handed me an envelope that had been on my table all the while.

I glanced at the small envelope as Naylan half dragged me through the door; and before I thrust it into my pocket I saw the neat letterhead of Bizarre in the upper corner. Irony seared like a dose of corroding acid into my very soul.

At last, after twelve successive rejections, I had put together a yarn convincing enough not to be returned!

When, hours that seemed days later, I was at long last able to meet my lawyer in the cell to which the police took me after their inquisition and routine, I learned the full gravity of my predicament. I was booked on a charge of murder—as

the "fiend of intellect." "Grool's inspiring genius," to quote the tabloid stories.

Now, the readers of this are doubtless aware, sentence has been passed; and in light of that which I have set forth above, with the inevitable furor aroused in the public and the press, I realize in my dispassionate moments that the jury's decision was unavoidable. But what I read that first night in my cell, when I opened my letter, in many respects capped all the ghastly irony and circumstance that coiled so inextricably about me. The letter from *Bizarre* read:

Dear Mr. Simms:

In your yarn, "Command to Kill," the teacher is skeptical enough to disbelieve the "obsessed" victim, yet encourages him by visits, etc. But, in your ending, he is actually jailed for complicity in the crime.

Sorry, but this and the whole tale smack of things that just don't happen. Unconvincingness spoils a very intriguing idea.

Sorry to say that in moving our offices your manuscript was somehow mislaid. It will, I'm sure, turn up soon, and we'll mail it along.

Sincerely yours,  
Franklin Bard.

My lawyer, whose ingenuity and tireless pleading altered the charge to second degree murder, assures me that when popular passion cools the governor undoubtedly will pardon me before I serve out my twenty-year sentence.