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Flesh for the Devil's Piper

By Wayne Rogers

Below the dank waters of Dead Man's Pond the long-dead body of Obie Greene sent his weird, unearthly love-call to the girls of that new community—and they rushed to him, slaying even the husbands they loved to enjoy for one brief dying moment, the ecstasy of his watery caresses!



*A feature
length novel of
stark, eerie menace!*

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man's Pond

THE late afternoon sky was overcast, after a day of intermittent drizzling; one of those mid-May rainy days that rob the Spring of all its bright freshness, all its gay promise.

Howard Wilson and his wife were moving—moving to the country—to a real estate development that was still chiefly a matter of staked out lots and optimistic street signposts. They gazed wistfully as the moving van started back to New York—and left them stranded in a wilderness of misplaced furniture and piled up crates and barrels.

Connie sighed as she surveyed the hopeless confusion that extended through every room of the little bungalow. For a moment she had not the ambition to start unpacking. Instead, she walked out onto the porch and looked out over the

artificially created lake, less than a hundred yards away, that was the center and outstanding attraction of the Sunrise Lake development.

But now the man-made lake was desolate. The water looked drab and cold, the shoreline wet and dismal. All the homey beauty of the lake and mountain setting that had so attracted the Wilsons was lost in the chilly dampness.

The official opening of the development was scheduled for the next day, when Sunrise Lake was to be inaugurated with elaborate ceremonies and a gala reception in the new community clubhouse, but today the place looked like a summer resort after the close of its season. Most of the scattered houses were unoccupied, and an aura of empty loneliness hung over the colony.

Connie shivered, and Howard's arm went around her slim waist in unspoken understanding.

"The weather has gotten into me," she apologized, as her fingers closed over

his hand. "Not a very auspicious day to be moving into our new home, is it, darling? I thought everything was going to be so bright and cheerful—and now even the lake is dreary and depressing."

Her gaze, roaming over the dull surface of the water, came to rest on a misty cloud that hovered dankly over the center of it; a cloud that was heavier than the greyish vapors that rose like wisps of steam from the surrounding hills.

"Isn't that strange," she spoke almost to herself; "that cloud of mist—it looks almost like a human figure emerging from the water."

"Maybe he's the Sunrise Lake reception committee!" Howard tried to banter away his low spirits. "You certainly have an imagination, honey."

"'Taint imagination—that *is* a human figure; leastways it has the *shape* of a human figure," a nasal, high-pitched voice corrected him. "That's Obie Greene. Folks thought he'd be drowned out when they buried Dead Man's Pond under that lake, but he comes to the top just the same."

Not until then did Howard realize that he and Connie were not alone. Old Dillon, the caretaker of the development, who had come down from the office to help them get straightened out, was standing at the foot of the porch steps, his gaze following theirs.

The Wilsons were familiar with the legend of Dead Man's Pond and had laughed at the quaint country superstition, but there was no humor in Dillon's long, bony face. His grey head nodded sagely as his faded eyes rested on the misty form—that now *did* have the general appearance of a human figure half-way out of the water!

"That's Obie all right," he muttered. "I seen him plenty times and nearly every time there's been trouble. Like the time Cliff Mason's young wife was

drowned in the pond—I seen him two-three days before that . . ."

The site of Sunrise Lake, Howard knew, had originally been a small pond, locally called Dead Man's Pond, because of a legendary drowning in it some fifty years past. At that time, the story ran, Obie Greene, an eccentric who was supposed to be endowed with supernatural powers, lived in a cabin on the site of the present development. He lived alone but lured other men's wives to his cabin at will, merely by playing a weird, seductive tune on his long pipe.

Young married women were especially susceptible to his piping, but Obie overreached himself when he used his lure on the young bride of one Dan Pelley. Pelley organized the menfolk of the countryside and they closed in on Greene, trapped him near his cabin and had almost caught him when he walked into the pond and was never heard of again. Efforts to recover his body had failed, and the pond acquired the reputation of being bottomless.

That was the end of Obie Greene—but thereafter a curious, man-shaped mist often formed over the pond and seemed to walk on the water; and at such times, old-timers maintained they caught the eerie wail of Obie's pipe. . . .

DEAD MAN'S POND was now lost in the lake formed by damming the stream that fed it at a steep canyon on the edge of the development. The Sunrise Lake promoters had tried to soft-pedal the legend—but today it clung in the minds of the Wilsons. From time to time, as he strove to get the house into some sort of order, Howard found himself mulling over the old man's words—and twice when he looked up suddenly he caught Connie absently staring out of the window toward the misty formation that was still visible above the water.

Unaccountably he shivered.

To shake off the gloom that enveloped them, he started a fire on the open hearth. That helped. The leaping flames spread a cheery glow about the living room—and darkened the vista beyond the windows so that the lake surface was no longer visible. But their persistent dejection stayed with them, even after the last of the rain had stopped and a feeble moon arose to fight its way through the clouds.

Sitting in front of the fire, wearied by the day's unaccustomed labor, they faced each other. Connie's pretty face was sober, thoughtful, and when Howard looked into her dark blue eyes he glimpsed the uneasiness that lurked in their depths.

"I am going to tell Dad to keep that old man away from here," she announced suddenly. "I don't like him. He gives me the creeps with his spooky stories—and the way he looks at me. Just as if he knows—just as if to tell me that his ghost is sure to get me. I think—"

Her voice stopped abruptly, and her eyes rounded until they seemed to be twice their normal size. In the stillness that settled like a pall over the room he heard the sounds that had caught her sharp ears—and a chill ran slowly down his spine.

A weird, four-note melody that must be coming from a high-pitched pipe! In the silence that followed the last fading note he was sure that the sound must have been only in his imagination—but there it was again; unmistakable this time!

Quickly he got to his feet and tiptoed furtively to the window. For a moment there was no sign of life. Then he caught sight of a figure moving in the dim light—a white figure that was just leaving the steps of a large bungalow near the center of the colony.

That house was the new home of Mona

whose residence in the development the promoters hoped to use for publicity purposes. The figure was Mona herself!

HOWARD stared incredulously. She was walking slowly, walking straight toward the lake—and she was undressing as she went! One by one, her garments dropped to the ground, until she was wearing only a flimsy chemise that did little to conceal her voluptuous figure as she reached the water's edge. Her shapely legs, that had been hailed as the most beautiful in Hollywood, were naked; her full breasts were almost completely revealed above the low-topped chemise—and her fingers were fumbling with a shoulder strap, slipping it down.

She seemed intent on taking a naked bath in the moonlight!

But just as she stepped into the water a flash of light suddenly illuminated her fully. Howard turned away in disgust.

"A publicity stunt!" he snorted. "Might have known that her press agent would be up to some—"

Something made him stop and stare—something about the way she strode into the water; as if she were mesmerized. It was up to her thighs, her waist, had nearly reached her breasts—when suddenly she screamed wildly and threw her hands above her head. She was battling desperately to get back to the shore, while screams of terror pealed from her throat.

Despite her struggles, she was going in deeper and deeper—until suddenly her head disappeared beneath the water!

The wet gurgle of her last strangled scream was ringing in Howard's ears as he cleared the bungalow steps in a single bound and raced to the shore—but when he reached the water's edge the surface of the lake was unruffled. There was not a sign of Mona Vale—except her filmy chemise that floated a short distance

By then half a dozen others had arrived—old Dillon, a contractor named Crump, several property owners and salesmen Howard did not know. Foremost among them was Lee Reinhart, Mona Vale's press agent. His usually florid face was a pasty white, and he ran his long fingers through his bushy hair like a stage madman, tore nervously at his tie.

"Do something! Do something!" he beseeched wildly. "She's in there! She's in the lake! I saw her go down—and she didn't come up again! Don't stand there—my God, *do* something!"

But what was there to do? Nothing but stand there and gape helplessly at the placid surface, until Crump stepped into the water and swam out well to the middle. Even that gesture was useless, for he could see nothing in the dark water.

"Her body wouldn't stay down; it would come to the surface if she drowned," he argued when he waded out and stood on the shore, shaking himself like a dog to get the water out of his close-cropped beard and his dripping clothes. "She must've gotten out somehow."

"We could drag the lake or have it drained," someone suggested.

"But what use would that be?" another argued. "She'd be dead, even if we did find her."

It was Dillon who put a sudden quietus on them.

"You won't find her no matter how much you drag. Tain't no use doing nothing. She's gone down to Obie Greene at the bottom of Dead Man's Pond—and Obie don't never give up them he takes. You won't find her no more than any of the other girls that went down in that pond was found."

With a shrug of his shoulders he turned away—and behind him he left a nameless dread that reached out and

fastened upon his hearers like the clammy, grasping tentacles of a devil-fish. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Quiet—At Any Cost

CONNIE was at Howard Wilson's side as he and Reinhart led the way to the bungalow that served as the office of the Sunrise Lake Development Company. Her father, John Eastman, was one of the partners who had launched the project. The other was Emil Stahl. Both were busily working on final preparations for the opening day activities when Reinhart bolted ahead of the others, thrust the door open, and burst in upon them.

"Mona Vale—she's gone! She's in the lake—dead; do you hear?" he panted. "We've got to do something! Get the police! Blow up the dam and drain the lake! *Do* something, I tell you!"

With difficulty Eastman managed to calm him and gradually got an intelligible account of what had happened. A big man, with a large, full face and an impressive shock of grey hair, he sat back in his chair and seemed to diminish visibly; seemed to sink into himself. His cheeks became pale, and his forehead netted in lines of worry.

But Emil Stahl's reaction to the news was quite different. He was a small, wiry man of about fifty, with sharp grey eyes and thin features. He sat silently, holding himself in check until Reinhart was finished—and then he exploded.

"Sabotage—that's what it is!" he snapped. "This thing happening the night before we open—it's clear enough. Someone is working to ruin the development." His eyes swung to Eastman and bored into his partner with undisguised suspicion. "I haven't forgotten what happened to Crawford Hills Estates—and I'm going to be damned sure that noth-

ing of that sort happens at Sunrise Lake!"

Howard saw the blood drain out of his father-in-law's face, saw his jaws lock as if to hold back the anger aroused as he heard that thinly veiled accusation. . . .

Crawford Hills Estates had been John Eastman's last development enterprise, previous to Sunrise Lake. Three years ago he had launched it with two partners, Sam Taylor and Martin Fitch, but the project had ended in disaster when Taylor and Fitch scuttled the organization and ran off with all the cash, leaving Eastman to hold the bag. The absconders had fled to Europe, and on the way across Fitch had jumped overboard. Nothing more had been heard from Taylor, but Eastman had gathered together what assets remained and finally had managed to salvage the wrecked development fairly successfully.

Howard Wilson had been called in as the attorney for the reorganization, and it was this fortunate circumstance that resulted in his meeting Connie. . . .

"I'm afraid you're right, Emil," Eastman admitted, as soon as he could control his voice. "Someone evidently is trying to ruin us with adverse publicity before we get started. That's why we must keep this thing quiet, no matter how we do it."

"Keep it quiet—when Mona Vale was dragged to the bottom of that lake!" Reinhart shouted. "That was murder. I want the police—and I'm going to call them!"

"Just a moment, Reinhart," Howard intervened as he started to reach for the telephone. "How is it you were on hand so promptly when Mona Vale was drowned? What was that burst of light that illuminated her just as she stepped into the water? Wasn't that a flashlight bulb?"

"Yes," the press agent admitted reluc-

tantly, "I set off the bulb to snap her. It would have been a swell publicity stunt—movie star vamped by a ghost that comes up from the bottom of a lake—the papers would have eaten it up."

"And we particularly wanted no mention of that ghost yarn," Emil Stahl reminded acidly.

"But she was only supposed to go into the water up to her waist," Reinhart went on as if he had not heard. "Something went wrong—she *couldn't* come back! I was close enough to see what happened—and I saw something reach up and take hold of her—I swear it! Something misty-looking that pulled her down under the surface while she screamed and struggled. I want the police called!"

"That ghost story is poppycock!" Emil Stahl spat. "This is more of your damned trick publicity, Reinhart. Mona Vale is around here somewhere—and we're not going to report her disappearance—not until after this week-end, at least."

He had gotten up from his seat and confronted Reinhart. Chest to chest, they glared at each other, on the verge of blows. It was Thomas Bartell, the general contractor who had built the development, and Ed Crump, one of the sub-contractors, who stepped in and separated them.

"You're worked up, Reinhart," Bartell pacified. "Take it easy for a while. Miss Vale must be somewhere around the property. We don't want the police in here now. We'll organize searching parties and start looking for her. Then, if we don't find her—"

The press agent's tension relaxed. The anger faded from his face and he backed away. Apparently he acquiesced—but suddenly he sprang clear and darted to Eastman's desk. One hand snatched the telephone from its cradle and clapped it to his-ear. while with the other he

grabbed a bill-spike, a formidable steel rod with a pointed end, and held it in front of him threateningly to keep the others at a distance.

"Police! Give me the police—quick!" he barked into the receiver. "The police! The police!"

And then his face fell, slowly, incredulously. His eyes turned to the others in puzzlement that rapidly changed to terror.

"No answer," he said dully, as his hand replaced the instrument in slow motion. "Line's dead."

UTTER silence followed that announcement. The line was dead . . . cut! That answer flashed into every mind, gleamed in every eye as they turned to one another—and then the silence was broken by a noise that froze them where they stood.

The sound of stealthy footsteps on the bungalow porch!

Howard Wilson and Bartell reached the door together and sprang out with the others at their heels. The porch was empty, and at first glance there seemed to be no sign of an eavesdropper—until Howard quickly warned the rest back from where a trail of wet footprints led from the steps to one of the windows. Footprints that were shapeless oval smudges of wetness, fully fifteen inches long!

All around the footprints was a trail of drops and splashes—as if the dripping wet intruder had just stepped out of the lake!

John Eastman was the first to recover his wits. Quickly he divided the men into parties and sent them in different directions, to search the shore of the lake and the surrounding territory. Party by party they returned after hours of fruitless search—and none had seen the intruder or found a trace of anything suspicious.

"It's just as if he *did* go back into the lake!" Connie whispered, as she clung to Howard's arm. "But that—that *can't* be!"

Lee Reinhart was among the last to return to the office, and now he could no longer be mollified.

"There's something mighty queer going on!" he flared. "I call it murder—and you're all guilty of trying to conceal it from the police. I'm not going to have any part of that. I'm going to notify the authorities—and you needn't try to stop me!"

Emil Stahl followed him as he stamped out on to the porch, still arguing, trying to persuade him to wait; but it was obvious that the promoter's pleas would be of no avail. A few minutes later he came back, crestfallen.

"No use," he answered his partner's unspoken question. "He would not listen. He'll have state troopers and reporters swarming all over the place before morning—and then we might as well shut up shop."

There was not much else to be said. Deep gloom and vague apprehension gripped them all as the conference broke up and left John Eastman to his unhappy meditation. Connie and Howard were last to leave the office, and as they walked back to their bungalow their minds were filled with the strange troubles of the night.

"Poor Dad," Connie worried aloud. "He's staking everything on Sunrise Lake. If things go wrong here, he'll be wiped out completely—" A shiver ran through her and she clutched Howard's arm more tightly as her eyes scanned the dim surface of the lake. "It looks so cold," she half-whispered; "such an awful way to die—"

And the dread voice of Death itself seemed at that moment to echo her words. Suddenly a blood-chilling howl ululated eerily through the stillness—a

man's voice that was twisted into knots of agony before it snapped off with appalling abruptness!

Transfixed, they stood in their doorway, momentarily unable to move a muscle. Peering out into the semi-darkness, Howard thought he saw a dark figure near Mona Vale's bungalow—a figure that darted furtively toward a patch of bushes.

"Inside—quick!" he snapped, as he urged Connie through the door. "Lock yourself in. I'll be right back."

Then he was down the steps, racing toward the spot where the half-glimpsed skulker had disappeared. A man's body was stretched out on the ground.

The hair at the nape of Howard's neck seemed to stand up on end as he stooped over that still figure—and then chill horror laid icy hands upon him. The inert figure was Lee Reinhart—although his blood-covered face was almost unrecognizable. His head had been battered in like a crushed eggshell!

Momentarily stupefied, Howard crouched over that gory sight—then something came smashing down out of the darkness, something that crashed down on his skull—and loosed a deluge of enveloping blackness upon him, and

his own body dropped down on top of Reinhart's. . . .

It was Connie who brought him back to his senses—Connie's sobs in his ears and the frantic ministrations of her soft hands as she strove to restore him. Only Connie—for there was nobody else around; no evidence of whoever it was that had clubbed him over the head—and no sign of Lee Reinhart's body!

Dazedly Howard got to his knees and stared down at the ground where, he was certain, the press agent had been lying. It was empty—even the bloody pool in which his battered head had lain was gone, sanded over so completely that no trace of it remained. Connie had not seen it—and when Howard stared down at the smooth sand he wondered whether he actually had seen it himself, or whether the corpse was a figment of imagination!

CHAPTER THREE

Nightmare Hours

LEE REINHART murdered and then whisked away into nowhere, Mona Vale swallowed up by the lake that refused to disgorge her body, the impossible eavesdropper who walked in a trail

of water that started and ended in the lake—what was the meaning in this succession of inexplicable events? What could be the answer to these astonishing disappearances?

Howard grappled with that baffling problem while chill apprehension tugged at him, and his arm instinctively went around his young wife's waist—to protect her against what?

Obie Greene. . . . But that was utter nonsense, a bugaboo tale to scare children and superstitious, half-educated countryfolk. Old Dillon believed in Obie Greene, but no intelligent man in his right senses would give serious consideration to a ghost that came up from the bottom of a lake to pipe women to their doom.

And Obie Greene would not explain what had happened to Reinhart.

John Eastman had refused to believe that anything had happened to the press agent. He had insisted that Reinhart had gone for the police; that Howard had only thought he saw a body lying on the ground and then had knocked himself out by straightening up too quickly beneath a low-branched tree. That explanation might satisfy Eastman, but Howard knew better.

No, he swore grimly as he fingered the painful welt on the back of his skull, this was no matter of spooks and it was no matter of "seeing things"; this was a case of cold-blooded, devilishly calculated murder. Someone was out to wreck the Sunrise Lake development!

Lee Reinhart, he knew, had been John Eastman's press agent in the days of the Crawford Hills Estates. That was why Eastman had contacted him and induced him to move his new client, Mona Vale, to Sunrise Lake. Was there something more to this than appeared on the surface—was there some basis for the suspicions of Emil Stahl?

Reinhart had admitted staging a press

agent stunt in direct violation of the promoters' orders. . . . And he had insisted on going for the police, to precipitate the disastrous publicity they were so anxious to avoid. . . . Perhaps *he* had been the one who was trying to wreck the development—and had been stopped before he could accomplish his purpose.

Who else would be interested in bringing ruinous publicity to the lake development? Certainly not Bartell or Crump, the contractors; the more successful the project, the more money they would make. One of the new property owners? But why should any of them want to blight the colony in which they had purchased a home?

Howard knew several of them by sight, but he was acquainted only with Ralph Shelby and his wife Nina. They were located in a bungalow farther down the shore.

At one time, before he married Nina, Shelby had thought that his wife would be Connie Eastman. Howard's advent had changed that, but the Wilsons and the Shelbys were now the best of friends. Certainly Ralph could have no reason for trying to ruin Sunrise Lake.

That left old Dillon. . . .

Howard's eyes lifted suddenly and met Connie's, as she sat across the fireplace from him—and at once he divined that her thoughts had been flowing in the same channel as his own. She was thinking of old Dillon—of the specter in the lake. . . .

Again the night had become deathly still; so still that every sound took on strange significance. Twice he was almost certain that he heard someone on the porch; and again it seemed that someone was opening one of the windows, creeping stealthily over the roof.

"We're both getting the jitters in a bad way," he said irritably, as he got to his feet. "What we need is sleep."

Silently Connie followed him to the

half-straightened bedroom. Her hands were icy and her slim body trembled as she snuggled up to him beneath the blankets, but gradually her fear diminished and her tension relaxed. She was breathing evenly, dozing off to sleep in the haven of his arm—when suddenly a shrill scream brought her bolt upright.

A terrified scream that was choked off in mid-cry! A scream that left the engulfing silence tingling with its throb of wild alarm!

A FEW moments later the stillness was broken by the sound of a slamming door, by the pound of running feet, a man's voice yelling something that was just a splash of sound in the night. Then someone was running across the Wilson porch, was rapping lustily on the door.

Howard was already out of bed and getting into his clothes when that imperative summons came from downstairs. Half-dressed, he rushed down to the door, yanked it open to find Ralph Shelby, wild-eyed and ashen-faced, standing on the porch.

"Come over to my place, Howard!" he begged—and Howard saw that his hands were shaking and wet with perspiration. "Something happened to Nina—God knows what! We've been hearing strange noises all evening. I knew that Nina's nerves were on edge, but a few minutes ago when she went upstairs, she screamed as if the devil was after her. When I ran up to the bedroom she was lying on the floor in a dead faint. Nothing seemed to be disturbed, but there were wet footprints on the floor—big, shapeless splashes that led to one of the windows."

As soon as he heard that it was Nina Shelby who had screamed, Howard had called up to Connie and told her to stay inside until he got back. Now he followed Shelby across his porch and upstairs, to where Nina lay stretched out

on the bed—and instantly he saw that the front of her dress was wet, although Ralph denied having used water to revive her.

Between them they worked over her, and in a few minutes she came back to consciousness—to a horror-haunted consciousness that filled her eyes with terror and plunged her into hysteria.

"Where is it?" she screamed. "Where is that *thing*? It was right here in the room! It caught me in its wet, steaming arms! It started to drag me toward the window!"

Gently her husband soothed and petted her, talked to her reassuringly until her composure was restored.

"I was standing there in front of my mirror," she told them then, "when suddenly I saw it in the glass. It was coming through the window. It was like a cloud of steam—and yet it was shaped like a man. A great, misty, blubbery looking creature coming toward me with outstretched arms!

"I couldn't move a muscle, couldn't even whisper, until I felt its wet arms closing around me—and then suddenly I heard my voice screaming wildly. That's all I remember—I felt those wet arms going around me—and then—"

Again the night air was abruptly riven by a shrill, terror-laden scream that left the three of them staring at each other wide-eyed, slack-jawed. That scream—it was *Connie's!*

Like a released spring Howard snapped out of the momentary coma that had gripped him and ran to the stairs, down to the lower floor and out into the night. Grisly fear spurred him on as he sprinted toward his own bungalow, a ghastly dread of what he would find there—because, like Nina's, that scream had been abruptly choked off.

With a flying leap he cleared the porch steps and bolted through the doorway into the living room. It was empty! So

was the dining room, the kitchen. But, of course, she must be upstairs. His knees were weak and quaking as he sped up the steps to the bedroom he had so recently left—and even before he flung himself through the open doorway he knew what he would find there.

The room was empty! Connie was gone!

"Connie! Connie darling!" he frantically shouted her name as he searched for her everywhere—even behind chairs and amid piles of unpacked boxes. "Connie—where are you? Connie—for God's sake answer me!"

Only silence answered him—until he ran through the kitchen and opened the back door. There Connie lay, on the floor of the little back porch—a pathetically crumpled heap that sent his heart up into his throat as he dropped to his knees beside her.

Thank God, she seemed to be all right! His anxiously probing fingers found that her heart was still beating, that she was breathing—and discovered at the same time that the front of her negligée was wet!

"HOWARD—oh, Howard, you got here!" she moaned, as he bathed her face with cold water and brought her back to consciousness. "That awful creature—it was terrible! Its arms closed around me—and then I must have fainted."

"But what were you doing on the back porch?" Howard questioned, as he held her close to him.

"I was afraid for you," she confessed penitently. "I went out to the front porch and couldn't see you, and then I tried the back—but the moment I stepped out there something rose from the darkness. A ghastly thing that was like a cloud of steam. I walked straight into its arms. I felt that awful wetness envelop me, and then everything went black."

Howard's scalp prickled as he listened, as he envisioned the steamy arms of that unholy lake creature closing around Connie's soft body—and a great fear welled up within him; an ancestral terror that sent an icy current trickling down his spine. Like his caveman forebears, he drew the woman he loved closer into the protection of his arm and stared out into the suddenly forbidding night, his narrowed eyes probing for the dread menace that hovered in the darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Call Of The Pipe

NINA and Connie, both attacked within ten minutes—attacked by an incredible creature that apparently had done them no harm beyond the fright of its sudden appearance. What could that mean? Howard racked his brain for a convincing, even a plausible, answer—and he could find none. None but a wildly fantastic ghost story that quavered from the lips of a simple old man. . . .

But the thought of old Dillon stirred a memory out of his subconscious mind. As he had come racing from Shelby's bungalow to his own, he had noticed a figure darting away from his porch—a hardly distinguishable form that vaguely resembled the old caretaker.

Howard grimly resolved to interview the old fellow in the morning. But for the rest of the night he would not dare leave that house, would not dare let Connie out of his sight.

She was becoming restless, he noticed as he watched her covertly. She complained of the heat—in a house that already was cooling off with the raw chill of the night; and when they got into bed she tossed off most of the blankets—and still found no comfort.

Worried, he felt her cheeks and her forehead. They did not seem to be too

warm—and yet they were filmed with perspiration!

With that discovery his uneasiness mounted. For what seemed hours he lay awake, watching her toss, resolutely driving off the drowsiness that weighted his eyelids. He must stay awake until morning—he must stay awake until daylight brought an end to this lurking peril—he must stay awake. . . .

But fatigue won. His tired eyes closed and he slept—slept until a wild alarm clamored in his brain and snapped his eyes open.

For a moment he lay there, trying to get his bearings; and then a strange sense of loneliness crept over him. Instinctively his hand reached out to the pillow beside him, the pillow where Connie's blond head should be resting—

She was gone!

Instantly his whole body was tense, quivering with fear. She was gone! But just as he was about to vault from the bed he caught himself and lay still, to stare out into the hallway. There she was, at the head of the stairs, in her negligee. She had already started down the steps—but she heard him stirring and looked back at him—and kept on going down!

"Connie!" he called sharply. "What's the matter, Connie? Where are you going?"

"Nothing is the matter," her answer came back to him. "I am only going out onto the porch—just to get a breath of fresh air."

But suddenly he knew that he did not dare to let her go. Suddenly he was afraid to let her out of his sight. She was not telling the truth; she was trying to deceive him—and if she went out there into the night, something whispered, he would never see her again!

That terrifying thought spurred him out of bed and after her. Midway down the stairs he caught up with her and

wrapped her in his arms. Despite her protests, he would not let her go, and finally his insistence won. With a half-annoyed sigh she yielded and allowed him to tuck her back between the sheets—but as he lay beside her a fresh fear tortured him.

She was ill, even though she claimed that she felt all right. Her whole body now was warm and wet with perspiration. If only they had a telephone—if only Eastman's line were not out of commission—he would summon a physician; but now there was no choice but to wait until morning.

Gradually, as he watched over her, her uneasiness abated, and then she slept. Her peaceful slumber was contagious. Twice he caught himself nodding, and the third time he did not catch himself—until a strange sound, a muted melody, brought him sharply awake.

The moment he opened his eyes he knew that he was too late. That noise—it was an eerie piping that came from the direction of the lake. The wail of Obie Greene's pipe! And the bed beside him was empty!

Leaping to his feet, he dashed downstairs. The lower floor was dark, and Connie was in none of the rooms. Nor was she on the porch when he padded out barefooted onto the cold boards—but on the ground a few yards away he spied one of her bedroom slippers!

A short distance beyond that was the other slipper—and there, caught on the branches of a low bush, was her negligee. And then he saw Connie herself. She was almost to the shore of the lake—a white, stark naked figure, with even her nightgown discarded!

She was going to Obie Greene!

"Connie!" he shouted her name frantically as he sprinted after her. "Stop, Connie! Wait—"

But she did not seem to hear him. She had reached the edge of the water.

and now she was stepping into it—was striding forward as if she were in a daze; as if she were charmed by that hellish piping that seemed to come out of the lake itself!

It was less than a hundred yards to the water's edge, but he realized with sickening certainty that he would be too late. Connie was out past knee-depth. The water was half-way up her lithe thighs, reaching her waist. Connie, who had always inched in timidly when bathing, was striding out into the lake without hesitation. Before he could plunge in after her, he saw the dark water lap against her full white breasts, saw it creep over them.

"Connie!" he packed all of his anguish in a last despairing appeal—and his cry was echoed by a terrified scream.

She had turned around and was trying to fight her way back to the shore, but something held her back. Something that was no more than a grey mist on the water. It closed over her and dragged her down, strangled her despairing scream before it was half-voiced.

That much Howard saw as he threw himself into the water and put every ounce of his strength into the strokes that carried him toward the center of the dark lake. He saw her frightened face turn to him for a split-second, saw it disappear beneath the surface—and then the silence of the tomb settled over Sunrise Lake. As if her vanishing had put an end to its song, the reedy pipe shrilled its last minor note as her head went under the water.

Straining every muscle for speed, he raced to the spot where she had sunk—and found that not even a ripple now disturbed the surface. Again and again he circled around it; but there was not a sound, not a sign of life. Again and again he dived, struggled through the stygian water until he reached the muddy bottom—but his questing hands found no

trace of the soft, death-chilled body he dreaded to encounter.

She was gone—gone down to Obie Greene, from whose lethal arms no woman ever returned!

HEART-SICK and tortured with an agony of despondency, Howard made his way slowly back to the shore. Listlessly he waded out and stood looking over the dimly lit water. It was still—horribly still; and over it hung a wispy haze that seemed to gloat and mock at him. A haze that seemed to writhe and twist in bestial human contortions as he watched it. . . .

There *could* be no such thing as a specter at the bottom of the lake, his rational intelligence shouted at him—but his eyes had *seen* Connie in the throes of an eldritch spell that drew her like an automaton to her doom! Connie had heard his plea; she had gone from him willingly into the steamy arms of this uncanny lake creature!

Unheeding, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Like a man in a trance he stood there until a hand closed on his shoulder.

"What happened, Wilson—more trouble? Ed Crump asked.

Howard's stricken face answered that question before it was completed. Crump stopped short and gulped in confusion.

"It's your wife, Wilson!" he divined. "I'm sorry, man—I didn't have any idea. I'll help you—but what can we do?"

"Nothing." The answer came out of the darkness, and old Dillon materialized out of nowhere. He carried Connie's nightgown, carried it as if it were a crepe ready to be tacked up on her door. "That's the way it always is—when Obie Greene blows his pipe the woman he wants goes to him, and there's no getting her back. This ain't the first time I picked up clothes like this on the shore of Dead Man's Pond—but the women

they belonged to never had no more use for them."

His voice was like a dismal knell of doom. It closed the door on all hope, consigned Connie forever to a watery grave. . . .

But Howard would not listen to him. Blindly he dashed past the old caretaker, sending him spinning out of the way. Then he rushed into the night—frantically seeking surcease from the awful agony that was tearing at his heart and eating into his brain.

CHAPTER FIVE

From The Deep

WHEN he left the shore of the lake Howard Wilson had no conscious idea of where he was going, but his footsteps led straight to the office bungalow of the Sunrise Lake development. There was a light in the windows, he noticed as he clambered up the steps; and his father-in-law was still awake, still sitting at his desk.

John Eastman was clad in a dressing gown and bedroom slippers. He sat behind his desk like one entranced—sat staring, ashen-faced, at something that lay on the broad glass top in front of him. Slowly he looked up as Howard burst in upon him—and his blood-drained cheeks turned a pastier white.

"Connie—she's gone," Howard panted

in a voice that seemed bereft of all feeling, all emotion—a dead thing that spoke without conscious direction. "She's in the lake—like Mona Vale. She's gone, do you understand? Connie's drowned. She's gone down to Obie Greene—into that hellish woman-trap. . . ."

"No—no—it isn't that," John Eastman groaned. "It is someone else—someone who is determined to ruin me."

Suddenly Howard's grief-frozen brain began to click. John Eastman was alone there in the office. He had been sleeping in one of the bedrooms behind it and must have been awakened. But where was Emil Stahl? Why wasn't he there if something had occurred that was sufficiently important to get his partner out of bed?

"Emil?" Eastman answered his question dully. "I don't know where he is. He isn't in his room. He isn't in the building; I looked for him when I found—this."

He nodded to the papers that lay on the desk before him, and Howard realized that his father-in-law was in the throes of abject terror. Those papers that seemed to fascinate him—they were a typewritten note attached to what appeared to be a deed. He picked them up and scanned them curiously.

The note was signed by Martin Fitch, Eastman's ex-partner, who had jumped to his death from a trans-Atlantic liner! A note that damned Eastman for a thief

and demanded that he sign the accompanying deed which would convey his interest in Sunrise Lake to the man he had wronged—to Martin Fitch! A transfer of property to a dead man!

"There is the answer—Martin Fitch!" Eastman groaned. "He's come back, Howard; in some ungodly way he has come back—out of the water!"

As he spoke his eyes widened, became round wells of cringing terror, and he almost choked on the words that were throttled in his throat. His petrified gaze was riveted on the window at one side of the office.

Howard whirled—and saw a man's face framed beyond the pane. A thin, clean-shaven face that glistened with the water that still ran down it in rivulets from a soaking wet felt hat. A face that was familiar. . . .

"Martin!" Eastman screamed, as he gripped the arms of his chair. "I'll sign, Martin—I'll sign!"

Trembling like a victim in the last stages of palsy, he groped for his fountain pen and the deed—but Howard knocked the pen out of his grasp and thrust the deed into his own pocket. Without waiting to argue or explain, he bolted from the office and raced across the porch; but by the time he got around to the side of the bungalow, the apparition had disappeared. Nothing remained but a pool of fresh wetness that was rapidly sinking into the ground.

There was no sign of the spectral visitor, but from beneath the bushes just beyond the water-soaked patch, a pair of trouser-clad legs projected! Howard dropped down beside them—and knew at once that he was kneeling beside a sprawled corpse. Gently he pulled it out from its partial concealment—and stared down at the dead face of Emil Stahl. A face so covered with freshly spilled blood from the battered skull that it was hardly recognizable!

That was the answer to Stahl's disappearance. . . .

Pushing the corpse back into the bushes, Howard hurried back into the office. John Eastman was still sitting there behind his desk, paralyzed with fright. He wet his lips nervously before he could force hesitating words through them.

"Did you find him, Howard?" he quavered. He'll be back—we can't keep him away."

"You're afraid of Fitch coming back—why?" Howard stung at him suddenly. "What has he got on you?"

His staccato questions drove into Eastman like bullets. The promoter sagged back in his chair like a man mortally hit. His lips worked soundlessly—and then words came in a flood; impetuous words that stumbled over one another in his anxiety to unburden himself and rest his conscience.

"**Y**OU must not think too hard of me, Howard," he begged. "I was desperate; I needed money—big money—to keep from losing everything I possessed. I *had* to have it—so I took it. I hardly knew what I was doing—but it was I who wrecked Crawford Hills Estates. I—I managed it so that the guilt would fall on Taylor and Fitch. I enmeshed them so completely that there was nothing left for them but flight; I had to do that in order to get rid of them.

"Martin Fitch was the hardest hit. He had the largest amount of capital invested in the development, and he knew that he would be ruined when it collapsed. He turned everything he could lay his hands on into money, and then he ran out. He had a wife, but he deserted her—left her for his grown son to take care of. That must have preyed on his conscience. Half-way across the ocean he jumped overboard—but now he's come back! He

was here twice tonight—still dripping wet from the water that drowned him!"

John Eastman had looted his own company, and then had framed his partners; had forced them to take to their heels and ruin their lives! No wonder he sat there cringing, his guilty soul quaking with terror!

"That was how you treated your former partners—and how about this one? How about Stahl?" Howard demanded. "Who killed him?"

"Killed him!" Eastman shouted and half-leaped from his chair.

"His body is lying in the bushes outside that window—with his head crushed in," Howard told him inexorably.

"Martin Fitch!" the terrified promoter gasped. "Fitch got him! Give me that deed, Howard—it's my only chance! Unless I sign it he will murder me! Let me have it!"

He was out of his chair and half-across his desk when Howard took the document from his pocket; but before Eastman could snatch it he tore it again and again, tore it into little pieces and tossed the handful into the waste basket.

"You're not saving your own hide!" he spat contemptuously. "This watery devil—ghost or masquerader or whatever he is—has Connie; and you're signing nothing until she is returned, understand that? If you do, I'll expose you and see that you go to prison if it's the last thing I do!"

Leaving the panic-stricken man gasping in his chair, Howard strode purposefully from the bungalow.

Martin Fitch—there was the answer he had been seeking. Fitch never had leaped into the ocean. In some way he had tricked the ship people and the authorities, and now he was here at Sunrise Lake, scheming for revenge and a chance to grab the development for himself. Reinhart must have run into him and been killed so that he could not iden-

tify him. Stahl no doubt had been murdered so that Fitch would have complete control of the property when Eastman signed it over to him.

Martin Fitch was the inhuman devil who was responsible for that performance at the lake. He was Connie's kidnaper. Howard would not believe that she was dead; Fitch had her—and the secret of her disappearance was somewhere there in the waters of Sunrise Lake. . . .

The eastern sky was greying when he reached the shore and found a hiding place beside a bath-house from which he could command a full view of the lake. Fitch, he was certain, would come back to it sooner or later—and when he did there would be a surprise awaiting him.

Minutes dragged by with agonizing slowness, but no more than a quarter of an hour had passed when he tensed, every nerve taut. His ears tingled with the reedy notes of a pipe—a weird melody that came from somewhere out on the lake!

Obie Greene was calling!

Now a fresh victim would appear. Howard waited—but nothing happened. . . . Minutes passed, and that reedy wail continued with hardly a break in the melody—but no woman came in answer to it.

Howard was just about to creep from his cover and try to work his way closer to the water's edge, when a new outburst of sound held him where he was. A woman's voice protesting shrilly. . . . A man's voice arguing, begging, commanding. . . . And then the tumbling, crashing sounds of a scuffle—overturning furniture and shattering glass!

Suddenly the door of Ralph Shelby's bungalow opened, and out darted a white figure. Nina Shelby! She was stark naked, her plump, lusciously curved body grey-white in the early dawn. Straight toward the water she strode—and after her came Ralph.

Howard heard him gasp his wife's name, caught a glimpse of his face as it was momentarily turned upward—and saw that it was streaming with blood! Shelby managed half a dozen blundering steps—and then he went down, to writhe and twitch on the ground!

For an instant Howard could only stare in startled horror—and then Nina was almost upon him. She passed within a few feet of where he crouched and did not see him—but he saw the bloody smear on her right hand and arm, saw the blood that flecked her full breast. And he saw her eyes—the eyes of a mad-woman, fixed with basilisk intensity on the water toward which she was hurrying!

Nina had killed her husband! That shocking realization stunned Howard, made him instinctively draw back as if from some loathsome creature. She had killed him in order to go to Obie Greene beneath the lake!

EAGERLY she rushed into the lake, reveling as the cold water laved her nude body. Deeper and deeper she strode—and, like the others, she did not seem to realize her danger until it was too late; did not scream until the water was about to close over her head!

But this time Howard Wilson was watching the surface of the lake like a hawk. Now he was certain that something rose out of the water and pulled her down—something that disappeared again beneath the surface. But it *must* come up again; it could not possibly stay down there in the depths of the lake!

Howard did not relax his vigilance for a single instant, and soon it was rewarded. On the far shore of the lake he discerned a faint movement. A misty vapor was arising from its edge, was disappearing among the trees that skirted the bank.

Carefully he noted that exact spot,

oriented it so that he would be able to recognize it when he reached it. Then, when the misty cloud had entirely disappeared, he cautiously scouted his way along the shore until he arrived at the tall, overhanging oak tree that was his chief marker. In a few moments he located what he sought—a watery trail that came up from the lake.

It led to a faint path through the woods. Howard could barely see the path, but the watery trail guided him. His pulses pounded as he realized that this was the way Connie must have been taken! Then she *was* still alive! He was going to her! In a few minutes he would come to grips with the kidnaping murderer. . . .

The snapping crackle of a twig warned him barely in time. The snapping of twigs and then the shuffle of footsteps!

Quickly he burrowed backward into a clump of brush and crouched there as the noises became louder. Someone was coming along the path. And then he saw the newcomer—the mist creature itself!

Howard's blood felt as if it were congealing in his veins as he stared at that weird monstrosity.

At first it seemed to be nothing but a cloud of vapor that came drifting toward him. Then, as the thing drew closer, he saw that it was a large, almost shapeless grey mass, bulbous and ungainly. Its head was nothing more than a neckless blob on top of a formless trunk. And from all of it arose a cloud of steam that surrounded it completely.

The creature was headed back toward the lake. To lure another victim with its devilish piping?

Howard did not wait to see. The instant it was past him he leaped; threw himself upon its back and grappled with it. And instantly a wave of revulsion surged through him. The skin he grasped was wet and soggy, like sponge rubber that has been soaked in water—and yet

it was not cold. It was warm—almost hot enough to burn his fingers when he jabbed them deep into it. A strange, thick hide that seemed to exude water that turned to steam as it ran down the repulsive hulk.

His fists drove into the blubbery mass, but they seemed to make no impression upon it. No matter how much force he put behind his savage blows, they were blanketed and muffled in the rubbery folds—and now the thick, shapeless arms were spreading wide to enfold him, to smother him in their steamy embrace!

Desperately he gambled on a change of tactics. He backed away as if in mortal fear of those clutching arms and suddenly he leaped straight into them, to grab at the monstrous head. Deep into the rubbery folds his fingers probed until they encountered an edge, until they slipped in under it and obtained a hold.

With all his strength he tugged, at the same instant that he climbed through the closing arms and over one of the thick shoulders. The creature's immense bulk and resultant clumsiness was its undoing. Before it could wheel around and seize him again Howard was out of reach and the rubbery folds his fingers probed unyanked backward.

It tore loose and slipped back like a cowl—and revealed beneath it a human face. Not the face of Martin Fitch, as he expected—but the frightened face of Sam Taylor, John Eastman's ex-partner who had not been heard from since the day he landed in Europe!

CHAPTER SIX

Battering Doom

HOWARD'S momentary astonishment was disastrous. Quick to take advantage of it, Taylor suddenly swung one of his ungainly arms in a swipe that caught him alongside the head, sent him down.

By the time Howard got to his feet he knew that it was too late. The blubbery figure was already at the water's edge. The hood was drawn back and fastened in place, and the steaming body walked straight forward. Some ten feet beyond the edge it seemed to hesitate for a moment; then it went on, sinking lower and lower into the water, until even its head disappeared entirely.

Howard knew that it would be suicide to follow it into the water. He would have no chance there.

But Taylor could not stay under water indefinitely. He would have to come up for air when he had exhausted the store of oxygen with which the blubbery outfit must be supplied. Before then there must be a reception committee posted along the shore of the lake to greet him!

Back to Eastman's office Howard ran in search of aid. Even his terrified father-in-law could be of some use; could at least rouse other, more effective battlers—but when he rushed into the office he stopped short and stared about him in amazement. The office was in disorder; Eastman's chair was overturned and his papers littered the floor—and he was gone!

He was still standing there in the doorway, trying to find the answer in that disorder, when a shrill scream knifed into his ears.

Connie's scream!

It brought his heart up into his throat, held him paralyzed—but he noted that the terrified cry came from the direction of the community house. When he whirled and bounded out onto the porch he was almost certain that he caught a glint of light reflecting from the glass panes as the clubhouse door closed—and then he went streaking toward it, running as he had never run in his life.

Up the steps and across the porch he bounded. The door opened when he twisted the knob, pitched him into the

big reception room—and then darkness descended upon him. His assailant must have been waiting for him just inside the door, he realized in the split-second when his skull seemed to splinter and a great white flame seared his eyes.

PROBABLY it was the bone-penetrating chill that brought Wilson back to his senses. The first thing he knew was that he was cold—cold from which he could not escape when he tried to move.

Hesitantly he opened his eyes and looked around him—and his brain reeled under the shocking realization of what had happened to him. He was buried in something that reached up to his neck!

And he was not alone. There were others with him—his father-in-law, Nina Shelby and Mona Vale! Like him, they were buried up to their necks; buried in what seemed to be the shape of a triangle. John Eastman was at its point. Howard was behind him and a bit to the left, the two women in a row still farther back. Beside Howard and to Eastman's right there was a deep hole in the ground—a hole that was waiting for another victim; and when he craned his neck he saw that there was another hole behind and a bit to one side of him.

Those holes, arranged in that one, two, three order suddenly took significance; and then he knew where he was.

In the basement of the community clubhouse! This is where Ed Crump's men had been at work laying a foundation for the bowling alleys.

He and these other helpless victims were embedded up to their chins in that clay. They were going to be buried alive!

Despite himself, Howard tried to yell as that realization came crashing into his brain—but he could only make gurgling sounds in his throat. A tight gag had been fastened between his jaws. The others had been trussed similarly; they could only stare at him with despairing

eyes and dumbly wait for their doom!

A noise at the far end of the dimly lighted basement swiveled Howard's gaze in that direction, and again he saw the ponderous apparition from the lake. It was dragging in another victim—and to his amazement he saw that the helplessly bound captive was Sam Taylor!

TAYLOR'S eyes glinted with horror. He begged desperately for the mercy he knew that he would not find. His whole body trembled as he was dumped into the hole beside Howard and the tight-packing clay was shoveled in around him.

"That's right, tremble—you bloody murderer!" a muffled voice came from the blubbery head. Howard saw that there were slits for eyes in the hood-like mask. "It's cold down there, isn't it? Just like the cold water of the Atlantic Ocean!"

With a muted chuckle, the blubbery hulk turned away and stalked out of the basement—and Howard Wilson knew that time was short. He began to fight against the ropes that bound his arms to his sides. They were tightly tied, but his struggles were loosening the clay slightly around his body. Ever so slightly, merely enough so that he could swell and contract his muscles. At that rate it would take him many hours to free himself—and he had only minutes.

Less than that—for the creature was returning!

This time Connie's white body lay helpless in the blubbery arms! She was not bound, but her strength was as nothing against her captor's. Setting her on the floor, he gripped her by one shoulder as he held her at arm's length and appraised the intimacies Connie was helpless to conceal.

The fiend drew her to him, wrapped his arm around her—but the dawn saved her when all hope seemed gone. A faint ray of light came through one of the basement windows and reminded him that

the night was spent. With a snort of irritation, he dragged her to the waiting hole and dropped her into it. . . .

"You, Eastman," he taunted, "this is to pay you off for fleecing me and making me out a treacherous crook! You, Taylor, this is for robbing me and tossing my body overboard in the middle of the Atlantic! You, Wilson, this is for using your slick law tricks to help your thieving father-in-law get away with my property!"

A chill that was far colder than the dank clay around his body ran down Howard's spine as he listened to that gloating voice and realized that the man—or the thing—inside that blubbery outfit must be Martin Fitch! Martin Fitch—who had been tossed overboard and drowned in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean!

"You, Mona Vale, you obligingly opened this little performance for me, but your exit unfortunately has to be permanent," the muffled voice went on. "And you, Mrs. Shelby—I'm sorry that you have to go with the rest; but if the doctors got a chance to examine you they would recognize the drug that I shot into your veins—and I'm afraid they would be able to trace that to me. That would not do at all—for Emil Stahl will be credited with doing away with you when his body is found in this disguise."

That tiny space beside Howard's body was widening! If the inhuman fiend would only keep on talking there might be a chance—but he was finished. With a final glance at the six heads that projected above the hard-packed clay floor, he waddled to the far end of the basement. There he picked up a wheelbarrow and trundled it to what would be the head of the bowling alley and out of it he lifted something big and black. A bowling ball!

For a moment he crouched at the end of the alley, the ball cupped in his huge,

blubbery mitt—and then it came sailing down the clay surface, straight toward Nina Shelby's head!

Howard shuddered in a paroxysm of horror as he heard the sixteen-pound missile batter her skull sickeningly—and then he wrenched to one side, just in time to avoid the black juggernaut that seemed to be coming straight for him. Only a fortunate bounce at the last moment saved him.

That diabolical game could not last long. One of the hurtling balls crushed in the side of Eastman's head. Another smashed Taylor's features into a bloody pulp. And then another came speeding over the clay—one that would be certain to crash full into Connie's sweet face.

HOWARD watched its swift approach while beads of cold sweat broke out on his brow; watched it until the last moment and then lunged his own head sidewise as far as he could stretch it! Just far enough! The ball clipped him on the side of the forehead and seemed to split his skull into pieces. His head rang like a great drum, and blinding agony tore through it—but the ball caromed to one side, and Connie was saved.

Taylor's face had lost semblance to anything human, and Eastman's head was battered and crushed like an egg-shell before the fiend ran out of ammunition.

Every second of that grueling ordeal Howard had been struggling with the ropes that held him and had been widening the mold in which his body was wedged. At last the hard-packed clay was pressed back far enough so that he could wriggle one wrist clear of the rope, could work his arm free up to the elbow—and then the huge, bulbous creature was looming over him, gathering up the balls and putting them back in the barrow.

Grimly he waited until one of the shapeless legs was right beside him—and

then he sank his teeth powerfully into it!

Like a bulldog's, his jaws clamped shut on the spongy hide, and he hung on with utter desperation. One of the big hands clapped at him viciously. His head rang with the blows, but his clenched jaws did not relax an iota. With a snort of impatience the masquerader suddenly jerked his impeded leg upward — and Howard was dragged half-way out of the hole! Sufficiently so that he could free his loosened arm and wrap it around the ponderous limb!

After that, the fellow's own struggles dragged his captive from his near-tomb. Wriggling clear of the ropes that fell away from his sides, Howard leaped upon the blubbery hulk and probed for the grip that once before had unmasked the man hiding behind it. Frantically the fellow fought him off, but now his fingers knew the secret of that hood mask and again they fastened beneath its edge.

A sharp upward tug ripped it clear and revealed the snarling face of Ed Crump, the contractor!

But Crump was not defeated by that unmasking. His eyes narrowed to bleak, deadly slits as he closed in on Howard and drove him backward. Savagely they fought — with the advantage all on Crump's side. Howard knew that it was useless to drive his fists into the blubbery torso; his only mark was Crump's head—but his fists found that again and again. He flattened the fellow's nose, half-closed one of his eyes, just missed an uppercut to the jaw that would have meant a knockout — and saw that his knuckles had ripped away Crump's beard!

Ed Crump and Martin Fitch were one! Howard stared into the snarling face and suddenly understood how that was possible. Crump was far too young a man to be the middle-aged Fitch—but his features were so like Fitch's that he had deceived Eastman. So like Fitch's—*because he was Martin Fitch's son!*

That amazing discovery was almost Howard's undoing. Crump charged him and bore him back to the wall, almost had him pinned against it before he managed to break loose and drive his fist once more into that doubly unmasked face. Crump staggered backward, half-stunned by the blow.

Down he went and instantly Howard was on top of him. Now the heavy outfit that encased him was no advantage. It weighted him down, pinned him on the floor, while Howard's fist pummeled him mercilessly—beat a tattoo on his bleeding face until his fading consciousness was beaten out of him.

HOWARD had Connie and Mona Vale liberated from the clay before Ralph Shelby and old Dillon came warily into the basement with some of the other property owners they had roused. Connie, with his coat wrapped around her shivering body, was clasped in his arms.

"We'll get you to a doctor and have him give you an antidote for the stuff Crump shot into you," he assured her. "Whatever it is, it evidently increased your body temperature so greatly that you could think of nothing but getting cooled off."

And his layman's diagnosis was correct. The drug that must have been administered to Connie while she was unconscious on the back porch of her bungalow proved to be one which is used in the formula of most rat poisons; a drug that fairly sets the body on fire and creates an overwhelming desire for water. With it surging through their veins, its victims found the lure of the lake irresistible. Fortunately, it yielded readily to treatment, and soon its effects had disappeared entirely.

By that time Howard had examined the curious outfit that was the hide of the "mist creature." It was a specially constructed diving suit. The outer, sponge

rubber surface was netted with hundreds of holes that led to the under-surface. This was lined with well insulated electric wires, over which a thin stream of water flowed continually—and was converted into steam that oozed out of the rubber pores. When it was in operation the myriad steam jets completely concealed the grey hulk and gave the effect of a bodiless cloud of mist.

By means of heavy weights, which were slipped over his feet when he stepped into the water, the mist creature was able to walk on the bottom of the lake, breathing the oxygen with which the suit was supplied.

The latter details Ed Crump, alias Edward Crump Fitch, supplied in his confession to the police. Embittered by what he considered the wrecking of his life and the plundering of his heritage, he had carefully planned his revenge upon

Eastman and Taylor. First he had located Taylor, had wrung a confession of his father's murder from him and then had held it over his head as a weapon to force him to do what he ordered.

Working on the Obie Greene legend, he planned to bankrupt the Sunrise Lake development and then grab it for himself, if he could not terrorize Eastman into signing it over to him.

In that he failed—but his orgy of horror and murder doomed the real estate project. The disastrous publicity scared away prospective purchasers. The development languished, and when the dam broke in a violent Fall storm, the operating company did not rebuild it.

Sunrise Lake vanished, leaving only Dead Man's Pond—where a misty cloud that looks strangely like a human figure may often be seen hovering over the surface of the stagnant water.

THE END