

SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

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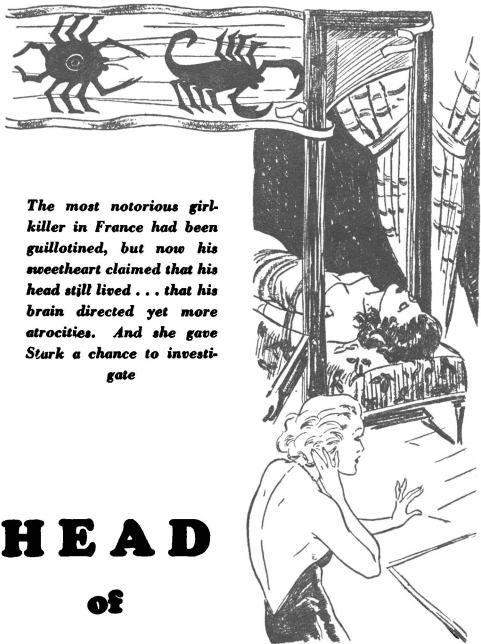
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The most notorious girl-killer in France had been guillotined, but now his sweetheart claimed that his head still lived . . . that his brain directed yet more atrocities. And she gave Stark a chance to investigate

HEAD

of

HAKMED

By C. A. M. DONNE

With all his strength, Stark struck out.
His feet crashed into the pedestal; it
tottered. . . .



eye could see with silent men and women, all gazing expectantly toward a black skeleton framework erected on a high platform. Standing close to the macabre structure, because he was the privileged correspondent of the *New York Express*, Stark had obtained an excellent view of the most hated man in all Europe as the gendarmes escorted him up the steep steps to the scaffold where Madame Guillotine waited to reward him with her rending embrace for his appalling, incalculable sins.

GRAHAM STARK frowned, rubbed his dependable gray eyes incredulously and stared again at the reflection of the exotic blonde in the bar mirror. Gradually his lean, aquiline face took on a reminiscent aspect and his mind turned away from the New York glitter, looking backward five years. . . .

He recalled a narrow street in Paris, packed from wall to wall as far as the

Hakmed, the condemned man had called himself—and people whispered that he was the reincarnation of Cagliostro, the great charlatan of the Eighteenth Century, whose magic bent kings and statesmen to his dark will. Hakmed dealt in magic of the blackest hue, angling with fearsome spells for the souls

and the fortunes of the rich and superstitious. With the aid of Satan, his master, he gained gold and power, and men who dared to denounce him died mysteriously and swiftly. He was almost above restraint, above the law, when his vigilance relaxed one night and he was trapped alone in his house, performing mad rites over the half naked body of a murdered girl.

Hakmed shook the hands of the gendarmes from his shoulders and strode to the edge of the platform. His long white hair and beard streamed in the breeze, and from beneath cavernous brows his dark eyes gleamed so malignantly that the spectators in the front of the crowd crossed themselves and shrank back.

"Fools!" the arch-criminal shouted in French. "You think your pretty machines can kill me! But Hakmed will come back from the grave—come back to scourge the world and make a mockery of all of you, to tear your tiny souls out of your breasts and cook them with hell-fire for his breakfast—"

They dragged him to the blood-stained block, fitted his neck in the wooden collar, strapped his feet securely. The slant-edged knife dropped twenty feet through its grooves with a hissing sound, bit like the blade of a swung ax through flesh. Hakmed's snowy, sinful head tipped gently away from his body and rolled sedately into the wicker basket. A throaty, horrible roar went up from the rag-tag-and-bobtail mob, and all at once the world seemed a better place for the passing of the monster.

Pushing through the crowd, above which his head and shoulders towered, Stark had felt his arm grasped by eager fingers. He looked down into the exotic, strangely beautiful face of Chela,

the girl who had been Hakmed's mistress and had been exonerated of guilt at his trial. Her compelling, feverish eyes of hazel were untroubled at having witnessed the execution of the man who had ruled her life. She said: "You are the gentleman who wrote such shocking things about me at my trial, and whom I forgave because you were so handsome. Come with me to my house."

SENSING a story, he had gone with her to the ancient, fantastic structure where Hakmed had enacted his countless crimes. In the barbaric splendor of a boudoir whose walls and ceiling were shaped like the dome of the heavens, with the stars and the signs of the Zodiac limned upon them in phosphorescent paint, she had poured him spiced wine that made his senses spin. And his dizziness increased as she pressed herself to him for a brief kiss. She stepped back, laughing, and the little pin at her bodice caught his coat, ripped the bosom of her dress, away from snowy breasts as small and fresh as apples.

"Kiss me!" she whispered. "For a few hours I am free. But tonight I must return to Hakmed and do his bidding."

No man with red blood could have withstood her. Stark did not even try. With frenzied hands he caught her shoulders, caught her savagely to him. The torn dress had slipped down, and her high heel catching its hem, ripped it completely from her, uncovering flesh as soft and smooth and white as rich cream, slender curves that no sculptor could have equalled in the purest of marble. His heart hammered until his whole body throbbed to its rhythm, and his blood turned to liquid fire. The little murmurings of rapture that came from her throat were more stirring than any music he had ever heard. . . .

THEN, that night, the head of Hakmed vanished from the keeping of the police. It was to have been sent to the Sorbonne, where learned doctors and earnest students could dissect it and perhaps discover something new about the mentality of criminals. But when the wicker basket was opened the next morning it contained only a big lump of putty, squeezed by unskilled hands into a grotesque caricature of one of the trial judges who had passed the death sentence.

Ridiculous rumors filled the columns of the sensational Paris newspapers and were repeated everywhere. It was said that magic and science had been combined to keep Hakmed's head alive, that the charlatan's evil powers had grown immensely until now, relieved of the responsibility of a body, the brain was to be feared as never before. It was pointed out that Russian scientists had kept the severed head of a dog alive for years by providing it with a mechanical heart and lungs.

Not long after the execution, the trial judge who had been caricatured committed suicide by hurling himself from the top of the Eiffel Tower. In falling, his neck struck one of the bracing girders and the head was torn away, dropping into a basket placed for the disposal of rubbish. Thousands were converted by that startling coincidence to belief in the immortality of Hakmed—so many that a cult of men and women calling themselves his disciples came into being.

Within recent weeks, anonymous letters to the New York newspapers, published for the most part as humorous offerings, had asserted that Hakmed's head was now in America, still living. . . .

THE exotic blonde at the bar in the Hotel Luxor in New York sipped

her creme de menthe sparingly. She whispered something to the man beside her, and Stark, shifting his glance to the man's reflection in the mirror, was surprised again. He could not mistake the fleshy face, piggish little eyes and silver hair of Thornton Lakely, the oil millionaire.

Acting on a sudden impulse, he moved from his cushioned stool at the bar to one beside the girl. He ordered whisky-and-soda from the bartender, pretending not to notice her. Before the drink was served he felt her fingers on his sleeve, exactly as he had felt them that day in Paris, and in spite of himself he was thrilled by the touch.

"M'sieur Stark!" cried a voice he would have recognized anywhere. "Is it possible you have forgotten Chela?"

Feigning glad surprise, he faced her. "Forgotten you!" he said. "Not as long as I live. But I think of you when I think of Paris. How long have you been in America?"

"One month. Since my marriage." "Marriage!"

She said: "Can you be discreet? Can you keep a secret, and not print it in your newspaper?"

He nodded, smiling.

"Then," she said, "meet my husband, M'sieur Lakely. It is a secret no one else knows."

Scowling, obviously ill at ease, Lakely extended a pudgy hand. "Glad to know you," he said.

"M'sieur Stark knew Hakmed," Chela told Lakely. "He was near me at the guillotine when they—how do you say it?—lopped off his head."

Lakely's scowl deepened. Clearly, he did not want to talk about Hakmed. He stirred restively. "My dear," he said, "I have two or three things to attend to. Supposing I leave you with Mr.—ah—

Stark, and meet you at midnight, as we planned."

"As you wish, *cheri*. Only, do not be late. He is very strict about appointments."

"I'll be on time. And while I am gone, perhaps it would be better to say nothing further about—us." He gave Stark an unfriendly nod, squirmed down from his stool and left them hurriedly.

"HE wasn't very pleased to meet me," Stark observed. His eyes were busy appraising Chela, discovering that she had changed not at all in the five years since he had seen her. Her lithe body was just as slender, just as lovely, to judge by the curves that appeared in outline through the metallic cloth of her expensive gown. Her breasts must still be firm and young, to form such delightful, gleaming mounds.

"He was frightened." She was perfectly aware of his scrutiny. For his benefit she moved so that the outlines of her hip and thigh were more sharply portrayed, and straightened her ivory shoulders to draw the top of her dress tigher across her breasts, accenting the soft depression between them.

"Frightened of me?" He wasn't especially interested in what her answer would be. His consciousness was taken up almost entirely with her nearness and the recollection of that afternoon in Paris, after her monstrous paramour had been sent back to the abyss from which he must have sprung.

"No," she said. "Frightened of Hakmed. He is here with me in New York, you know."

Her words shook him out of his pleasant abstraction. He stared into her hazel eyes and thought he saw laughter there. He said: "That wouldn't be a bad joke, except that I can't see the point to it."

"But it is not a joke. I really have him. His head, that is, and his brain—all that was ever very real about him. And even though he is legally dead, let me assure you his mind is very much alive and has been very active."

"I should like to see him," Stark said slowly. He still didn't believe her, but he was beginning to suspect there might be something behind her claim that would make a story.

"And I should like to have you," she remarked unexpectedly. "I should like you to write about it. In order for Hakmed to interest people, to attract clients who can use his powers, he must be talked about. I have written letters to the newspapers, but they have all been laughed at. If you, who are well known, should write an article saying that he is really here, it would be believed and people would seek him out."

"And let him murder them," he supplied.

"P'fah! How can a head commit murder? Even in the old days, he never harmed anyone unless they tried to make trouble for him."

"Self-defense, eh?" Stark was thinking of the girl for whose brutal murder Hakmed had been executed. "Very well—if you take me to see him, I'll write about it."

"Splendid!" She was pleased as a child with a new toy. "But you must let me blindfold you. You are not to know how to find the house he has made his headquarters. That is one of the rules he has laid down."

"I agree."

"And," she continued, her eyes beginning to glow, "you must remember, that day in Paris, and try to be a little bit nice to me."

For, as a head cannot commit murder—neither has it the strong arms, the

kisses for Chela . . . as *you* have, *cheri!*

Stark did remember—how could he forget!—that day in Paris. And his heart throbbed with excitement . . . "But how about your new husband, Chela?"

She made a grimace. "He is a fat fool. For twenty years he has had no interest in love. I married him only for his money!"

OUTSIDE the hotel they entered a taxi. Chela whispered directions to the driver. As the cab pulled away from

the curb she took a pair of goggles from her handbag.

"I carry these for my fat husband to wear when he goes to see Hakmed," she explained. "The lenses are stuffed

The knife flashed down, left a red streak across white flesh. . . .



with cotton. They look ordinary enough, but you can see nothing through them."

Stark discovered she was right. Held close against his eyes by an elastic band, their leather shields fitting snugly, he could not see so much as a ray of light. The cab threaded through traffic for perhaps fifteen minutes, making so many turns Stark lost all sense of direction, then stopped. Chela paid the driver and led Stark, still blinded, for a considerable distance, turning three corners. Finally they climbed half a dozen steps and went into a house. When she had guided him through several rooms, Chela said: "You may take off the goggles now."

Stark blinked in the faint violet light that came from a single bulb in the ceiling. He was standing in a room reminiscent of that luxurious boudoir in Paris, but smaller and less elaborate. Velvet drapes were drawn tightly over windows in one wall.

"I don't see our friend Hakmed," he remarked.

She laughed musically. "You have fulfilled the first condition. You have worn the goggles. Now you must fulfill the second."

Grinning with anticipation, he advanced and put his arms around her. And as her pulsing, vibrant figure melted against him the smile left him. There was nothing gay, nothing laughable about the emotion that shook her, and that leaped like a spark to seize him. As though a powerful electric current flowed from her body, he began to tremble.

The touch of her red lips, moist and slightly parted, was like the searing kiss of a hot iron, tingling every nerve in his body with an indescribable pleasure almost too painful to bear. His arms tightened in a spasm of eagerness; and the wild hammering of her heart made the firm breasts against his chest seem

live, fluttering things. Her smothering kiss and his own thickening pulse choked him until he could hardly breathe. His fingers were scratched by the coarseness of the metallic cloth that shaped itself to the curves of her smooth hips, her sleek thighs. Her fingers rose swiftly, and as if by a magic gesture, the dress rustled to the floor.

Without the gown, clad only in wispy underthings, her white body was a torturing dream. He clasped her so tightly that it seemed he must crush her, yet her breath only came faster and her hazel eyes burned more feverishly as she moaned and writhed, her mouth moist and avid as it clung to his . . .

"FOLLOW me," she said when he again reminded her of the purpose of his visit. "Come—and I'll show you—*Hakmed!*"

He lingered in the room for just a moment—just long enough to step to a window, pull one of the drapes aside and peer through the shutter. The first thing that met his eyes told him what he wanted to know. It was the sign of a shop across the street—ELMER GUTZ, PLUMBER.

Hastening after Chela, he found her at the entrance to yet another room. It was a long, oblong box of a chamber, bare of furniture, lit only by candles in tall sconces. Floor, walls and ceiling were sheathed in black velvet.

Chela addressed a heavy curtain that hung across the end of the room. "Master, here is one who would know that you still live."

The curtains parted, seemingly without any hand touching them. They revealed a slender stone pedestal, shoulder-high, surmounted by the wax-white head of an aged man, bearded, with flowing white hair. The eyes were closed. There

was no living color anywhere about the head, yet it was an accurate enough likeness of Hakmed, as Stark had seen him that eventful day in Paris, to send a shiver along his spine.

Heightening the illusion, the gruesome skeleton of a guillotine, no more than ten feet high but for all that appearing deadly enough, stood close to the pedestal.

"This," Chela said very softly, "is Hakmed."

Amazingly, incredibly, the lids lifted over the eyes of the statue and dark orbs gleamed, piercing Stark with a malignant stare. Miraculously, the pallid lips moved and a deep, familiar voice issued from them.

"Men laughed when I said I should return from the grave. They thought I would die when they separated my brain from heart and lungs and stomach. The fools! A heart can be made from machinery, blood can be obtained from any living body, steel pumps can filter oxygen into it and it can be fed in a thousand ways."

Beneath the booming of the slow voice, Stark heard the purr of machinery in the pedestal, a pulsing like a heart-throb. He did not doubt any longer. He was awed, terrified, repelled.

Through the doorway came a sudden breeze. It stirred the silver threads of Hakmed's beard, billowed other curtains at a side wall. As the curtains parted, Stark caught a fleeting glimpse of another person beyond them—a girl, almost completely nude, strapped to a low sofa. A bandage covered her mouth and she lay perfectly still, but her eyes were wide and moving, and even in the semi-darkness he noted that they were violet and that the girl was beautiful.

He remembered the hideous murder for which Hakmed had been condemned

to death. Anger arose within him, supplanting the astonishment that had kept him powerless. He clenched his fists and took a step forward. "You have cheated death once," he cried, "but you shall really die this time!"

That one step was all he took. He felt a slight pain in his shoulder, like a pin-prick, and all at once the room seemed to darken. He groped for some support as his strength ebbed away, and, finding none, pitched to the floor, senseless.

A ROUGH hand shook Stark back to wakefulness. A voice growled: "Will ye go home and sleep it off, or will I call the pie-wagon?" He opened his eyes reluctantly and saw that he was lying in a doorway and a cop was bending over him. With the cop's help he got to his feet.

"I'm not drunk," he mumbled. "I was sick, or something."

"Or somethin'!" said the cop in disgust, turning away.

Stark walked unsteadily along the street. He was only half a block from the Luxor. By the time he reached the lobby his brain had cleared and he remembered everything that had happened. He must have been drugged, he thought—stabbed with a hypodermic needle just as he had been going to tear Hakmed's evil head from its mechanical body. Chela had done it, damn her!

And the young girl he had seen strapped to the couch, within half a dozen feet of the guillotine—what was happening to *her*? Was she meeting a horrible fate similar to that of the girl who had been murdered in Hakmed's house in France? Was some ghastly ceremony being enacted even now over her bleeding corpse?

God! To be at the mercy of a head!

To be in the power of an evil intelligence, that was practically disembodied, that had nothing remotely human about it! The very thought was enough to drive a man mad. And the girl had been young—no older, certainly, than nineteen or twenty—and she had been beautiful.

He went to a bank of telephone booths and rifled through the pages of the Manhattan directory. He found the name he sought—"Gutz, Elmer, plmbr". There was an address in East Ninety-first St.

A taxi took him to the plumbing shop. The house that stood opposite it was like all the others in the block, except that the windows were shuttered and it wore a general air of neglect. It was the fourth house from the corner.

He began trying the doors of all houses on the same side of the street which bore signs advertising rooms or apartments. He came to a door that was unlocked. Entering unchallenged, he mounted four flights of stairs to the top floor and a ladder to a trap door that opened on the roof.

Climbing over the low walls that separated the houses, he made his way slowly in the darkness to the roof of Hakmed's house. In the center of the tar-and-gravel expanse was a skylight, hinged. A savage tug broke the catch with no more noise than a sharp *snap*, and he lighted a match and peered into the house. Directly beneath him was a stair well that went down four stories.

Letting his body through the skylight, clinging precariously to its rim, Stark swung himself back and forth until he thought he had gained enough momentum to swing clear of the stairs. Loosening his grip suddenly, he plunged into blackness. His feet thudded on an uncarpeted floor and he reeled back against a railing that sagged and creaked, but

did not break. He stood, breathing hard, listening for sounds from below. When he was sure the noise of his unorthodox entrance had given rise to no alarm, he tiptoed down the stairs, flight after flight, to the first floor.

Instinctively he groped toward the rear of the house. He passed through many doorways and came finally to a room lighted feebly by a yellow ray that sifted between the folds of draperies at one end. Peeping through the draperies, he experienced a shock. Not ten feet distant, Hakmed's head rested upon its pedestal, the malignant eyes closed, as though Hakmed slept beside his guilotine.

Stark would have gone directly to the head, with the idea of completing his original plan of destruction, except that he realized he was in the room in which the girl had lain strapped to the sofa. He strained his eyes through the gloom and, his heart pounding with relief, could just make out her white form beside him.

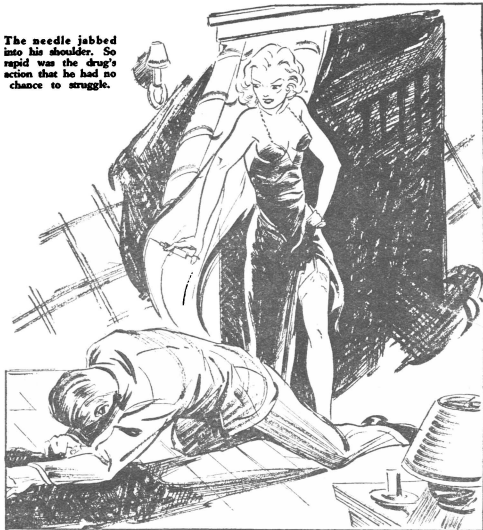
Hastily he tore the bandage from her mouth and withdrew the wadded handkerchief that had served as a gag. He whispered: "Can you talk?"

He could barely hear her choked whisper: "Thank God somebody has come!"

He felt along the warm expanse of her body until he reached the strap that held her legs, just above the knees. All she wore, he found, was a scanty garment over her thighs. He said: "I'll have you free in a minute. How did you get here?"

"I was worried about my uncle," she breathed. "He is Thornton Lakely, and I am Bernice Lakely. He had been acting queerly, and I had seen him with a blonde girl who looked like an adventuress. I suspected she was victimizing him, so I followed them to this house this morning. When I rang the door-

The needle jabbed into his shoulder. So rapid was the drug's action that he had no chance to struggle.



bell, the girl let me in. I don't know what happened after that. The next thing I knew, I was lying like this."

"The blonde girl was an adventuress," Stark said. "You're lucky to be alive." He was thinking, grimly, of one of the things the head of Hakmed had told him that evening—"a heart can be made from machinery, blood can be obtained from any living body"

HIS hands fumbled with the buckle of the heavy belt. Even though he was

hurrying desperately, he could not help but enjoy the sensations set in motion within him by the touch of her soft, tempting flesh. The skin of her legs was like living velvet. His eyes, grown accustomed to the dimness, saw that her body was even more exquisitely shaped than the slim form of Chela.

The strap fell away from her, and she flexed her legs with a little relieved sigh. He turned his attention to the second strap, which crossed her chest just beneath the swell of her full, gently trem-

bling breasts. The satiny warmth of her flesh, as his knuckles brushed it working at the strap, set his fingers trembling. . . . Suddenly Stark had forgotten his danger and was crushing her in his arms and kissing her.

His heart leaped as he felt her mouth return his kiss, moving eagerly. The emotion that flooded through him was not like that he had felt for Chela—it was warmer, gentler, less shameful. . . . He dropped to his knees and tightened his arms around Bernice Lakely. . . .

THERE was the sound of a door opening and closing. Two persons entered the room beyond the draperies. Chela's voice announced: "Master, he is here."

Suddenly cold and self-possessed, cursing his carelessness, Stark applied his eye to the narrow rift between the curtains. He saw that the eyes of Hakmed were open, regarding Chela and the trembling form of Lakely, who stood before her.

The lips of Hakmed writhed like pale serpents. "I presume you have decided to do as your wife advises, Lakely, and place your entire fortune at my disposal for our mutual benefit?"

Lakely hesitated, wetting his lips nervously. "As a matter of fact," he replied hesitantly, "I had decided just the opposite. After all, I have enough money, enough power for one man."

"Then you have decided like a fool!" The face of Hakmed was an evil sneer. "You have made it necessary for me to bring pressure to bear upon you. For no one who has ever been offered a partnership by Hakmed can refuse and be safe. I need your money to enhance my control over men and women who can be useful to me. I shall have it in spite of you!"

Lakely's pale face turned purple. He lifted his heavy cane. "You can't bulldoze me!" he shouted. "After all, you're only part of a man. With one blow of this cane I can—I can—" His words dwindled into silence. His eyes began to bulge. Watching, Stark could almost see the invisible bonds that held him back, the radiation of hypnotic rays that rendered him helpless. Chela had no need to use the little hypodermic needle she had snatched from her handbag.

"We shall see," Hakmed gloated, "how well you can stand the little treat I have in store for you. Note that I have but to will it, and immediately Satan delivers into my power one whom you would hate to see die young."

Before Stark's fascinated eyes the couch on which Bernice Lakely lay, still held by the one strap, began to move toward the pedestal, pulled by invisible wires. It brushed aside the curtains, advanced into the pale candle-light of the larger chamber, passed partly between the uprights of the miniature guillotine. Then it stopped, and Stark saw with awful clarity that the oblique blade of the deadly knife was poised directly above her snowy throat.

Bernice had fainted, mercifully. Her flower-like beauty shone in the room like a glittering vision. A lump rose in Stark's throat.

"I have but to will it," Hakmed said silkily, "and the blade will separate her head from her body, even as the guillotine in Paris beheaded me. Then her blood will help feed and invigorate my brain, that I may devise a fitting torture for you!"

"No!" Lakely gasped. His teeth chattered and his face had gone yellowish. "Take my money—all of it! Only let her live!"

Stark was already crouched, every

muscle in his body tensed. Straight for the pedestal he sprang. He planned to lift it in his strong arms and crush Hakmed's head against the wall before this devil's business could go further. He had no faith in Hakmed's promises to Lakely—when the fiend had possessed himself of the rich man's millions, Lakely and Bernice both would be put to death in some unholy manner. That was Hakmed's way.

Stark's arms were stretched to embrace the pedestal, but they never touched it. A small, furious figure darted at him, struck him with sufficient force to send him sprawling on the floor. Again there was the swift pain of a needle jabbing into his shoulder. So rapid was the action of the drug that he could not ever struggle.

“AND your conscience will watch you while you are away from my presence, making the arrangements to transfer all your accounts and holdings to your wife. Not only will your niece remain with me, but also I will keep evidence that will send you to the electric chair if you try to betray me.

“You have a penknife attached to your watch chain, Lakely. Take it with your bare hands, so that it will retain fingerprints, and cut the throat of this impetuous young journalist. Then dip one of your gloves in the gore and give it, with the knife, to Chela. After that you will write a confession to murder. Then you may go.”

The words penetrated to Stark's consciousness at first as vague sounds, without significance. Gradually their dreadful meaning became clear to him. He was about to be murdered by Lakely! The insane brain was planning, by a single stroke of horrid strategy, to rid

himself of an enemy and gain a new slave!

Lakely's voice was thick and choked. “Good Lord, Hakmed! I can't cut the throat of a helpless man!”

“It is your choice,” Hakmed said. “If you do not, the throat of a helpless girl will be cut, as surely as I am here before you.”

“Please, Hakmed!” Chela's voice was cajoling. “Let the man live. I can take care of him, so that he will not be a danger to you. I—like him.”

“What right have you to like anyone?” Hakmed rasped. “You are only my servant, Chela. You have no will but mine.”

“So!” Lakely's voice had assumed a desperately calm note. “My marriage was only a trick to get me in your power! Chela only pretended to love me to carry out your orders, Hakmed! Very well. I shall do your bidding, too. I shall murder this man to save my niece's life. I shall sign a confession to murder and give you all that I own. But some day, Hakmed—if I die for it—I'll pay you back!” His voice shrilled suddenly. “I'll send you screaming back to hell—forever!”

“We can do very well without the hysterics,” Hakmed said drily. For the time being, let us content ourselves with the work at hand. You may proceed, Lakely.”

ALL during the tragic clash of wills, Stark had not opened an eye or moved a muscle. The pain of tight-drawn straps of hard leather, holding his ankles together and pinning his arms to his sides, told him that any struggle would be worse than useless. But he could not repress a shudder as he heard Lakely's feet coming reluctantly toward him, the

(Continued on page 106)

Head Of Hakmed

[Continued from page 101]

thud of fat knees plopping to the floor at his side, the tiny click of the blade of a knife springing open. Lakely's labored breathing was loud and irregular; the man muttered: "May your soul forgive me for this, Stark!"

Cold steel touched Stark's throat. It bore down hard, began to saw back and forth. Lakely's penknife was too dull to do its work efficiently. It was a long time before it cut through the first layer of skin, bringing agony so enervating that Stark, with the sticky warmth of blood running down the side of his neck, fought to keep from shrieking.

His eyes were opened in narrow slits, veiled by lashes, now. He lay with his feet almost touching the pedestal. Above him Chela looked down, her cheeks deathly white, her hazel eyes wide with fear. Lakely's features were the color of lead and a light of near-insanity darted from beneath his eyelids. Bernice was still insensible, lying beneath the knife like a sacrificial offering upon a devil-god's altar.

But it was Hakmed's head which drove Stark utterly mad, past all reason. Hakmed's face bore a satanic leer that no human being could look upon without being revolted to the depths of his soul. Blood-lust was in it, unspeakable bestiality and gloating triumph. It spurred his victim to a superhuman effort he never could have accomplished under other circumstances.

His muscles tensed and leaped into action like coiled steel springs. His knees

drew up nearly to his chin, and his long legs shot out like pistons, straight at the pedestal. His feet struck the stone a

shattering blow, toppling it. Chela screamed. A hoarse yell came from Hak-med's throat. The thin shell of stone that covered the pedestal cracked and fell apart and a gaunt body, pressed into the unbelievably narrow space it enclosed, came to light. A skeletal hand thrust forth a pistol and fired, and then Hak-med's head struck the corner of the guillotine with sickening force and thumped to the floor, no longer bodiless. Blood stained the white hair, but the long beard had come away from the chin and still clung to one of the bolts of the instrument of death, snowy as ever.

Lakely reeled like a drunken man, one hand pressed to his chest where the bul-



Cold steel touched Stark's throat—Lakely's pen knife bore down hard, began to saw back and forth.

let had struck just over the heart. Crimson trickled through his pudgy fingers. His eyes were blazing and his free hand brandished the knife. He was laughing horribly at Chela.

"So you made me love you just because I was rich!" he croaked. "You would have made a murderer of me, seen my niece slain, watched my own death with a smile! Hell-cat! Now you shall join your precious master in death!"

She had no chance to use the hypodermic. The knife rose and fell, shearing the dress from her bosom, baring her small breasts. Across the breasts appeared hideous red gashes from which blood spurted. She sighed and slid to the floor. Lakely fell over her, striving with the last of his dying strength to drive the knife yet again toward her heart.

Her eyes rolled toward Stark. Scarlet bubbles formed on her lips. There was nothing but sorrow in her face.

"If you hadn't come back—we could have been lovers," she gasped. "I was going to leave him—Hakmed—he was really an actor I knew in Paris—as soon as we got enough money. Now I shall have to face Hakmed—the real Hakmed—who never came back to life—and pay in the devil's coin—for betraying him in France—"

No pity for her stirred in Stark's heart, nor even a memory of how her faithless beauty once had enraptured him. He had hobbled painfully on his knees to the side of Bernice and was gnawing with his teeth at the strap that still bound her, pausing frequently to kiss the satin skin below her throat. Bernice's eyes opened, warm and trusting, and he read in them a promise of ineffable bliss.