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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Hollywood Horror

By PAUL ERNST

*Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal, in a powerful thrill-tale of blind, unreasoning fear and panic terror*

## 1. Death in Life

THE central sound stage on the lot of the R-G-R Motion Picture Company was almost ready for the shooting of the main scene in the company's latest production. Outside the square, windowless concrete building the massive doors were being closed. In a moment the red light would burn which would keep anyone from entering and ruining the sound effect. Inside, all was tense activity and bustle.

The inside of the sound stage had an eerie, cavernous look. One huge room, it was dark and shadowy at its outer fringes, and its high ceiling was lost in darkness. Shadows of people and things appeared like soundless prehistoric monsters.

Far above in the semi-darkness were shadowy platforms along which electricians were moving as they shifted scenic lights and equipment. An electric crane purred like a giant cat as it moved a heavy bit of scenery.

In the corner of the sound stage a set was being completed. It was for the picture, *Enchanted Castle*, in which the great star, Joan Harwell, had the leading role.

Men were hauling huge "sun-spots", incandescent globe spotlights, to platforms on three sides of the set. "Baby spots" also were being fixed in place to give a beautiful backlight effect on Miss Harwell's bronze hair.

All was prosaic, business-like, com-

monoplane to the moving-picture industry. And yet——

One of the electricians, who was trundling a baby spot into position, shivered suddenly. He was a small man, partly bald, with a sensitive, thin face. He had wide blue eyes which, at the moment, glistened with something more than apprehension in the dusk of the great stage.

He paused beside another electrician, a burly, phlegmatic man, as he got the spot to the right position to play on Miss Harwell's head when she sat in the divan around which the forthcoming scene centered. His hand touched the burly man's shoulder.

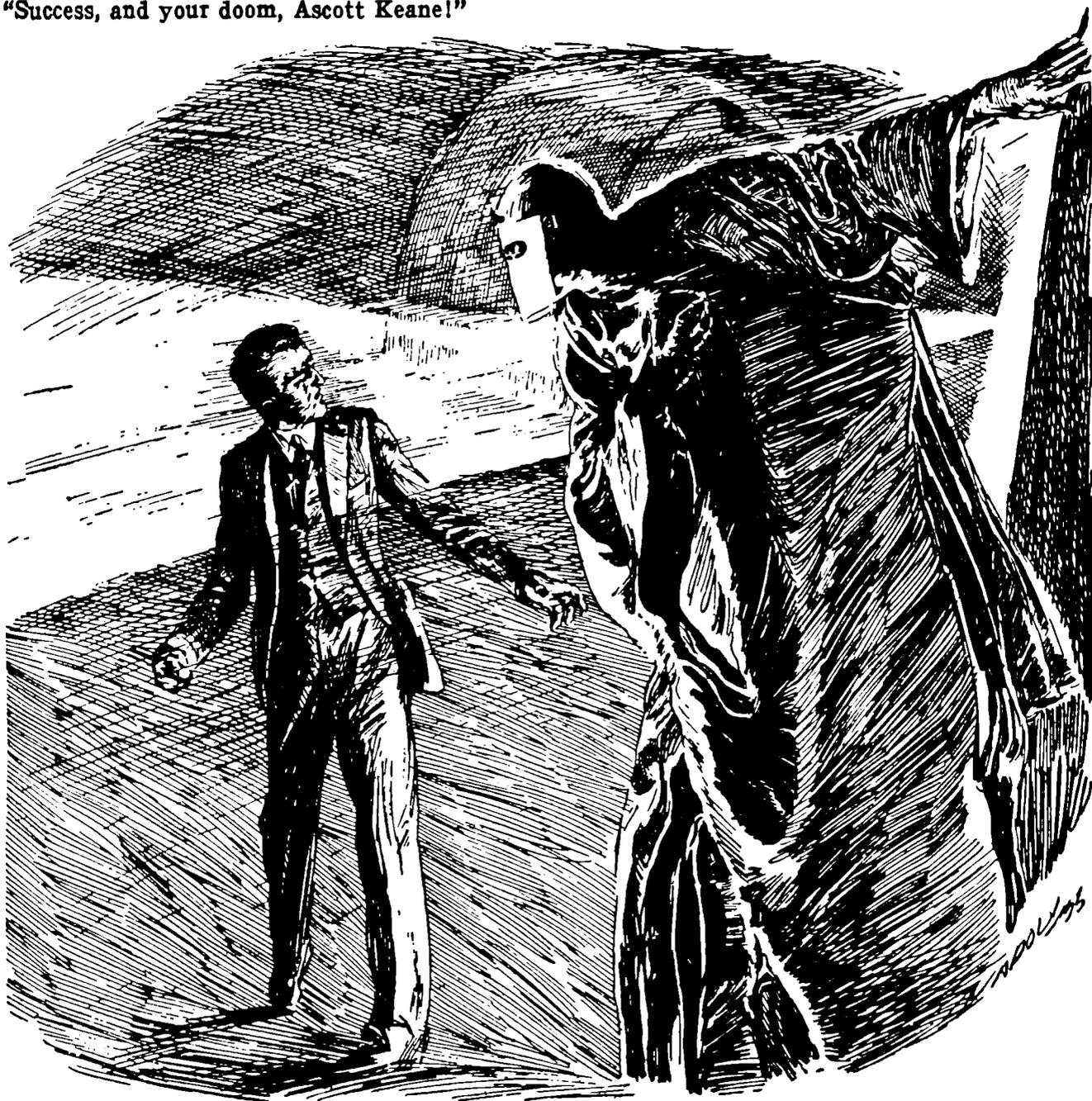
"Bill," he half whispered, looking embarrassedly around to make sure he wouldn't be overheard, "do you feel it too?"

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● Here is another fascinating tale about that weird genius of crime who calls himself Doctor Satan. He is no madman, but is as sane as you or I. An immensely rich man, he has turned to crime for the thrill of it, and strikes down those in his path ruthlessly, heartlessly, and thoroughly. He is master of amazing powers that make him the world's weirdest criminal. If you have not yet made the acquaintance of this fearsome master of crime, meet him today in Paul Ernst's story, "Hollywood Horror." You have a literary treat in store.

---

"Success, and your doom, Ascott Keane!"



"Feel what?" grunted the big man.

The smaller man cleared his throat, plainly torn between a desire to speak what was in his mind, and a fear that he might be thought a fool. Desire won over fear.

"There's a kind of funny feel to this joint today," he muttered finally. "I've never noticed it in here before, but I can sure notice it this afternoon!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded the big man. "What kind of a feel?"

"I . . . don't exactly know how to describe it." The smaller man stared aloft

at the spidery forms of workmen on the cat-walk, and then glanced almost fearfully at the set which had been constructed for the afternoon's shooting. "It gives me the willies, that's all."

The big man stared around, with his forehead wrinkling. "It's kind of quiet, like everybody was holding their breath," he said. "But it's always like that when we're about to shoot."

"No—it's more than that," babbled the smaller man. His hand on the big man's arm became a frantic clutch. "God, Bill, something's going to happen in here today. Something awful—some-

thing not on the director's program. I can feel it. I *know* it!"

He moistened dry lips.

"I remember once feeling like this when I was a kid. I've always been funny about feeling things—a spirit medium called me psychic, once. Anyway, this time I was just going into a picture show. I was about fourteen, I guess, and I went with a couple of other kids. When we got inside the theater I almost turned around and went out. I didn't know why. I just felt that something was going to—happen. I tried to get the others to leave with me, and they only laughed. I couldn't explain my feeling, you see. I said I felt that something terrible was going to happen in that theater, and we ought to get out before it did. But—they only laughed. We stayed."

**E**VEN in the half-light the whiteness of the man's face was perceptible.

"Bill, it happened, all right. That theater was the Mohawk Theater in Chicago. Everybody still remembers the name—and the fire that destroyed it and killed half the people in it. That was what happened, and I was the only one of the crowd of us who went in that got out alive."

He wiped sweat from his face.

"I feel now, today, just the way I felt that night, an hour before the fire! I feel now, this afternoon, that something awful is going to happen in this sound stage. Bill, should I say anything to the boss or the director—maybe get them not to shoot this scene today?"

The big man jerked his arm loose from the other's detaining hand. His phlegmatic face registered annoyance and contempt.

"Are you nuts? Sure, they'll put off shooting the scene for a day, with a forty-four thousand dollar payroll, just because you got a shivery feeling in your

spine. I see 'em doing a thing like that!"

"But, Bill——" quavered the smaller man.

"You better get busy," said the other, briefly. "Come on, hop to it."

The two left the baby spot the smaller man had adjusted to illumine Miss Harwell's bronze, silky hair. The big man was scowling, and a sneer shaped his lips. But the smaller man looked almost ill, and his eyes glinted like the eyes of a frightened horse in the dimness.

Neither of the two noticed something it was, in a way, their business to see:

Taped inconspicuously to the power cable trailing from the spot that was to throw its rays on Miss Harwell's head was a fine bare wire. It entered the shell of the light along with the big cable. It was soldered, with the other, to the incandescent globe socket. And before this globe there was a lens that differed just a little in color from the glass of the other lenses.

A trifling difference. One any man could be forgiven for not seeing. But—it was a change that was to introduce to Hollywood a horror such as had never descended on the moving-picture industry before!

**A**TALL man with stoop shoulders adjusted a microphone at the end of a long boom. He stepped in front of it, called: "One, three, five, six, seven. . . ."

The voice of the monitor in the glass-enclosed booth came hollowly from a loud-speaker, like the voice of a ghost: "Okay on valve test."

Through the great outer doors came the director and the members of the cast who were to participate in the scene, two men who played minor roles, and Miss Harwell.

It is unnecessary to describe the great Joan Harwell. Before her untimely end, she was familiar to two-thirds of the

population of the country. Her silky, red-brown hair had dazzled millions of eyes with its soft sheen. Her large, brilliant eyes were the envy of the women of a nation. Her body, flawless in the delicate maturity of its curves, had stirred the pulses of a nation's men. A great beauty, she would have been outstanding in any period; one of those women who almost frighten the beholder by their perfection.

She was dressed in a creamy satin negligee which was to register white on the film. The negligee clung to her figure, accentuating its loveliness, and revealed perfect bare arms and throat. Above it her exquisite face and flame-brown hair were flower-like.

"Miss Harwell," said the director, a corpulent man with a bald head, "you know your lines?"

"Yes," she said, in the soft, well-modulated tone with which all the theater-goers in the world were familiar.

"We'll rehearse this living-room scene, then. . . . What is it? Don't you feel well?"

The director looked anxiously at the star's rather pale face, spotting the pallor in spite of her exaggerated make-up.

Joan Harwell hesitated a moment, with her red lips quivering. Then she smiled.

"I feel all right."

"You're sure? We've been working you pretty hard lately."

"I'm sure." The beautiful face continued in its smile, although the deep violet eyes were not smiling. "I felt a little cold for a moment, that's all. Not exactly cold—a little chilled, as though a cold, damp wind had touched me."

"I don't think there's any draft in here," said the director jovially, glancing at the solid walls. "Well, let's get on with it. I'll run over the scene again for you.

"You are to sit on that divan in the

center of the set. You are to register happiness mixed with fear. The man you love is on his way to see you—but another man may reach him before he gets here with a malicious tale that may turn him against you. So you are in a fever of impatience, mad to hold him in your arms, ecstatic at one moment and at the next fearful that he may not come at all. Then the malicious tale-bearer comes in and announces that your lover is on his way back to the ship that will carry him out of your life for ever. You have lost. You go through the throes of grief and rage. . . . But I think you know the rest well enough. Take your place, please."

MISS HARWELL walked to the divan and sat down. Light in floods brought every detail of her face and form into relief as she reclined on the divan. She faced a little away from the bank of cameras.

"You're sure you feel all right?" persisted the director, staring at her violet eyes.

"Yes. I'm all right."

The director bit his lips, then shrugged. After all, this was only a rehearsal. The star's slightly strained look, for which he could think of no reason whatever, would not matter.

"More light on Miss Harwell's right cheek," he called.

The burly electrician moved a baby spot. The planes of the star's face leaped into higher relief.

"On the back of her head," said the director.

The man with the sensitive face and the wide, apprehensive eyes moved another small spot so that Miss Harwell's lustrous hair became a web of silky light.

And Joan Harwell shivered suddenly as that light touched her.

All noticed it, though none noticed that the last small spot to be moved was the one that had the fine bare wire subtly fastened to its power cable.

"Is the lens of that light clean?" snapped the director. "It seems just a shade off-color. . . . No, I guess my eyes are playing me tricks. All right, Miss Harwell."

Absolute silence reigned in the great sound stage. In it, workmen and actors, property man and director, stared at the nation's most beautiful woman who sat on the divan in the lacy negligee that molded limbs and body a sculptor could not have equaled.

The star swung into her part.

"He's coming," she whispered, just audibly for the microphone to catch it. "He'll be here soon . . . after nearly a year. . . ."

The director frowned. Her voice was strained, almost harsh. But her facial expression was all right. It registered happiness—mixed with fear. No, not fear. Horror! What ailed the girl?

The spotlights rayed on her face and body. The little spot that illuminated her hair seemed to burn with a faintly orange tint. . . .

The director, seated in his camp chair, gripped the rough wooden arms and stared with eyes that protruded from their sockets.

Joan Harwell's hair! What in heaven's name? . . .

It seemed to be fading from her head like a cobweb mist, revealing the lines of her skull!

The director blinked rapidly, and stared again. Was he going mad? The slight rasp of his panting shivered in the air. He was going insane—or blind!

"He'll be here soon," Miss Harwell whispered, "unless Tim reaches him first. . . ."

A sort of croak came from the direc-

tor's throat, a rasping small sound of utter horror.

The beautiful lips that had murmured the words had become like the lustrous hair—misty, like substance of fog rather than of flesh. He could see her teeth through the lips!

The shivering sob of the small electrician near him in a way reassured the director, though the reassurance was a dreadful thing. For it told him that someone else was seeing what he saw.

"If Tim tells him that lie, and kills his love for me!" breathed the star. "But he won't! Fate couldn't be so unkind."

And now in the sound stage there was a paralysis of silence more terrible than wild shouts. Every eye was riveted on the star with chains of horror. Riveted on her face and head.

Something was happening to the beautiful face—something terrible and impossible beyond description—something of which Joan Harwell still seemed unaware, though the tone of her voice had grown more strained and odd with each word she uttered.

*Her face was disappearing!*

Shuddering, whimpering silently in his throat, gripping the arms of his chair, the director glared at the girl on the divan. And now the metamorphosis, progressing ever more swiftly, was complete. And Joan Harwell no longer had a countenance that could move men to rapture and women to envy.

Gone were the violet eyes and the straight small nose. Gone the silky hair and the creamy skin of cheeks and brow.

*On the star's lovely throat a skull rested!*

With a scream the director leaped from his chair. And his wild shriek broke the awful silence that chained the others in the sound stage. As one, they ran for the great outer doors, hiding their eyes from the thing of horror that now sat on

the divan; all but the burly electrician, who stood near the cameras and stared, with eyes that started from his head, at the thing that had been a woman.

A gorgeous body, seductively revealed by a cream satin negligee—but a body on which was nothing but a grinning skull!

"My God!" whimpered the one man who had stayed behind. "Oh, my God!"

"Harry!" shrilled Joan Harwell, getting up from the divan and turning toward the doors from which the men were hastening. "Harry—what is it? What has happened to me?"

The director did not answer. He did not turn back to look at her. Not for empires would he have gazed again at what had been sheer beauty. He ran from the doors and out into the afternoon sun. The star was alone with the shaking big man in coveralls who stared at her with twitching terror in his stupid face.

**T**HE thing that had been Joan Harwell walked toward the man. The negligee, trailing from the perfect body, rustled in the stillness. The blanched white skull on the slender, lovely throat turned toward him.

"You," Joan Harwell's voice came from between teeth that chattered in their bony sockets, "for the love of heaven—tell me! What has happened?"

The man's nerve broke utterly at last. With a hoarse yell he turned from the glaring, hollow eye-sockets of the skull, and raced for the door to join the others.

The beautiful form in the clinging negligee stood beside the cameras. The ghastly skull turned this way and that.

"Gone! All of them! They ran from me. But what has *happened* to me?"

The lovely figure swayed. Then it walked unsteadily to a make-up box near the set, with the skull atop the creamy bare shoulders shining almost phosphorescently in the dimness. Death on lovely

life! A pallid skull on a beautiful woman's body!

The thing that had been Joan Harwell stretched out a trembling arm and hand toward the make-up. Pink, tapering fingers opened it. In the lifted lid a mirror showed.

For perhaps ten seconds of frozen silence the glaring eye-sockets of the skull stared into the reflection of themselves. Then through the clenched and naked teeth scream on scream ripped forth.

People gathering outside the sound stage, drawn by the almost crazed director and workmen, heard those screams and shuddered. But none moved to enter the place. None dared!

And suddenly the frightful screams ceased. The pink fingers holding the lid of the make-up box slammed it down, shattering the mirror into a thousand pieces. In its place, the fingers caught up a pair of shears, keen, thin, long.

Straight and tall the figure stood—lovely as few women's bodies are lovely. Then a bare white arm went up. The shears glittered in the dimness of the sound stage; glittered more as they swept down and in; ceased glittering as they were bedded in flesh.

Joan Harwell fell, the negligee half covering a breast from which crimson poured, but with nothing covering the thing of horror that had been a flawless countenance crowned by bronze hair.

And now in a far corner of the great stage a shadow moved. It had seemed nothing but a mound of debris covered with tarpaulin. But now it took on human shape.

A tall, emaciated-looking figure stood erect. A black cloak covered it from heels to head. A dark felt hat with a down-drooping brim hid the head and part of the face. The rest of the face was covered by a red fabric mask.

The figure walked to the body of the dead star, and stared down. From eye-holes in the red mask, black eyes gazed callously at the skull set on the creamy throat. Then the felt hat moved as the man nodded.

Silently the figure moved from the body to the small spot that had been trained on Joan Harwell's head. Fingers sheathed in red rubber gloves ripped the bare fine wire loose from the power cable. Then the figure moved toward a smaller door in the sound stage leading into the property warehouse—where a secret exit could be made with the fine wire which was all the clue that might have explained the method by which a flawless face had been turned to fleshless ruin.

## 2. *Satan's Decree*

**I**N THE conference room flanking the private office of the president of the R-G-R Motion Picture Company, eight men sat. They were the wealthiest men of the industry, titans of the picture business. But they looked like anything but titans as they sat there.

The eight were frightened to the verge of collapse, and they showed it. Their faces, whether lean or chubby, were paper-white. Their hands trembled. Several smoked, sucked in great drafts from cigar or cigarette and expelling them again without really knowing what they were doing. And the eyes of all were turned toward the door marked: A. R. STANG, PRESIDENT.

In the big private office behind the closed door, there was a sight to evoke the same dread as that inspired the day before in the sound stage when Joan Harwell gazed into a mirror and saw why men ran from her.

Stang, the president, shivered in a huge leather chair next to the big desk across which normally flowed the busi-

ness of R-G-R. But no business was flowing now. The desk was bare. And beside it, a fantastic creature, cowered Stang. Or the thing Stang had become!

The president's corpulent body remained untouched. But his left forearm and hand were the hand and forearm of a skeleton! Like bony twigs his fingers writhed and clenched while he sat there gazing at them; gazing out of sockets as eyeless as Joan Harwell's had been yesterday! For on the thick neck of the man was no longer placed a head. A skull was there, blanched, pallid, naked bone.

No sound came from the fleshless mouth. Sounds had been worn out. For eighteen hours Stang had cowered in the office, unable to drag himself out of it to face the horrified stares of the rest of the world. For eighteen hours he had screamed and cursed, raving for those who knocked at the office door to go away.

Now the first person to come into the big room was pacing up and down before him and shaking his head while he said with stiff lips: "I don't know what to do. I've been a practising physician for twenty-eight years, and I've never seen anything like it. You haven't any idea what caused the change?"

The skull on Stang's shoulders spoke.

"I have no idea at all. I was sitting at my desk, bent over. I was writing. Just a check, so I didn't bother to light my desk lamp—I sat with only the light from the overhead fixture shining down on my head and hand. Maybe that light . . . but how could a light do—*this*—to me?"

He raised his skeletal left hand and forearm. The doctor's nails bit into his palms as he repressed a shudder.

"I didn't feel anything much. I recall feeling cold, as if a dank wind had touched me. That was all. The first thing that told me of the change was my,

secretary's behavior. She came into the office, stared at me as though she'd suddenly been turned to stone, and fainted. And I've been in here ever since. . . . Doctor, for God's sake, do something!"

The doctor walked toward the door.

"I'll do everything humanly possible. But first I've got to try to find out what is wrong. I'll take this sample of your flesh down to the laboratory and report back as soon as I can."

**H**E OPENED the office door, with a reflection in his eyes of the panic that had filled the eyes of those who had fled from Joan Harwell, and went into the conference room.

The eight executives in there surrounded him.

"Doctor—what causes it?"

"Is it some new disease? Is it contagious?"

"Is it controllable?" rasped one who held crumpled in his fist a sheet of notepaper.

The doctor brushed them aside with a weary wave of his hand.

"Gentlemen, I know nothing yet. I can only tell you what I told Mr. Stang. As soon as I find out something I'll report."

"But what could strip the flesh off a human being's bones like that?" demanded a short fat man whose high voice was like a squeal. "And how can a person live in such a condition?"

"The flesh is not stripped off," said the doctor, moistening his lips. "That at least I have found out. I found it out by feeling of the affected parts. The flesh is still there, gentlemen. Mr. Stang's head is not a naked skull. Hair and flesh and eyes and features are still there. But in some unguessable way they have been made invisible, or transparent. The flesh is as it always was—but it is as translucent as so much spring water, so that all

you can see is the bony structure underneath. Similarly with his left hand. So it is not as bad as we feared."

"Not as bad!" squealed the fat man. "Does it make it any the less frightful that the skull is not really a naked skull? To the eyes of all beholders, it is only dead bone!"

"An illusion," the doctor began shakily.

"Hell, man! In a case like this illusion is as ghastly as reality. Stang can never mingle in the world again, like that. At a stroke he has been made into a thing that is dead even though still alive. You've got to do something!"

The doctor shrugged, opened his lips as though to retort, and then went on out of the conference room. Behind him, the eight reseated themselves at the big oval table.

"Gentlemen, we're beaten," said the man who held the sheet of notepaper in his hand. "We will have to follow the demands of this outrageous letter."

He straightened the crumpled paper and read again that message which any of the eight could have repeated word for word from having read it so many times already:

Bertrand C. Phillips, President of Acme Pictures, Incorporated: You will arrange to pay me five hundred thousand dollars by tomorrow at midnight. You will also instruct your star, Dorothy Dean, to pay to me the three hundred and eighty thousand dollars she has invested in Government bonds. If the payments are not made, she will suffer the fate of Joan Harwell, and you shall become as A. R. Stang—whom I advise you to visit immediately in company with other motion picture heads. His appearance may be an object lesson. Signed, DOCTOR SATAN.

The man with the letter looked around the circle of faces.

"Bertrand Phillips," he said. "That's me. And if I don't pay, I'll have a skull for a head and enter into a life in death such as lies before Stang. If I do pay, and persuade Miss Dean to pay, it will be only a beginning of the schemes of

this man who calls himself Doctor Satan. Every one of you will have to give in to the same threat in turn. And then all of us will have to keep on, paying millions to the fellow."

The little fat man shook his head like a scared, bewildered child.

"But nobody can do a thing like that! Making flesh transparent over bone so that only the bone is seen, like a living skeleton! It can't be done."

"The only answer is that it has been done," the other man ground out. "I'm going to pay, personally. I'll pay Miss Dean's share too, if she should refuse to do as Doctor Satan demands. Her head is worth more than three hundred and eighty thousand dollars to me. Not to mention my own!"

"Is there no way out, then?"

"None, gentlemen, as far as I can see. A man who could perform such miracles of horror as were performed on Stang and Joan Harwell is a man far beyond the reach of law or the police." He sagged lower in his chair. "I repeat, we're beaten——"

**T**HE outer door of the conference room opened. A man stood on the threshold an instant, then calmly came into the room. He was tall, dressed in dark gray that masked the width of his shoulders and the muscularity of his athletic frame. Steely gray eyes peered out from under black eyebrows. The eyes, combined with a large but aristocratic-looking nose, gave him a hawk-like appearance.

"Who are you?" squalled the little fat man in feeble wrath. His fear and uncertainty in the last hours came out in a burst of rage against the intrusion. "What are you doing in this room? We left orders that no one was to come in here!"

The man's large, firm mouth moved in a grim smile.

"Your orders were observed by your office help," he said. "Or, they would have been observed—but I walked past them out there and came in anyway."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"My name," said the man, "is Ascott Keane——"

"Keane? Keane! That means nothing to me. I never heard of you——"

"Just a minute," the voice of the man with the letter cut across the little fat man's voice. "That name means something to *me!* Ascott Keane. . . . Aren't you a criminologist? From New York?"

Keane nodded.

"You're a sort of under-cover man, working for no one but yourself? You tackle the big crime cases, sometimes when the regular police don't even know the cases exist?"

Again Keane nodded.

"For God's sake," quavered Phillips, "sit down and talk this over with us. I don't know if you realize it, but a man like you couldn't have come here at a better time!"

**A**SCOTT KEANE looked at the letter Phillips handed him. He didn't even bother to read it. The signature, Doctor Satan, was all he needed to see.

His steel-gray eyes turned toward Phillips.

"I didn't come here by any accident," he said quietly. "I came knowing I would find some such thing as this in Hollywood. I saw the news flashes yesterday about the hideous thing that had happened to Miss Harwell. Within a half-hour I was on a plane, with my secretary, Beatrice Dale, headed this way. At the airport when I landed I overheard a man talking of what had happened to Stang here. The man was on his way out of California, afraid it might happen to him too. So I came here at once, to place my services at your disposal."

"If you will," babbled the little fat man, "if you only will—well, you can name your own fee."

Keane's grim smile appeared again.

"I happen to be fairly wealthy, gentlemen. I am not working against Doctor Satan for fees. I'm working"—his eyes flamed—"to rid the world of a monster that will be emperor of all crime if he can't be destroyed!"

Phillips clutched his trembling hands together.

"A man who can do what he has done," he said, "could be emperor of the world, I'd think. Who is he, Mr. Keane? You seem to know of him already."

"I know very little. I don't know his identity, nor does anyone else on earth. But I do know that his is a name that is internationally famous for family wealth and power. I know that he is a man in the prime of life, who has become jaded with the pleasures of wealth and has turned to crime of a sort so advanced and bizarre that nothing like it has ever been known before—crime, incidentally, that must pay, in the end. That is one of the rules of his game. Though he is perhaps richer than any of you here, he must get money from his crimes or they would not be successful and he would not get his thrill from his grim play."

The little fat man clutched his arm.

"You can stop him, can't you?" he squealed. "You can force him to leave Hollywood? Money! Successful crime! He'll get all the wealth of all of us if he can't be stopped."

"I can do my best," murmured Keane. "Can any of you men give me a hint or clue of how the change was wrought in Stang or Joan Harwell?"

The eight looked at each other. Finally Phillips said: "I don't think any of us can give you a bit of help. I doubt if Stang himself can." His voice sank to a

fearful whisper. "I wonder where Doctor Satan is, here in Hollywood. And I wonder if he has prepared my fate, and that of Dorothy Dean, already."

### 3. *The Heart of the Web*

THE motion picture industry is still a new one; and R-G-R is not a pioneer company. None of its buildings is very old. But one of them, the property warehouse, was old enough so that all but a few veteran workmen had forgotten one feature of its construction.

Under the north end of the warehouse was a deep circular pit. At one time the mechanism for a large, buried, movable stage had been in that pit; a stage set beside the original, smaller warehouse. Then the stage had been discarded, the warehouse had needed enlarging, and workmen had floored the unused pit and built the warehouse out over it.

Dark, secret, forgotten, it had yawned beneath the cement floor untouched for years. But it was untouched and forgotten no longer.

Less than four hundred yards from the conference room in which eight executives sat in pallid fear, the pit teemed now with activity.

In the center was a big electric motor, once the power source of the movable stage mechanism; then left to rust, out-moded; now cleaned and repaired again. It was running, sending out a low hum that filled the round pit with a murmuring noise.

Beside it were three men—one normal and average, the other two like gargoyles out of a nightmare.

The one was a workman in coveralls with rubber-insulated pliers in his hand. He shrank from the other two as he stood there. And no wonder.

One of these two was a giant of a man with no legs, who moved about between

his swinging arms with an astonishing speed and agility. The other was a small fellow with matted hair over his face through which pale, cruel eyes peered like those of a sadistic monkey. The legless giant was Bostiff, servant of Doctor Satan. The smaller man was Girse, another henchman.

"I tell you this old motor won't hold together much longer," chattered the man in coveralls. "I didn't think I'd ever get it in working order in the first place."

"You got it in working order," rumbled Bostiff, "because you'd have been killed if you hadn't. You'll keep it in working order for the same reason."

"What are you using it for, anyhow?" babbled the workman. "And how long are you going to hold me here?"

A sinister smile appeared on Bostiff's stupid, savage face.

"We'll hold you here as long as we need an electrician," he growled. "As for what the motor is used for—it's to make things happen to women like Joan Harwell and men like that damn rich man, Stang!"

"But how in the name of——"

"Shut up," snapped Bostiff, cracking the flat of his huge hand against the electrician's mouth.

The electrician staggered back, with blood flowing from his lips. And as he did so, a red light near the roughly cut entrance of the circular pit snapped on and off.

"It's *him!*" said Girse, hopping monkey-like toward the entrance.

Bostiff drew his gigantic body up on the backs of his hands as though standing to attention. Girse opened the door.

A figure came through that was as bizarre and extraordinary as something cut from a book of ancient illustrations; a figure that looked as though made up for the part of Lucifer in some ghastly masquerade.

A red robe sheathed its gauntness as a red scabbard might sheathe a lean blade. Red rubber gloves covered the hands; a red mask concealed the face save for burning black eyes; over the hair was a red skull-cap with two small knobs like sardonic devil's horns.

"Doctor Satan," murmured Bostiff hoarsely.

The electrician whimpered and drew back from the sinister form in red. Doctor Satan's jet-black eyes flicked over the unfortunate man, noting the blood oozing from his cut lips.

"He has been trying to get away?" he asked Bostiff.

The legless giant shook his head. "Not that. He feared he could not keep this old equipment running."

The red mask over Doctor Satan's face moved a bit, as though to a smile.

"He will keep it running," came the arrogant, flat voice. "He loves life."

Doctor Satan turned toward Girse. The little man's pale eyes wavered under the impact of the coal-black ones glaring from the eye-holes in the mask.

"Girse, there is more for you to do. Take the fine wire and run it from this pit to the R-G-R conference room. Attach it there to the light socket over the third chair on the left-hand side of the big table. The third chair, Girse! Make no mistake! It is in that chair that Bertrand Phillips sits."

An evil chuckle came from the masked lips.

"Because that light gives diffused illumination instead of a beam of it like a spotlight, we shall be unable to control the rays quite so thoroughly. It will be amusing to see the result—if Phillips defies me. He might become a partial skeleton from the waist up, instead of merely exchanging a normal head for a skull."

"The wire is to be laid from this pit

to the third light on the left side of the conference table," muttered Girse, parrot-like. "It shall be done, Master. And it is to be attached at this end?"

"To the transformer," nodded Doctor Satan. He paused an instant, then said harshly: "This man has not been allowed to examine that transformer?"

Bostiff stared with dull ferocity at the electrician.

"He has not," he said.

**D**OCTOR SATAN walked to one wall of the pit, near the humming old motor. A cable led from the motor to a black box leaning against this wall. Doctor Satan raised the lid of the box. Over his red-robed shoulder could have been observed a maze of cobweb wires in the box, with vacuum tubes studding the maze and glass terminals at the wire's ends. From the opposite end of the box came a small length of the fine wire that had led to the baby spot in the sound stage. To this would be spliced the wire leading to the conference room.

Doctor Satan's Luciferian head moved in a gesture of satisfaction.

"All is ready. Prepare the wiring, Girse. And—if by the luck of the devil, my master, you should see Ascott Keane, you know what to do. If you can!"

Bostiff started. His dull eyes swung toward the red mask.

"Keane?" he croaked.

"Yes." The word hissed from the masked lips. "He is here. In Hollywood. He is to be killed at sight."

**T**HE eight men who headed the motion picture industry of the nation were in the R-G-R conference room at eleven-fifty next night. They faced Ascott Keane, who sat at the head of the board.

Bertrand Phillips' face was dewed with sweat. He kept staring at the clock, and running his tongue over his dry lips.

W. T.—3

"In ten minutes," he said huskily, "if the payment is not made I am to become as Stang became! Keane, I must make that payment!"

Keane shook his head. His face was pale, tense.

"Payment would only put off your fate. You would pay—and pay again. There would come a time when you could pay no longer, and then Doctor Satan would strike. For he must keep terror alive in the hearts of others, and to do that he must give a horrible object lesson at regular intervals."

"But what can we do? You have found out nothing. You admit it."

"No, I have not admitted it. I have found out a little. I have found out how Doctor Satan creates his ghastly illusion, for one thing. The man has devised a ray that changes the molecular arrangement of flesh. The ray, playing on flesh, so lines up the atoms of which that flesh is composed, that they fade from the range of vision of the average eye. It is as if a cloud of dust particles were so shaken as to line the particles up one behind the other. The cloud would become a thing of straight lines, seen end on, and hence not seen at all."

"But how is the ray controlled? From what place can it come?"

"I don't know," said Keane.

"And where does this Doctor Satan hide? Such a ray would mean equipment of some sort. Perhaps bulky equipment. Where is it concealed?"

"I don't know."

Phillips sprang from the chair he habitually used and paced up and down the room, with the eyes of the others following him.

"I can't stand the strain any longer! I want to pay!" He mopped at his forehead. "Fancy going through the rest of my life as Stang is doomed to do! Unless he kills himself. . . ."

He stopped abruptly, and a look of terror froze his face.

"Do you hear it?" he whispered, after a moment.

Ascott Keane stared at him. "Hear what?"

"A voice." His whisper shivered in the conference room. "A voice! I heard it distinctly. It said: 'Remember — at midnight! Pay, or doom overtakes you at midnight!'"

Frozen silence chained the room for an instant. Then the eyes of all swung back to Keane.

"Telepathy," said Keane quietly. "There was no voice. The words grew in your brain, Phillips. But I think it means that Doctor Satan is very near us."

"I'm afraid!" panted Phillips. "Keane — what are you going to do?"

"I've told you. We will wait here till midnight. Satan will strike then, or attempt to. And the nature of the attack — and its source — will determine my next move."

"But he strikes at me!" sobbed Phillips. "At *me!* If you can't act quickly enough——"

He stopped and stared at the clock. Two minutes of twelve. With a groan he sank into his chair again and buried his face in his hands.

Keane stared at him with pity in his steely eyes, though inexorable purpose shaped his countenance. Then his eyes, too, sought the clock. A minute and a half to twelve. A minute. . . .

How did Doctor Satan project his diabolical ray? How could he control the invisible current that made flesh transparent so that the bony structure beneath, whose mineral content no doubt made it impervious to the ray, could be made so hideously plain?

Forty seconds to twelve o'clock.

Phillips' breathing rasped through the silence. The little fat man choked out a

curse. The rest of the picture executives held their breaths.

Thirty seconds. There was a slight flicker of the lights. . . .

"Out of that chair!" yelled Ascott Keane, springing up so swiftly that his own chair was overturned. "That's how he does it! The lights! *Out of that chair!*"

PHILLIPS stared at him in dazed lack of comprehension, with a kind of bleating noise coming from his lips. Keane bounded toward him.

"*Move, man!* Damn it—then——"

Keane's arm shot out. His hand clutched Phillips' coat collar and he pulled backward with all his strength. Phillips shot back against the wall, crying aloud, and Keane, with a leap and a smash of his hand, broke the light bulb in the ceiling over the spot where the man had been sitting.

Then, in the pandemonium of men unused to action and made into terrified animals by the nearness of peril, Keane looked grimly at his hand.

The fingers of that hand looked as if they had suddenly been turned to frosted glass. They were not quite opaque. In them could faintly be seen the outline of finger and knuckle bones. Doctor Satan's ray had accomplished a fraction of its deadly purpose before the bulb had been smashed.

"*Touché,*" he whispered. "A slight, partial victory for you, Doctor Satan. But also, I think, the beginning of the end."

He stared at the light socket.

"Of course! It came from the lights! I should have thought of it instantly. Joan Harwell's flesh became invisible when the spotlights were played on her. Stang's head changed under the ceiling light above his desk. The lights! With Satan's ray traveling along their beams!" He placed a chair beneath the shattered fixture, and examined it closely.

A fine bare wire came into view, soldered deftly to the socket, and threading up through the plaster of the ceiling with the main light wire. Disregarding the men who babbled and clutched at his arm, and who stared with horrified eyes at the milky fingers of his right hand, he walked to the window and leaned out.

The rays of a small flashlight showed him more of the fine wire stretched unobtrusively down the outside wall of the building. Down the wall, to the ground. And at the other end of that wire. . . .

"Gentlemen," Keane's vibrant voice cut across the din, "I shall see you soon. And I think I will have conclusive news!"

He went down and out of the building, and around beneath the window. Off into the night the fine wire ran, so inconspicuously that it would never have been seen by eyes not searching specially for it.

Off into the night—toward the great dark building which was R-G-R's property warehouse!

Drawing a deep breath, Keane started tracing the wire—to the source of the ray and, he prayed, the man who had devised it.

#### 4. *Black Box of Death*

**I**N THE pit beneath the property warehouse, Doctor Satan stood with his head bowed a little as though listening. He stood near the secret door, with Girse and Bostiff near him.

Behind the big electric motor, the electrician lay with eyes closed as though asleep. But under the fringe of his lashes he was watching the three near the door. And now and then, at long intervals, he moved a little. His movement was always in one direction—toward the mysterious black box to which a cable ran from the motor and from which a fine bare wire trailed on the opposite end from the cable.

Girse and Bostiff hardly breathed as

they watched their master. The red-masked face lowered a bit more. They stared in silent respect, careful not to distract him.

They knew what Doctor Satan was doing. They had seen him do it often before.

Somewhere in the night outside, there was a person in whom Doctor Satan was vitally interested. He was reading that person's mind, through his marvelously advanced telepathic powers.

Suddenly the red-robed form stiffened. The red mask moved with words.

"Phillips will pay," the harsh, arrogant voice rang out. "He has escaped the doom of the ray. Someone suspected the source, and broke the light bulb. Ascott Keane, probably." The red-gloved hands clenched. "But Phillips will pay. He has just telephoned his home to deliver to whatever messenger calls for it the package of currency he made up before Keane persuaded him to hold off. Girse, you will call for that package. First, as you go out, remove the wire from this pit to the conference room before it is traced. Then go to Phillips' home."

A malevolent chuckle sounded from the covered lips.

"Half a million dollars! And it is only a beginning——"

The words stopped with awful suddenness, and the coal-black eyes glaring from the mask's eye-holes began to gleam like fire opals.

Doctor Satan turned suddenly, and stared at the black box from which the fine wire ran. He stared also at the figure beside it.

The electrician had edged his way from the motor to the box. Leaning on one elbow, with his terrified gaze going constantly to the ominous red form by the door, he had raised the lid, and was peering in at the maze of wires and tubes the box housed.

The man cried out, a low, choked exclamation. There was no chance for him to pretend sleep as he had done before. Satan had whirled and caught him as though he'd had eyes in the back of his head and had watched all along.

No chance to conceal his fatal curiosity! The man could only stare, panting, into the awful black eyes, with his hand still holding open the lid of the box.

Doctor Satan walked slowly toward him. On either side, Girse and Bostiff moved with him. The terrible three advanced soundlessly, save for the slight rasp of Bostiff's calloused knuckles on the floor as he propelled his great body forward.

The man screamed, and cowered away from the box. He got to his feet, wildly, and tried to run. But there was no place to run to.

Girse got him on one side, and Bostiff on the other. They dragged him to confront Doctor Satan. The eyes behind the eye-holes in the mask were like small black windows into hell.

"So," murmured Doctor Satan, "you were curious to see what was in the box."

His red-sheathed arms folded themselves across his chest. His voice was as soft as satin—and as deadly as a snake's hiss.

"Scientific curiosity," he purred. "The inquisitiveness of the trained man. It is an odd thing. You are a prisoner here, afraid for your life—and rightly. But in the same room with you there is a bit of electrical equipment such as you have never seen before. Mysterious equipment. A new invention. And you must look. With death staring you in the face, you can still be moved by that professional inquisitiveness! The human animal is an odd object."

The man held by Girse and Bostiff said nothing. It was doubtful if he heard the words, or, hearing, understood them.

He stood there, half fainting in the grasp of the sinister two, staring at the death in the coal-black eyes.

"So you would have read the secret of my ray," the arrogant, calm voice went on, "and perhaps have exploited it for your own profit when you got out of here! Fool, you will never leave here. I could not have let you live, in any case, to bear witness as to what happened here. Now I am doubly forced to remove you."

The red-clad form seemed to grow, to tower taller in the low, cement-covered pit.

"Girse! Bostiff! Stand aside!"

THE two released the man and moved away from him. The electrician sank to his knees, unable to support his weight on his trembling legs.

"I saw nothing!" he chattered. "I learned nothing! I swear——"

He stopped. His lips continued to move for a moment, but no more words came. His eyes were like those of a bird paralyzed by a serpent as he kneeled there.

"You wanted the secret of the box?" purred Doctor Satan. "Well, you shall have it. But it will be a different secret from the one you already have an inkling of. That transformer of mine has two functions. The primary ray it can produce re-aligns molecules to make them invisible. The secondary ray causes atoms to collapse."

The coal-black eyes beneath the mask burned more fiercely yet.

"Have you ever speculated on what would happen if atoms collapsed? Matter is nothing but a few atoms moving within certain confines. The rest is space. Your body, for example, is not a solid at all, really. It would be interesting to see what would happen if the atoms of your body were compacted to their limits."

Gasping, the man stared at him. Doctor Satan moved to the box, with his eyes constantly impaling his victim. He reached within. A tiny light glowed in the side of the box. Doctor Satan trained its rays on the electrician.

The man began to scream. The agony of hell was in those screams. But he did not move. His body twitched and jerked, but seemed incapable of muscular action.

On and on the screams continued, but gradually they changed tone. They grew higher, shriller in pitch, keeping time in their change of pitch with a phenomenal change in the man's body.

It was growing steadily smaller!

With poorly concealed terror in their eyes, Girse and Bostiff watched the fate of Doctor Satan's latest victim. They watched him shrivel from a man to a figure the size of a child. It was like peering down a telescope through the wrong end; a telescope so adjusted as to reduce an adult form to a statuette the size of a doll.

On and on the unfortunate man screamed. But now the screams were like the shrilling of an insect, piercing the ear-drums in the upper reaches of sound, but still scarcely audible.

"My God!" whispered Bostiff at last.

The man was a thing two inches high, that peered up and up at the towering giants in the mile-high room. Girse and Bostiff bent far down to see, keeping carefully out of the ray's beam. And they saw that the feebly shrilling, tiny thing that had been a human being was sinking into the packed earth that made the floor of the pit.

"Small as he is," the calm, harsh voice of Doctor Satan droned out, "he weighs as much as ever. And a thing two inches tall and weighing a hundred and sixty or seventy pounds will sink through pretty solid substance."

Now the ear could no longer hear the tiny shrilling of the man's screams. And the eye could no longer see him save as a blot, a pinpoint. The pinpoint remained the same in size. . . .

Doctor Satan turned off the deadly little light. Girse and Bostiff bent till their eyes were within six inches of the pinpoint. . . .

It was a hole in the hard-packed earth. A hole that might have been made by a fine needle. Down that hole the man had sunk. To where? God knew! Such concentrated weight might stop with the first rock layer of the earth's crust—or it might sink and sink till earth's center was reached! Either way, a slight threat to Doctor Satan's peace of mind had been removed.

**T**HE pit was very quiet as, sweating, Bostiff looked up at Doctor Satan again. The red-robed figure was moving convulsively. And with horror in even his savage heart, Bostiff read the meaning of the movement.

Doctor Satan was laughing! The doom he had meted out to the man was amusing to him!

"At least he will see things, if he lives, that no human eyes have ever seen before——" Doctor Satan began.

But the sentence was never finished.

Another voice rang out in the pit, the voice of neither Girse nor Bostiff nor their hellish master.

"Perhaps he will sink far enough to pay his respects to the demon you emulate, if there is a devil and a deep-buried hell."

A monkey-like cry came from Girse's lips, and a rasping exclamation from the thick lips of Bostiff. Doctor Satan whirled toward the door with his hands clenched so hard over the rim of the black box that it seemed as if the red gloves must split.

"Ascott Keane! By heaven——"

Keane walked slowly forward from the door to which he had trailed the wire. He was empty-handed. He needed no weapons for defense from such as Bostiff and Girse; and he knew that no ordinary weapons could injure Doctor Satan. But it was eery to see him walk, without apparent defense, into the lair of the cold-blooded monster in red.

"You trailed the wire," breathed Doctor Satan. "You found me—and you came alone. It is more than I could have hoped for."

Suddenly his body moved convulsively again. And Bostiff and Girse saw that again he was laughing, but with a laughter now more terrible than that with which he had watched the disappearance of the electrician.

"More than I could have hoped for, Ascott Keane. You came—but you shall not leave as you entered!"

"That's what you said when I found you beneath the graveyard in New York," said Keane. "But I left—and you very nearly stayed behind, dead!"

Doctor Satan's laughter stopped. His eyes glowed with cold triumph.

"That time I did not have the black box. This time I have. *And you shall receive its emanations as the other did!*"

With the words his red-gloved hand flashed down. The tiny light glowed again—with its rays leveled straight at Keane.

Keane shouted once, a yell of agony, then was silent. But he was not silent because the agony had ceased. The torture of that beam of light was a thing that tripled by the second, a thing that knocked the breath from his body and seemed to sear him in flame.

With legs wide apart, he stood there like a figure of stone, unable to move a muscle. And as he stood there, he became smaller.

From Doctor Satan's masked lips came a grating cry more eloquent of triumph than the waving pennants of a victorious army.

"I've got you!"

Ascott Keane's once tall frame had dwindled till his head was almost on a level with the head of the legless Bostiff. And still he stood there, braced on wide-spread legs, glaring at the figure in red.

"Success, and your doom, Ascott Keane!"

Doctor Satan moved closer to his victim, along the side of the clear-cut path of the beam. He thrust his red-covered face down close to Keane's face, which was a mask of agony.

"*Watch out!*" screamed Girse.

But the words came too late. Already, Keane had moved.

His right hand shot out and clutched Doctor Satan's red-robed shoulder. His left gripped the fabric of the robe at his throat.

Indescribable amazement and almost superstitious fear glinted in the black eyes of the man who had roused such awe and such superstitious fear in others.

"My God!" he gasped. "My God! You moved! But you can't move! No one can move with the paralysis of the beam on him! It's . . . impossible . . . but you did. . . ."

The hoarse, astounded words ended in a scream that was a faint echo of the shriek of the electrician. For Keane had pulled the red-cloaked figure before him so that the light from the black box caught it directly.

"See — how — you — like — it," whispered Keane, between gasps of agony.

**B**OSTIFF and Girse leaped forward. They clutched at Doctor Satan's robe and tried to tear him from Keane's grasp. But though his hands were so small that they looked like the hands of a child,

they held their grip. His body was shrunken, but all its weight and all its muscle texture was left. He held the man with an unbreakable clutch.

"The light!" screamed Doctor Satan thinly. "Turn it—off!"

Both Girse and Bostiff leaped toward the black box, Girse bounded monkey-like over the earth floor, Bostiff swinging in great loops on his thick arms.

"Quick!"

Girse fumbled in the box and apparently found no switch, for the deadly light continued to shine, and the red-robed form continued to shrink in size. He looked at Bostiff.

The legless giant growled something impotently, and caught up a hammer. He raised it over the box.

"No, no!" Doctor Satan shrieked. "The ray must be reversed! Don't wreck the transformer!"

Bostiff dropped the hammer. Girse continued to fumble. The red-clad body was now less than four feet tall, scarcely an inch taller than Keane's grim, compacted frame.

"Behind the light!" choked Doctor Satan. "Girse——"

His racked cry stopped, as the light did. Girse had found the switch. Agony rolled from Keane. He could breathe again. But he kept his clutch on Doctor Satan.

Keane spoke. His voice was piping because of his shortened vocal cords. But there was no lack of relentlessness in it.

"Make me as I was before, or you die!"

"You can't kill me!" raved Doctor Satan, trying fruitlessly to break Keane's grip. "No man can kill me!"

"You thought it was impossible for any mortal to move while in the path of the atom-compacting beam," said Keane. "But I moved. You have occult as well as scientific methods of fighting—but so

have I. I've come to close grips with you at last. You'll go to the devil, your maker, at once, if you don't do as I say."

"Bostiff! Girse!" panted Doctor Satan.

The two swung in on Keane. But, with their arms reaching for him, they stopped. His steely eyes were drilling into theirs, now Bostiff's, now Girse's. Under that hypnotic gaze they seemed to congeal.

"The switch, Girse," snapped Keane, moving Doctor Satan as he spoke, till he was in the path of light instead of the red-robed body. "Move it backward—and we'll see what happens."

"Girse—don't move!" panted Doctor Satan. "You hear me——"

Girse moved like a sleepwalker toward the box.

"Girse——" It was a cry of maniacal rage from the red-masked lips.

But the monkey-like man went on, with Keane's power in the ascendancy even over Satan's. His hand found the switch. The light in the box snapped on.

In no particular did the light seem to differ from that which had flashed like a baleful eye to collapse the atoms in a man's body and shrink him in stature. Yet, now, under what seemed the same beam, Keane's stature increased.

To five feet he grew, to six. His face was a stony mask of triumph—tempered by the fact that Doctor Satan grew as he did. The rays filtered through his body, apparently, to affect the red-robed body he had tried to block from the light.

"Enough," he snapped.

Moving mechanically, Girse turned the switch. Once more the light went out. And now Keane saw a curious thing. His half-transparent right hand, affected in the conference room, had become opaque again! In the beam, that had been altered back to normal along with his stature.

At every point in this encounter with Doctor Satan, he had won! Now he had

only to destroy that black box by the wall, and then destroy its master. . . .

With all the tiger strength in his big body, he thrust the red-robed figure suddenly from him and leaped toward the box. Doctor Satan staggered back against the wall. But his jet-black eyes suddenly flamed savage hope instead of impotent rage.

**K**EANE did not see the change in expression. He was too intent on catching up the hammer Bostiff had dropped, too sure he had won completely.

He raised the hammer over the box, with Girse and Bostiff making no move to stop him. Doctor Satan's eyes flared like live coals. . . .

"And now, damn you, you're next!" grated Keane, bringing down the hammer on all the intricate and delicate apparatus in the box as if it were the red-covered skull he struck.

There was a soft explosion. Rays of blue flame leaped from the black box, bathing Keane in malevolent fire.

He choked, cried out, and staggered back. Still a third secret the box had

yielded: almost certain destruction to him who wrecked it!

A snarl like that of a victorious animal came from Satan's lips. He stared at his two men, and, stirring as though waking from sleep, they moved toward him with Keane's occult chains broken. The blue flame licked at Keane's body.

"And so you die," rasped Doctor Satan, staring at him. "You have stopped me again. But this is the last time you'll interfere in my plans."

With Girse and Bostiff following him, Satan left the pit. And behind them, as the door closed, Ascott Keane lay with death playing through his body from the wrecked black box. . . .

The hum of the motor beside him grew to a wail, a scream, and then with a grinding roar subsided into silence. With no constantly tending hand to keep it running, the motor had at last burned out. Blind fate had rescued Keane.

But Doctor Satan did not know that. He was not, after all, infallible. Grimly confident, he left for dead a man who was already stirring feebly, to recover almost within the hour and play the part of Satan's nemesis once more.

Another gripping tale about Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal, will appear next month. In it Doctor Satan will throw the automobile industry of Detroit into stark terror. Reserve your copy at your news dealer's  
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