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TERROR TALES


FRANCIS JAMES IS BACK!!
WITH A NEW, CHILL-PACKED NOVEL
BRIDE OF THE SERPENT



HOUSE OF THE MUMMY MEN
STARK, FASCINATING TERROR NOVELETTE
by **EDITH & EJLER JACOBSON**



TERROR TALES



VOLUME TEN

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NUMBER THREE

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

A SPINE-CHILLING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL

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 What foul and hideous power was it that drew the loveliest women from their beds in that pitiful transient camp—and made them surrender themselves to the unholy mercies of the monster that dwelt in the slime and ooze of the river-bed? Bill Coleman learned the answer; but the price he paid was dearer to him than life itself!

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House of the Mummy Men



Dr. Timothy Howard was not a cruel man. It pained him to have to inflict such agony on these lovely young girls—and all just because the world refused to recognize his genius. But his great plan was nearly complete: it only remained for Marjorie Welles to submit to being transformed into a human treasure chest! . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Model of the Damned

IT WAS a time of great happenings in the current world, but Dr. Timothy Howard, curator of the Municipal Museum of New York City, explorer and anthropologist, was only remotely interested in his own time and generation. At seven o'clock on a brisk Tuesday morn-

ing, having breakfasted early, he worked intently on the last touches of his Cro-Magnon life group. The artificially-lit basement laboratory of Dr. Howard's house in Rockland County was already almost filled by similar life-like groups of ancient and prehistoric peoples.

A west wind rose and died in the hills beyond Dr. Howard's house, and in the house itself, there was a sound of anguish more desolate than the wind.

by EDITH and EJLER JACOBSON

*A Thrillingly Dramatic Novelette
of a Fantastic Diamond and
the Weird Prehistoric
Mummies Who Came
to Fearful Life . . .*



"Hush. Please hush," Dr. Timothy Howard murmured to the dim female form suspended before him. She was strapped to a sort of iron cross, and two bands of pulleys on either side of her, kept belts moving slowly in endless progress; kept a constant, agonizing friction on her exposed skin. Machinery hummed invisibly and a slight, constant wailing came from the woman's whitish lips.

Dr. Howard remembered a time, far back, when he had been able to address people without using that timorous murmur—but he could not remember any details about that time, or when it had ended. He only knew that he had changed since then, and that everything else had changed.

"Don't you understand?" he continued, in a low, almost whining voice. "Only a matter of hours—most important." He had explained before to his specimens that they must co-operate, that they were essential to his well-being and success.

A despairing sigh came from the white lips, as though the woman in the mummy-like wrapping had given up all hope of mercy. The body jerked momentarily against its bonds—and then the endless belts, freed of all living restraint, began to move faster and faster. With nervous but skillful fingers, Dr. Howard released the tension on the belts—and the body sagged heavily on the white-washed floor.

Life had gone from the specimen, not in the insidious lingering fashion it should have gone, but in the old-fashioned way, forever, so that within five days, the woman would be a decaying corpse.

"Damn!" said Dr. Howard. Only a month now, to finish that West Wing exhibit in the museum—and the greatest crisis of his career about to come up. He could not foretell the exact time of the supreme test, but he knew it would be soon. For months, he had been working at fever-pace, preparing himself and now there was a snag at the eleventh hour.

Almost, he felt, the genius which had guided him since his great inner change, was growing fallible. He was not sane, and he knew it—for no man who lives wholly by inspiration can claim a reason of his own. He knew he had been sane when he first discovered the process whereby the constant action of chemically treated belts could make human skin as tough and thick as tanned leather, so that it imprisoned the muscular life within like a strait-jacket, and appeared as lifeless as a relic that had lain underground through the ages.

But he had not been sane since. . . . He had talked in a frightened murmur, and he had had qualms. They were not qualms of conscience—he feared only discovery by a hostile world. It was that world, he considered, which had driven him to this in the first place. The world had been niggardly with him, had sidetracked him into the position of a petty executive in a public show. It had forced him to use his wits until they faltered, whereupon his guiding genius had taken charge of him.

That genius had promised to lead him to fortune and independence, if he should obey its prompting; and he had done so. The means of Dr. Howard's liberation already awaited him in the Municipal Museum, once he had devised a means of using it.

But if there were to be more snags like this one. . .

Dr. Howard was trembling fussily when he slid under the wheel of his conservatively-colored sedan, and nosed it out along the beautiful new highway, toward New York City. The air was like pure wine, but on that Tuesday morning, he was too upset to appreciate it. He felt almost spiteful toward the world, so that he wished he had been a manual laborer, instead of one of the greatest contributors to civilized knowledge to be without honor in his own time and place.

A PARTY of school-children, under the guidance of a teacher, was inspecting the wonders of the Municipal Museum. Curt Whelan, assistant director, listened to their chatter. He was smiling, but he did not know it. Half his mind was busy with the Van Houten diamond. It was a dangerous piece for a museum, he thought, as the children pressed their noses against the triple-glass case in which it was protected. Too bad of old Howard to insist on having it here—and yet, there was no logical place for it except a museum.

“That stone,” he heard the teacher announce crisply, “is worth six million dollars.”

Thirteen of the fourteen youngsters oohed and aahed. The fourteenth, an undersized wiry boy of ten, commented acidly, “Ah, who’d pay six millions dollars for a big piece o’ junk like that!”

Curt Whelan grinned more broadly. The kid had something there—it was the same objection old Van Houten had bucked when he tried to sell the largest diamond in the world without cutting it up. From British South Africa, Van Houten had carried his stone, stopping always in cities where wealth was concentrated, putting his stone on exhibition and hoping for a buyer—but New Yorkers, like Londoners and Parisians, seemed to consider that immortal goods come too high for mere mortal man. And so the stone, uncut and unpolished, lay with a sort of dull malignant lustre in its thief-proof case, an eleven hundred sixty-three carat white elephant.

Within an hour, when the crowd grew thicker, Van Houten’s special guards would come to stand watch. There would be the usual parade of idle women, noisy young hooligans and assorted rubber-necks, staring with greedy stupidity at the diamond. Suddenly Curt felt a strong distaste for the whole business. He was not a shy young man, but during his four

years with the museum, he had grown to love it for its cathedral-like feeling of quiet. He had enjoyed explaining to interested onlookers how Dr. Howard unearthed the Lake Como fossils, but there was nothing sensational in that. Nothing half so sensational as the story of the old Dutch farmer who had stumbled on the largest diamond in the world when a heavy rain washed the topsoil off his turnip patch.

THE undersized, wiry ten-year-old was wandering away from his group. He had already tired of the Van Houten diamond, and was seeking new worlds to conquer. Curt followed him idly. He had a passion for sating the honest curiosity of children. In front of the Afriti life group, the child paused and stared at the poison arrows.

“That’s more like it, isn’t it, youngster?” Curt asked.

The boy looked up and grinned. He said, “Yeah. Say, do you own that diamond?”

Curt said, “No, thank heaven,” and was about to expound certain angles of the Afriti culture which he had found delighted small boys, when a clear feminine voice called his name from the next alcove.

Curt forgot the small boy and the Afritis. He was willing to forget most things when Marjorie Welles called him.

“How’s my Midge?” he asked as he walked up to her.

“Your Midge is fine.” Her smile was quiet, delicate, like everything else about her. “I came to get another look at your wonderful diamond before the crowd pushes me away.”

Curt led her back to the triple-glass showcase. “Van Houten says he’ll break it up if he can’t get a buyer in New York, and I wish he’d make up his mind one way or another. It’s scheduled to remain here almost indefinitely. I can’t

imagine what made Dr. Howard want to turn the museum into a sort of side-show!"

Marjorie's eyes focussed on the unpolished stone. "I hate to see it cut up," she mused. The lazy, unpolished lustre of the stone seemed to exert a powerful fascination over her, as it did over most onlookers. "It's—it's got a soul, Curt. Sometimes I feel as though it were telling me things—all the things it's worth after having lain dormant for centuries. It has a power now, a greater power than anything that size ought to have—and I like it!"

She looked up momentarily, and asked, almost as an afterthought, "So Dr. Howard wanted to have it here?"

Curt was startled into a vague unease, three-quarters jealousy, he realized. Marjorie's tone as she mentioned the gem had been—well, a great deal like the tone she often used with him, and the characteristic had not quite gone from her voice when she mentioned the name of Dr. Timothy Howard. It was almost as though she felt that the brilliant scientist had something in common with her, something deep and eternal in their mutual appreciation of the monstrous jewel whose pale yellow dimness mockingly hid its preciousness.

Roughly he said, "Cut it out, Marjorie—Dr. Howard's an effeminate old fool." He paused suddenly, struck by the thought that had never occurred to him before, that there was something cat-like and purring about his superior. Then he noticed Marjorie's eyebrows rising at his outburst, and added with hasty contrition, "I'm sorry, I—"

A shriek cut him short. A scream that shattered the museum's vaulted quiet. The cry of a small child being tortured to death. . . .

Curt felt the blood going sick in him, as he bolted back toward the Afriti alcove, whence the shriek came.

THE small boy lay on his side in front of the life group, trying to rip something from his swelling belly, something that protruded fourteen inches, quivering as though from a recent impact.

Curt would remember the scene when he was an old man. Burned into his brain were the wooden Afritis; the bowman with his empty bow; the small, tormented figure swelling rapidly into a bloated, discolored caricature of a child; the crowd that collected, as crowds always do.

He was aware of a woman kneeling beside him, with the writhing hideous shape between them, a woman who moaned over and over, "Oh, God, what am I going to tell his mother!" He knew he was talking to the small boy, pleading with him to be brave, and he knew there was no bravery in himself. There was only a sick prescience of dreadful consequence and a desire to smash the Afriti image that had caused this accident.

And then an ambulance doctor came, and pushed them all away. The doctor looked at the small boy briefly, and white-coated stretcher bearers carried off the small form.

The verdict seemed to ring like thunder—yet Curt knew it was ordinary speech. "He's dead."

Dead, thought Curt, of a poisoned arrow that is five hundred years old, fired from a wooden bow held by a wooden bowman.

"Who brought him here?" demanded the doctor. "What's his name? Is there anyone here connected with the museum?"

While guards kept the crowds back, Curt walked to his office with the doctor and the boy's teacher. His legs worked automatically, his mind kept playing the crazy words over and over, like a needle on a cracked record. A wooden bow held by a wooden bowman. The bowman had not moved.

The dead child's teacher sobbed out a name, an address, an age. Then she faint-

ed. A plainclothes inspector, flanked by a few silent police, said to Curt, "Now, sir, what happened?"

Curt told him.

"You expect me to believe that?"

Curt said honestly, "No—I can't quite believe it myself."

"Nonsense. . . . Someone took the arrow and stabbed him with it. Did you happen to notice who was in the alcove with the child?"

"There was no one," said Curt. He felt that the policeman was right—had to be right. Yet, somehow, he *knew* that it was not that. It was something mysterious, inexplicable. He answered more questions, and the inspector shook his head, and asked when Dr. Howard would arrive. Then the office was empty. The hysterical teacher had been taken away, and the police were outside, taking measurements and finger-prints which might in time prove something rational. Curt buried his head in his arms.

"Darling." It was a soft, tender voice, clear and bell-like. Marjorie stood in the doorway, infinite shock on her cool, fair face. He reached out his arms to her, a muscular, competent young man who had become suddenly bewildered as a child. She came to him, and stroked his dark hair. "It's a bad thing," she went on, when she seemed to sense that she had calmed him a little. "Do you suppose the investigation will lead to anything?"

"I hope so," Curt declared. It was going through his head again. A small boy, bright with promise of long good life, dead by a poisoned arrow five hundred years old. A wooden arrow held by a wooden bowman. "I hope it makes them take out that damned diamond. It's not right. This isn't the place for it! I don't know what the tie-up is, but I know six million dollars of concentrated stone is so much dynamite—and it's just exploded."

"Don't, Curt," she pleaded. "If you

knew what your face looks like. Try to hold on to yourself."

He tried. But it was hard, with those words running through his brain. "How about lunch? I'd like to get away from this."

Marjorie shook her head slowly. "Can't make it. I saw Dr. Howard this morning. He came to look at the stone right after you—when you went into the alcove after the boy. He's talking to the police now, but when he's through, I promised to have lunch with him."

Indignation sparkled in Curt's brain. Howard had been there, in the midst of the *melée*, and had left him, Curt Whelan, to resolve the problem as best he could, while Howard himself had used the opportunity to date Midge for lunch! It was rotten of Howard—it was rotten of Midge. And how could they have been so cool, with a boy dying in the next room! . . .

CHAPTER TWO

None But the Fair—Shall Die!

DR. TIMOTHY HOWARD stopped on the Manhattan side of the Holland Tunnel, to fill his gas tank. Ninety-eight—dollar-fourteen. . . . It was amazing, the variety of ways in which money could filter from his pockets. He considered that his whole attitude toward the world would be more generous if the world should subsidize him. It wouldn't take much—the grocer would never miss a donation of provisions to one man, nor the enormous oil company, nor would the Federal Government notice an appreciable difference if it ceased to collect taxes from Dr. Timothy Howard. Peevishly, Dr. Howard realized that human beings were too blind to give an inch and gain a mile.

For they would have been much better off, all of them, if they had not forced him to concentrate on irrelevant details. He

didn't like money for its own sake; he thought it a nuisance. And they were forcing him to apply his genius to one great coup, in order that he might forget money forever.

The sedan, re-fueled, threaded again through traffic. Dr. Howard was a good driver, enjoying an occasional game of skill for right of way with a cabbie. It relaxed his mind. He began to see his immediate problems with a certain soothing perspective. The death of the girl this morning left him without a subject for a Nile-dweller for the fiftieth century B. C. . . . But even though circumstances kept him in New York, New York would be cosmopolitan enough to yield him another Namitic type. There was no specific quarter in which to look for her. As any anthropologist knows, the modern Egyptian race differs radically from the ancient. Namite, Semite, Aryan—the classic subdivisions of the white race. Of the three, the Namite was almost extinct, save for an infrequent, startling throw-back which might occur in any strain at all. Wide lips, clear eyes, high cheek-bones. . . . The coloring didn't have to matter, that could be, and must be, changed anyway.

Luck and genius were his allies. He was looking for a woman with wide lips and high cheek-bones, and he might find her this very morning in the museum. It might not be a bad world. For the first time in hours, Dr. Howard appreciated the clear, cold atmosphere. The motor seemed to sing ahead of him.

And then, to cap it all, right inside the museum, he did find her. The most beautiful girl in the world, standing beside the Van Houten diamond. Yesterday she would not have seemed beautiful, for yesterday he would not have needed her. But today—he was so pleased with her, he could have kissed her. He caught her arm, and tipped his hat.

"Good morning, Miss Welles."

The green-eyed girl turned with a start.

When she saw Dr. Howard, her expression changed from anxiety to query. "Dr. Howard, something's happened. I don't know what—"

He knew something had happened. He had heard the sound of disturbance, had seen young Whelan dash from the girl's side. "What seems to be the trouble, child? Young Whelan too busy to see you?"

"Something like that. I wonder. . ."

Dr. Howard gave her no chance to wonder audibly. She was not looking at him, she was looking into the alcove where young Whelan had gone. "Now, now," he interrupted her, his tone gentle and fatherly, "that's not right. Let's you and I teach him a lesson. I'm lurching with Mr. Van Houten today, the owner of this diamond. Join us, and I'll see that young Whelan gets a raise. That ought to solve a lot of things."

Marjorie looked at him then, and he could read the thoughts in her greenish eyes. She thought him an old fool—she was being tolerant, however. .

"Very well, Dr. Howard. If you'll excuse me now, I think I'll see what's happened to Curt."

Dr. Howard glanced backward at her as he went to his office. He could not remember having been more delighted with a young woman, ever. She had come like an answer to a prayer, and no amount of disrespect in her attitude toward him could make him like her less. Dr. Howard even thought expansively of Curt Whelan, who had first attracted Marjorie Welles to the Municipal Museum. Good boy, Whelan—the best! He actually would speak to the trustees this afternoon about raising Whelan's salary. The boy had wanted that a long time—had wanted to get married.

But of course, thought Dr. Howard gently, the marriage part will be out of the question. Absolutely out of the question.

FOR two hours, Marjorie Welles watched the birds and the children in the park outside the museum. Sometimes they blurred before her eyes; every time she thought of Curt. Curt's temper was a swift, onerous thing, like an electric storm in midsummer. It flashed always when he thought she was letting him down—and then, like a midsummer storm, it would end in almost violently brilliant sunniness. If he had only listened while she explained—but then, he never did, not until he had ceased being angry, and explanations became unnecessary.

In a way, she was sorry she had promised to lunch with Howard. She was not fond of the man. She thought him a doddering incompetent in everything but science. But if it would help Curt get a raise—they needed that raise! She was making so little herself, with that afternoon job, and it cost so much to live. . . . It was a shame, she thought, that she had to play this hackneyed old game with such a poor actor—a pretty young woman flattering her fiance's boss into giving a young man a raise.

Dr. Howard was visibly distraught when Marjorie entered his office, as she had expected he would be. He must have heard about the boy, and the Afriti bowman.

"I'm not going to discuss frivolities," he informed her gravely. "I only hope, during this luncheon, that I can talk Van Houten into taking away his diamond. And I want you to help me, Miss Welles."

"Me?" She stared at the middle-aged anthropologist, thinking that there was probably some foundation to all the rumors of eccentricity about him. What earthly good could she be?

"Yes, you. I'm not a salesman, Miss Welles—I'm a scientist. And I want to put an idea across; but I can't do it myself. If you could interpret this for me—that there's something evil about that diamond. It's nothing I could express con-

vincingly to a layman. It's a purely scientific hunch, something a man feels when he's dealt as much as I have with old, old things. . . ."

What *was* it? Curt, another anthropologist, had said the same thing. A dead child, and a priceless diamond—to them there was an invisible hyphen between the two. She didn't like to think of Curt's mind being like Howard's. It was said of Howard that he wasn't like other men, that he knew more about the secrets of the ages than a human being ought to know. Of course, that meant nothing. Any professional man's idiosyncrasies are exaggerated by the lay public into sensational proportions.

It occurred to her, however, that Curt had also said something else about Howard and the diamond. She looked sharply at the curator.

"I thought you always wanted the stone here," she charged him.

He wrung his hands, in a feeble attempt at self-expression. "I did. I'm not such a poor businessman as scientists are generally supposed to be. We have two days a week when we charge admittance. That stone's brought a lot of money to the Museum, and I knew it would. But now, I'm afraid we're going to have to pay too high a price, in other ways. . . . If you could only help me explain, Miss Welles! I can't, somehow, do my own explaining!"

That was true enough. Curt had often been amused by the old boy's need for him at trustees' meetings. Curt could address an audience without forgetting what he had started to say. Dr. Howard was notoriously unable to grow graciously friendly with people—as he put it, to explain himself. Partly, that explained the queer stories about him, for people imagine the worst of those they do not understand.

She could not understand Dr. Howard herself—though at the luncheon, later, she did her valiant best.

LITTLE by little, as the three, Van Houten, Dr. Howard and Marjorie, sat on the terrace of the Park Tavern after luncheon, a sense of foreboding began to creep over Marjorie. The Dutchman paid no attention to her—and Howard seemed bent on making it up to her. He leered at her in his *gauché* way, well-meaning enough, but disturbing. He talked endlessly, after the topic of the diamond failed to elicit response from Van Houten, of his life groups, of the travels and studies he had made to perfect them.

Professional talk by a professional man? Yes, on the face of it—and all the while, Marjorie felt as though he were making love to her in a perverted and mad way, as though all this talk of the Swiss Lake Dwellers and the Maori Aborigines had something distortedly sexual in it. For he talked of his work as Don Juan might have talked of his conquests—and far less wholesomely.

He couldn't love a woman, she thought alarmedly, as the winter sunlight made a lacy pattern on his bony skull, the way a man ought to. He could love a dead image, though, in some sinful, incredible fashion—and that was the way he loved her! It was unmistakable. Marjorie was woman enough to sense his love, human enough to sense the shy vileness of it.

She fixed her eyes on the unresponsive Van Houten, pleadingly. He was coarse and unchivalrous, he had poor table manners, but he was normal. Frantically, her brain worked on one thing over and over—Curt will have to quit that job! There's something really wrong with Howard; he's worse than poisonous, worse than leprous. It didn't matter how Curt raved and ranted this time, if he should choose to rave and rant. She felt as though their lives would be irrevocably tainted unless they cut off all points of contact with the curator of the Municipal Museum. Something about him, less tangible, than an

odor, and infinitely more repulsive.

She was relieved when the talk was over at last, and Dr. Howard offered to take her to the book-store where she worked. She would rather have walked, but she didn't want to make any gesture that would call for explanation. She wanted to be rid of the man as smoothly and swiftly as possible.

She perched beside him in the sedan's front seat, breathing heavily—and then she turned to him with sudden sharp alarm. "Why, you're going the wrong way! This isn't the—" An unexpected stinging sensation in her left wrist interrupted her. She gave a little cry, and lifted her hand. It jerked to a stop against her will in mid-air. She tried to put her right hand over it, but that, too, had ceased to obey her will. The panicky scream that rocked in her throat was paralyzed, unable to become audible. She turned her eyes toward Dr. Howard.

He was staring straight ahead, at traffic, but he turned, and smiled pleasantly at her. The man was insane! He smiled again, with tenderness in his face, and realization broke like a bomb in her outraged brain. She could see the passing streets of New York, hear the hum of multiple life, but she could not move. Her mind was rigid as her body in the cataleptic endurance of two emotions—rage and panic.

CHAPTER THREE

The Diamond of Death

CURT WHELAN realized with a shock that he was thinking of the wooden bowman as a murderer—and yet, as he studied every angle and lineament of the black face, he knew that no single part had changed. It was the total impression which was utterly different, just as though the Afriti had a soul. . . . Was it the play of light and shade on the coun-

ters of the face? Or was it actual alteration, by the merest of millimeters, so that the facial expression was affected?

Curt had a sense of being closed in on, of the sky's roof falling inexorably, suffocatingly, upon him. . . . He realized that the building was growing uncomfortably warm; the brisk day outside had probably grown milder, making unnecessary the steam-heat in the building. Curt wiped his forehead and walked on. As he passed through the Hall of Mammals and the Hall of Man, he felt an urge to smash every exhibit in the museum. He attributed it to his nerves, and his notoriously ungovernable temper . . . and something else. For the exhibits seemed all like the Afriti image, all subtly changed and vivified, though when he touched them they trembled only insofar as hard, inanimate things tremble under contact.

This was the work into which he had put his life, this was the great educational effort he had admired and abetted. Suddenly, like a man thirsty for light in the midst of a nightmare, he wanted Marjorie. Marjorie was calm and clear-thinking and forgiving. Marjorie was the only one who had the power to quiet his overwrought nerves. She would tell him he was imagining the unimaginable and impossible when he sensed a sinister aura about him.

People wandered about the museum, gaping at all things, and at the diamond in particular, as though nothing had changed. As though Curt Whelan had not seen a child killed by a manufactured image, and had not quarrelled with Marjorie Welles. Surely, something should have been different.

A crowd had collected in the Marsupial Hall. Women's voices cooed questions. A child was crying. Curt shouldered his way through the crowd, his raw nerves making him rough and angry.

A little girl put her hands to her eyes and howled, "I lost my fraulein—and I

want to go home! I want to go home. . . ."

A stout mother commented loudly, "Dreadful careless, them nursemaids."

"Where did you lose her?" Curt asked the child.

"By the ladies' room. I turned around to look at something and when I looked back, she wasn't there."

Curt took the small hot hand in his. "We'll find her," he said.

The washrooms were in a part of the building where, due to pending alterations, only a few exhibits were kept. Save for those few exhibits, and for some scaffolding on the bare plaster, the corridors were empty. Reason told Curt that a girl couldn't get lost there, that if he went down to the entrance desk, he would no doubt find the fraulein as tearful about a lost child as the child was about a lost fraulein. But a frightened memory precluded his turning the child over to another of the attendants, made him head for the almost-empty wing. . . .

Large plaster panes lay at various angles in the corridor, and the faintest of sounds, barely a flutter, seemed to come from behind one of them. Curt stepped behind the panel—and turned rapidly to put his hand across the child's face as she followed him. It was nothing for a child to see. . . .

Nothing for a man, either! The girl lay there, her blood zig-zagging lazily over the fair white skin, matting the yellow halo of hair into a gory wig. There was a dark bruise on her throat where the neck had been broken, apparently by her fall. The blue eyes were staring terror-stricken into eternity. Her clothes were in disarray—and through them, into her bloody entrails, was thrust the hairy arm of Dr. Timothy Howard's brilliant conception of the First Human—the Missing Link!

Curt stared straight ahead for the space of seconds—at the stiff, unmovable hairy figure, which now lay prone over the dead girl, its attitude threateningly hunched . . .

much the same as it had been when standing upright on its pedestal! But the thing must have moved, before it toppled. . . .

Something went mad in Curt's brain—it seemed to him as though the brute jaw glowered, as though the little eyes of the First Man were red with lust, and he knew he hadn't been dreaming about the look of hatred on the face of the Afriti bowman, Curt had red circles of rage before his eyes as he let go of the child and flew into the hairy figure.

It rolled over with a dull thud against the plaster panel, like the stuffed image it was.

HE WAS conscious of one damning thought as he raced through the silent vault-like halls, with an hysterically babbling child clinging to his hand—these two events were no accident. The fossils were taking their revenge for the ravishment of their secret graves in time's womb. . . .

"Get out of here!" he shouted at the women and boys who clustered about the Van Houten diamond. "Get out before it kills you. . . ."

It was the police who snapped him out of it; who made him stop forcing the people to leave the museum. The police who insisted that all possible witnesses be kept for questioning. But there were no rational answers to any questions, and, in the end, Curt was left alone to wait for Dr. Howard and tell the eminent man that his museum had become a stamping-ground for devils.

He did not wait in Dr. Howard's office. He had urgent business elsewhere in the structure. Marjorie Welles—he wished now he had cut out his tongue before he talked the way he had to her. . . .

It was the madness of his despair that made him knock down priceless relics to see if it would make them show pain. He thrust pins into the tough unwincing skins of the fossils and their reproductions, look-

ing for some sign of life in them. Life which had manifested itself so violently and horribly during the day.

By sheer chance he happened into hearing range of the phone in his own office. It might have been ringing for a long time—the voice of Dr. Timothy Howard told him that it had been.

"Isn't there anyone around to answer bells?" asked the curator of the Municipal Museum.

"No," said Curt. "I'm alone here." He stated briefly what had happened.

There was a long pause, and then a shocked voice exclaimed, "Dear me, how ghastly! I wish you'd leave, Curt; the place should be investigated thoroughly before it's open, and it's no safer for you than for anyone else."

"No," said Curt again. Then, "You wouldn't have seen Marjorie Welles anywhere, would you?"

No, Dr. Howard had not seen Midge since luncheon, but since she had evinced no intention of coming back to the museum, Curt should not worry. Besides, Curt was overwrought, Dr. Howard said. Imagining things. . . . "I'm at a trustees' meeting, downtown. This ought to be brought up—I want them to take that diamond away! And you know how badly I talk to trustees, especially when I have to retract myself. It was I who first wanted the stone there. Please come down and help me, Curt—please!"

"Maybe," Curt promised dazedly. He was going to call Midge—mention of the Van Houten diamond reminded him all the more sharply of her absence and the quarrel which had precipitated it. If he knew where she was; that she was safe and sound and ready to forgive him, there was just an odd chance that he might go to a trustees' meeting instead of straight to her. A very slender chance. . . .

He felt certain that he was jeopardizing his position by thus temperamentally making himself clear to his superior—but

all the response he got from the other end of the line was a somewhat petulant, but wordlessly sympathetic sigh.

“SO YOU see, gentlemen,” concluded Dr. Howard, mopping his bony forehead, “we must remove the diamond. We’ve had nothing but trouble since it first came to the museum. I know that it doesn’t quite make sense—but it is too big a prize with which to tempt the ages . . . contemporary or ancient. . .”

The Board of Trustees of the Municipal Museum was silent. Each elderly gentleman looked at his colleagues for an answer, and it was old Dinhaus, president of the board, who asked finally, “When are we going to do it? Somehow, I don’t like the idea of handling. . .”

“Of course not,” agreed Dr. Howard. “Six million dollars worth of dynamite—and then the trouble with Mr. Van Houten. But if you’ll permit me to advance a suggestion. . .”

Carefully, Dr. Howard outlined the plan which had been in his brain for months, ever since he had prevailed upon the trustees to build that obviously impregnable showcase and extend old Van Houten an invitation to exhibit the diamond. He was relieved to find his colleagues accepting the need of removing the diamond without Curt Whelan’s testimony. As an afterthought, he said, just before the meeting broke up, “I have a young assistant; been with me four years. An excellent chap—I move we vote him an increase in salary to four thousand a year.”

After some discussion, the vote passed. Dr. Howard felt a quiet glow of satisfaction. After all, he owed Curt something—and it wasn’t coming out of his own pocket, but the city’s. There seemed approbation in the blue-and-lavendar evening sky, as he drove away from the meeting toward the hotel room he sometimes engaged when business kept him in New

York overnight. All the nervousness of the morning had vanished—evening had brought accomplishment and peace. Everything had worked out for the best, more swiftly than he could have hoped. Tonight’s denouement would be almost automatic.

He relished the image of a green-eyed blonde girl who was waiting for him in his hotel room as a child relishes the anticipation of ice cream. So lovely, and so useful—surely, luck and genius had followed him all the days of his life!

THE silence of timelessness had descended again for a short space upon jewels and relics, fossils and fetishes, all the curious paraphernalia of mankind’s thousand centuries. Still, Curt Whelan lingered in the museum, though he had combed every corner of it. He had the feeling that if Marjorie were not here, she was somehow safe. He hadn’t been able to locate her, but if she should return to find him—no, he couldn’t leave, not till morning. He stood in the darkness, looking at the fat yellow diamond, hating it.

Ambrose Halleran, the night watchman, had already dozed off to sleep at his station at the front entrance. There was no sign of further disturbance among the life groups, nothing to indicate the presence among them of a dormant and vicious spirit. Curt guessed the accidents, if they were accidents, would hit Timothy Howard hard. The curator might even lose his job because of them. Low and worried beneath the professional confidence, Curt thought his chief had sounded, when he had called after the trustees’ conference.

“You’re still there, Curt? Well, you’ll have company soon. Don’t tell anyone, but Van Houten is coming tonight with his workmen to take the diamond away. It’s being done very quietly, of course, and I don’t think there’ll be trouble. Van Houten himself may be nasty, but once he gets out safely with his stone, I expect

all our lives will be much quieter. And Curt, they've raised your salary—it'll be four thousand this year."

Not a sound in the dark night—or was there? Someone or something seemed to be moving on the second floor. Curt groped through shadowed halls to his own office. Nothing had been disturbed. The other offices? Howard's was just adjoining. . . .

The edge of a towel peeped over the top drawer of Dr. Howard's desk, glimmered whitely and unevenly. Howard, the neatest of men, had never left his desk that way. Curt jerked the drawer open, and cried out at what he saw there. His cry echoed dully through the lofty halls—the thing was impossible!

Fat and yellow and opalescent, unguarded at last, lay the eleven-hundred-sixty-three carat Van Houten diamond. Who had put it there? Who had been able, in the short space of time since Curt had last visited its case, to spirit it out of triple glass?

With the distaste he would have felt in handling a grenade, Curt picked up the heavy jewel and weighed it in his palm. There it lay, like any ordinary stone a man might find in any quarry in the world—but it was worth six million dollars!

Six million dollars worth of uncut, unpolished stone in the curator's desk. But Howard was nowhere on the premises, and the guards had not been Howard's at all, they had been Van Houten's! The natural suspicions which rose in Curt's mind, at finding the stone where he had found it, were untenable, in view of Howard's remoteness from the scene, certainly in view of the man's temperament. But then, what had anyone to gain—

As he approached the upper floor where the diamond should have been, he heard the faint screech of steel grinding on glass. Men with lanterns, in overalls and eye-protectors, were cutting away the case,

under the direction of the grizzled Dutch owner himself.

There was no surprise in Van Houten's old face, no hysterical dismay, as there should have been, with the diamond in Curt's pocket. He looked merely gruff and put out, and the frown-wrinkles in his forehead seemed graven by lantern-light.

And then the silence of centuries was shattered. In the space of a breath, a shadow moved almost imperceptibly forward, and Curt Whelan screamed a sudden warning. The shadow fell swiftly. . . . Van Houten's shriek ended in a gargle as ancient claws met in relentless clasp about his throat.

The heat Curt had noticed earlier had grown stifling, more oppressive. It seemed part of the bizarre happening in the museum. It was as though, Curt was thinking, the ages which had spawned the diamond were guarding it jealously even against a contemporary owner—as though not Van Houten, not any mortal man, might claim it.

Cumbersome no more, their big grotesque bodies limbered in the moist heat, the fossils were attacking. The workmen went berserk, and their shrieks were the shrieks of the doomed. Armed only with his fists and his hatred, Curt joined them. He was blind with frenzy; was barely conscious of the fetid breathing of the enemy, of the claws that sought revenge on his person for the indignities of his wardenship over them. . . .

Then he realized that Timothy Howard was pulling him away. The workmen, those who had survived, had fled. Van Houten ceased to writhe, and the fossils had subsided to a mere twitching. Howard asked in a strident, harsh voice that sounded unfamiliar to Curt, "Where's that damned stone?"

"Here." Curt took the big mass from his pocket.

"Give it to me." Howard seized the

Van Houten diamond from his subordinate's yielding fingers. "I've called the authorities—I suppose they're the people to give it to."

Then the police came, and after Howard turned the stone over to them, he broke down into such hysterical stammering that Curt had to do the telling for him. Later, he followed his chief out into the autumn night. There were still a few questions Howard had not answered to Curt's satisfaction, no matter how they satisfied the police.

CHAPTER FOUR

Curator of Horror

DR. HOWARD felt he owed thanks to someone, but he did not know to whom. For a moment, when the imitation diamond could not be found in his desk, he had felt that the things were out of his hands for good—but he could not have managed better himself! His bony brow glistened with cold sweat that had not yet dried off, but there was a faint smile on his face as he led Curt to the parked sedan.

For Curt Whelan had actually handed over the bogus stone on request—and then, he had not intimated to the police by one breath that such a stone existed. And now the Van Houten diamond itself was in good hands. The police would be some time in discovering the substitution.

He didn't know what had prompted young Whelan to act as he had. Bewilderment, perhaps some remote hope of gain . . . but Dr. Howard had no time to find out. He allowed the young man to seat himself before sliding under the wheel himself. Tight in his fist, he clutched a bludgeon valued at six million dollars. As Curt turned toward him, he lurched forward, smashed the stone with his open palm hard against the side of Curt's head. . . .

Everything was taken care of. Whelan

slumped, groaned. He was out. Dr. Howard did not stop to take the cord from the tonneau until he was on the Hudson's far shore, on a little-traveled road. Then, with a feeling of justifiable triumph, he headed homeward, his captive coming slowly back to consciousness beside him.

They were no more than two miles from the house when Curt said, "You damned crazy fool—let me out of here!"

An odd way, the curator reflected, for young Whelan to talk. He asked, curiously, "What was your idea, Curt? Did you think you could outwit me by not telling the police about the imitation in my office? And, by the way, why didn't you?"

There was anger in the young voice, anger and pain and futility. "You were the last person to see Marjorie Welles, and I wanted to know what happened to her. I think you're stark, staring crazy. . . . I was afraid you might hurt her, might have her somewhere where you could be pretty nasty."

"You shouldn't think that way of me," said Dr. Howard reprovingly. "Why, you're accusing me of spite!"

"Spite!" The young man laughed, bitterly. He threshed against the bonds, lurching dangerously near the gear shift. "You're not spiteful—you're insane. Besides, it doesn't matter whether I told the police or not. They're going to trace everything to you. You can't just walk off with a six million dollar diamond, and have no questions asked. The fossils that caused the disturbance were your work. It's going to be traced to you."

"Now, Curt. . ." Dr. Howard felt the young man deserved an explanation. Besides, the sound of his own voice, dwelling as it did on his own security, was reassuring to him. He explained that he had needed Marjorie, that Marjorie was lovely and useful. "And it's because of her that you're going to remain alive, Curt. It would have been too remarkable if both you and she had disappeared completely.

That was so foolish of you, staying in the museum after I told you not to! Now I don't know what's to become of you eventually."

"You'll burn," the young man insisted. He was being unpleasant, the curator thought, but it was such ineffectual unpleasantness.

He explained how the fossils could never be traced to him. "Because I placed them in the museum years ago—I'm not responsible for any tampering that's taken place since. When they examine the specimens that came alive, they'll find human beings—dead human beings. I attended to that. If the police are clever enough to penetrate the disguise, they will find most of them anonymous—the others are all known criminals. And further search will reveal my original fossils and reproductions cached away in an east side hide-out . . . known to be a gang headquarters. The gang's going to be credited with everything that's happened—especially as even the chemicals that were used for the disguise were bought by members of the gang who perished tonight."

Curt Whelan snorted. "You mean they committed suicide so you could get the diamond? That's ridiculous!"

"NOT quite," demurred the curator. "You see, they believed they would be only temporarily disguised. It seemed a good idea to my friends in the less respectable parts of the community to take a one-night stand in the museum, disguised as fossils. That was going to be their opportunity to seize the diamond. I imagine they began to suspect, as they grew utterly helpless under my treatment, that they had taken more than they had bargained for—hence the immense efforts on their parts which led to those attacks on the child and the young girl. They were angry, but I rather expected that would happen, too. That fitted in well with my plans, as everything else did. It

led to a series of events which made the removal of the diamond seem a natural step."

The young man seemed to have a one-track mind. Instead of commenting on Dr. Howard's brilliant scheme, he asked, with agony in his voice, "But now you've got the diamond—what good is Marjorie to you? What good would she have been?"

"You'll see," said Dr. Howard. The questions were making him a little impatient. "Your Marjorie is a veritable treasure—or should I say, a travelling-case for treasure."

Ahead loomed a neat, little, white house.

"Welcome!" said Dr. Howard expansively to his young assistant. He dragged him into the house, and down the stairs to the white-washed cellar laboratory.

Curt Whelan began to shout at the stiff half-human unfinished specimens, pleading with them to rise against their satanic creator. . . "Don't be absurd, Curt," said the curator. "They couldn't do a thing even if they wanted to—and I shouldn't be surprised if even they knew that they won't be any loss to the world. I've only been working on them, so that they'd be ready to substitute if my other subjects died prematurely. Fortunately, the need for them will never arise. It's just as well—I might as well admit the business was getting too touch-and-go for me."

He mopped his forehead—he was beginning to get a touch of that migraine that sometimes came to him after crucial moments. "I'm not even faced with the necessity of destroying them," he continued. "The calcium compound I've worked into their tissue, and the other chemicals I planted subcutaneously will take care of that automatically. I'd hate to lose Miss Welles, and if you'll excuse me, I think I'll see how she's getting along. I don't even like to keep her in the same room with these people."

The young man sagged against the white floor, but the curator had no time

to tend to him at present. Later, he suspected, Curt might appreciate some cool water—but Dr. Howard's headache made him impatient with other people's ailments. He still had to take care of Marjorie before he took care of himself.

NUMBLY, as through a local anaesthetic, Marjorie could feel the burning friction of endless belts passing roughly about her tender skin. So much had been done to her—but she had felt nothing.

Somewhere in the world she had lost, dawn was coming. She knew it when Timothy Howard stepped into the small room, and a crack of light came through the doorway. She wanted to tell him something—to utter some curse powerful enough to damn him into eternity. She was unaware of any motion in her throat, but a meaningless sound came out.

"You'll be all right, child," said the anthropologist, rubbing his hands together delightedly. "Do you know where I'm going to take you? To Rotterdam—I've already engaged the services of a diamond-cutter there. Best diamond-cutters in the world, those Hollanders . . . and you'll be of just as much service as he will. We don't want any marks on your pretty body. What would they think of a scientist who brought a mummy aboard with scars on it? So while you're in a condition to do it, we'll have you swallow this. . . ."

From his hip pocket, the man produced an object the size of a man's fist. Crude and yellow and opalescent. . . . Marjorie stared at it as a condemned witch might stretching an inner passage, choking her, lying at last within her like an embryo of the death to come. She was helpless and bound, but another faint wordless protest came from her lips.

"Steady now," Howard cautioned. With small surgical prongs he jacked her mouth open. Numbly, the prong's end pressed into her palate and tongue . . .

She saw the stone magnify as it ap-

proached her face—and then it disappeared. Howard was shoving it back, down the entrance to the aesophogus. She felt no pain, only a terrible breathlessness. The intent face was blurring before her eyes. She guessed she would not have the good fortune of instant death. Death would come later, after she had endured more, much more of this. . . . She thought of Curt, and of what life might have been theirs. Even this place, she thought, would cease to be hell, if she could see his face.

Suddenly, Dr. Howard was not paying any attention whatever to her. He turned, his nostrils dilating like a frightened beast's . . . and then the walls seemed to come alive with a crackling sound. The air in the small room grew thick and hot.

Fire! Marjorie tried to pull against her bonds, but her muscles were impotent. She looked at Howard, and to her amazement, he was bolting the door. Fear made him drool, turned his eyes reddish. He was afraid of something else, something worse than death by burning! It grew hotter. Marjorie's vision began to blur. Louder and louder grew the crackling sounds in the walls, and then there was another sound, even more thunderous—the sound of stamping feet. Faint at first, then nearer and more savage, rose a chorus of yells, as though the doctor's sins were rising against him.

They were at the door. Marjorie heard the pounding of their fists, the blood-lust in their voices . . . and then a small red tongue of flame licked the door-hinges, and the mob was upon him.

The shapes that poured into the room were nothing that should have moved, they seemed half-finished pieces out of a museum, come to a sudden, savage life. Relentless, hideous, impervious to fire and heat, they tore into the curator fang and claw. Some of the hairy bodies were already smoldering in flame—but even that did not seem to trouble them.

Curt had come in—a strange Curt with

singed eyebrows and charred hands. She could not be dreaming—she felt him stopping the progress of endless belts about her body, heard him pleading with her not to die. She tried to answer, and blood frothed on her lips—then she closed her eyes. She knew Curt was taking the stone from her throat; the dull sensation through her enervated flesh must be the tearing of membrane. Curt was swearing, begging, weeping like a girl. She remembered at the end that he carried her through the pack of bodies, through the fiery house, into early morning sunlight. She would remember forever the feeling of cool, dewy grass under her, and Curt's hot hand on her forehead.

LITTLE by little, the paralysis seemed to be going from her body. She could not talk, and she could only move her hands a little bit, but she was beginning to feel pain. It was sickening, stabbing pain, but it was better than to feel nothing. And there was Curt's face, leaning over her . . . she tried to touch it, and could not. He caught her fingers in his, held them.

"You're going to be all right?" he asked. There was hysteria in his voice. "We'll get doctors for you—we'll fix you up," he went on. "Oh, Midge, darling. . ."

Far down the road, a bell clamored. Someone was coming to put out the fire, but Marjorie guessed that there would be nothing left of Dr. Howard's hell-house when the flames had done their work. It was just as well, she thought. . . . Curt was gasping for breath, and he flung himself face down on the grass beside her. He must have been hurt, himself. She looked at him anxiously, a query in her eyes.

"I'm all right," he assured her briefly. "It's you . . . I saw what he did to the others, Midge. He was crazy, perverted. He shouldn't have been allowed to live. He told me how he worked it. He got in with a bunch of crooks, and actually per-

sueded them that he could disguise them so that they'd pass for museum specimens. Then, as curator, he could smuggle them in so they'd be on hand at the exact moment when old Van Houten had his diamond in transition from case to case. Howard double-crossed them in one way—he didn't tell them the disguise would be fatal.

"He brought me here, because I'd seen too much—and I couldn't do a thing until the fire started. One of the poor mummies back there—he kept a few replicas on hand, helpless, in case something should happen to one of those already in the museum—had managed to knock a bunsen burner out of the laboratory window, so that it dangled against the wall of the house. This fellow had discovered that the stuff Howard had kneaded into their skins relaxed a little in warmth, and that's why he'd tried to get close to the burner.

"Anyway, that fire started just in time, and its heat set them all loose. One of them, in passing, freed me. They were all out to get Howard."

Curt paused, as though he were too tired to go on. . . . Marjorie heard voices, normal voices, and knew that help would come soon. Curt had thrown one arm across her, and she could feel a hard lump pressing against her side—he had something in his shirt-pocket.

The Van Houten diamond—she winced, and he whispered, "We'll get rid of *that*, Midge! But it'll be almost worth our while—there ought to be enough reward for its recovery from Van Houten's heirs to take care of us the rest of our lives."

The rest of their lives—no, she wanted nothing of the diamond to hang over the rest of their lives! But there would be time later to tell Curt that—later, when some of the wounds that were raw torture now, should heal. It was enough now that he was beside her, when she had never expected such blessing again.

THE END