

# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Seventeen

July, 1938

Number Four

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## A FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL

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Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 6, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1938, by Popular Publications, Inc., New York, N. Y. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.20. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

# MAIDS FOR THE DUST-DEVILS

*What was that figure from a dim, dread age, which rode through town enshrouded in the black folds of each dust storm? Sometimes it left in its wake a beautiful girl, ravaged, insane. . . . Sometimes there remained only a pitiful heap of fragile feminine garments—where a lovely maid had stood trembling only seconds before!*



## CHAPTER ONE

### Out of the Void

**T**HE VEERING flow of wind whipped the old man's scraggly, white beard, stirred the halo of silver that fringed his bare head. He

would have been impressive clothed in a prophet's robe of long ago; but here, upon his soap-box in front of Haney's Drug Store, he was an absurd, anachronistic Jeremiah foretelling inescapable doom to an audience that was willing neither to listen nor to believe.

Still, he babbled on. . . .

# By DONALD DALE

A long novel of nameless doom and sinister, diabolical intrigue!



The ominous cloud of swirling, black dust had already gobbled up the west edge of Gem City. It was swirling around Banker Jordan's big house, and beginning to lick greedily toward the center of town. More fervently, the old man's sonorous voice arose: "Meddle not with God's plans. He has delivered this land to Satan. Flee ye from the wrath

to come. Escape the Dust Devil that rides the storm!"

The few who made up the early Saturday afternoon crowd on Main Street scurried by, unheeding. A year ago, they might have been swayed by the superstitious exhortation of the old man who called himself John the Hermit, for then everyone had been discouraged, ready to

give up his home, and join the other tragic dust-bowl refugees; but now, hope renewed by the new reclamation work, they merely ducked hastily into store-doors to wait for another duststorm to blow over.

I grabbed Kay's arm and we sprinted for Haney's. As we flew past the old street preacher, the only person in Gem City who was not diving for shelter from the unpleasant black shower, I yelled at him to come in; but stubbornly he held his lowly pulpit. And as we made the drug-store just in time, he flung a last prophetic warning after us, his shrill, wild voice endowing the familiar Scripture with the urgency of a newly-discovered, personal threat: "Dust thou art, to dust returneth!"

**I**NSIDE, a number of people stood behind the show window, staring up the street. As we joined them, "Doc" Walters, the nervous little pharmacist, and the two soda-jerkers left their post to come up front. Silently we gazed out, all held by that peculiar fascination of a dust storm that never lessens with familiarity. Fierce, wind-driven sandstorms we had always known, and accepted. But even in this third year of that plague upon our land, there still seemed something uncanny about a sky-high wall of dust that advanced stealthily, turned a few minutes of day into thick, black night, and passed, with no wind, no movement except the curious whirling and boiling within itself that seemed to endow it with sinister life.

The advancing black cloud was half way down the block. Now obscuring the red-brick front of the post-office across the street; now scudding past Rankin's Hardware; now drawing a curtain across the pies in the window of Henry's Cafe.

From his box at the edge of the sidewalk, the old man continued to gesticulate wildly, but his words were indistinguishable.

He was the only person on the street, and I was thinking that perhaps we should force him to come in, when suddenly, just as the duststorm edged in on the west side of the drug-store window, a girl—a stranger in town—ran into view from the east. Her bare head, crowned with a duchess braid of luxuriant, raven-black hair, was lowered as her tall, well-formed body bent into an eddying gust; the high-boned cheek was waxen pale, and the strong white hands clenched tightly before her.

Then the first dusty fingers reached out from the seething wall to mold the silken blouse against her breasts, and impudently flip the hem of the graceful skirt above her knees. And when, in the last minute before the storm swallowed her, I saw her fling her head up and flash a wild look into the boiling mass bearing down upon her, I had the fantastic thought that the pained contortion of her regal features was caused not by fear of the storm itself, but by terror of something she had seen *in* the writhing dust!

Then, before she could pass in her determined effort to press on westward, the thick, black cloud moved across the window, completely wiping out our view. . . .

As swiftly as it came the storm moved on. For a few minutes, the heavy after-drizzle of dust still obscured the vision; then, as suddenly it too cleared, we surged as one man against the glass to stare unbelievably at the figure outside on the dust-sprinkled walk. I hardly heard the shrieks and whimpers of fright that rose up from the group, for paralyzing terror held me.

It was the girl, the lovely stranger, who had come into view just before the storm struck. But God! What the storm had done to her!

The tall, well-formed body was nude except for a few ragged wisps of some sheer garment that, as the retreating wind



snapped back at them, whipped around her waist. The black hair, loosened from its braid, was now tumbled into wanton curls as if it had just been rumped in the play of love. The red mouth, moist and half-open, seemed to bear the burning print of fierce kisses. All the strong grace of her hinted shockingly of a Delilah's cruel ecstasies—just consummated.

But, in the split-second of my paralysis, I stared at the great, ragged abrasions—flecked with queer, gelatinous globules—that scraped her white shoulder, diagonaled her arrogant breasts, and dug deeper across the undulating line of stomach and thigh, as if made by some monster from whose huge, destructive hand she had just escaped.

She turned, and her long-lashed eyes seemed to stare straight into mine with a flash of dazed triumph. Then she flung her hand high—her right hand—grasping a strange-looking grey thing. And as her long-drawn, ululant cry split the air, she pitched face down on the dusty sidewalk!

**I**NSTANTLY I was in the street with the villagers and Saturday-idle farmers who surged out from the stores where they had been watching the storm, and I began to realize a dreadful seriousness in the situation.

For three years, the simple people of this little farming community had seen their labor bear nothing but sterility, had watched their homes slipping away, their families reduced to want. The losing struggle against unremitting deluges of dust had left minds agonized; nerves taut to the breaking point, and imagination wild and morbid. And now, even though the last few months had brought new hope, they were ready to stampede at the first appearance of anything they did not understand.

Immediately their oft-flayed minds reverted to the superstitious rantings of

John the Hermit to supply a supernatural explanation of this strange occurrence in their midst. There is little wind in a dust-storm and so, they whispered to each other, the girl's attacker—her lover—must have been the *Dust Devil!*

I had no time to think of explanations, for somehow, though I had accepted the assistant directorship of reclamation here because Kay Frazer, my fiancée, was teaching their small school, my work had come to mean more than a job, and I felt responsible now. So, sending Kay inside, I mustered all possible firmness to deal with the terrified mob crowding around the nude, unconscious girl.

I urged them to stand back. With mutinous mutterings, they slowly gave a few feet, but I saw nerves quivering in toil-worn faces and superstition slinking into dust-reddened eyes, as Dr. Larmer, the village practitioner, crowded through and knelt with me over the inert body of the girl.

She lay prone, right arm doubled beneath her. The left arm was outflung and the left knee bent as if bracing against unutterable agony. Dr. Larmer did not look at the girl's pale, patrician face half-covered with the loose ebony curls, but, having fumbled his scarred stethoscope from the battered case, he placed it against the blue-veined whiteness of her superb back, just under the left shoulder blade. The crowd held its breath while he squatted there, listening for her heart-beat, and stirred uneasily when, a moment later, he turned to growl, testily, "Well, she's all right, but somebody's got to take care of her. Who is she?"

The question was flung all around, but, in this village where each least detail of everyone's life is common knowledge, nobody claimed to know her. Who she was, where she had come from, or why she had entered the little isolated town, was a complete mystery.

But Dr. Larmer was impatiently insist-

ing that someone take her for a few day's care. Knowing the town had no hospital and no hotel, I looked around the ring of staring faces, expecting many offers from these usually hospitable westerners. Grim silence met my unspoken appeal.

"Mrs. Bailey," I finally began, "won't you—"

But Mrs. Bailey recoiled with shuddering protest, and her husband crowded forward toward me, belligerently. I began the same appeal to two or three others whom I had in the past months been able to befriend, but all the crowd was backing nervously away, and no eyes would meet mine.

It was then, as I was silently cursing their stupid superstitiousness that Kay stepped through the nervous circle. "Dan," she said to me, "why not let me take the poor girl up to my cottage?"

Involuntarily I recoiled, a protest springing to my lips, while for an instant I was flicked by the same illogical uneasiness that had touched the superstitious mob.

But Dr. Larmer was enthusiastically accepting Kay's offer, and, ashamed of my strange momentary lapse, I had to agree that the little cottage, where Kay and her bronze-haired assistant, Anna Falk, lived, was the best place for the lovely stranger. The staring circle had closed in again, but someone pushed through to spread a blanket beside the still, white girl. I helped the doctor turn her over, and started to wrap the blanket around her.

Then, I saw—*the thing she clutched in her hand!*

A wave of fantastic thoughts washed over my mind, and I was hardly aware of the recoiling circle as, terrified, they stepped on each other in their haste to back away. But my own wild thoughts were prodded by their choking, staccato fear: "The Dust Devil! . . . I told you! . . . He'll git us all! . . . God-a-mighty, let's git outa here. . . . *Dust to dust!*"

As if under compulsion, I forced loose the girl's convulsive grip. But my fingers refused to receive the thing, and it thumped to the walk, soddenly. Tingling with a queer, creeping fear, I stared—tried to force myself to characterize the thing.

Grey, malformed, elongated, ragged at one end, it was like life as it had first manifested itself in the beginning of time—a repulsive, shapeless blob—enlarged to monstrous size! A tentacle from the body of a huge rhizopodic monster to engulf and consume an enticing victim.

Then my eyes jerked to the girl's hand. To one white finger clung a shred of green—like algal slime. And across the upturned palm, was a deep furrow, almost to the bone, filled with a clear gelatinous substance! It was as if the touch of the gruesome thing had caused devolution—reduced the girl's flesh to *protoplasm*—to its own *protozoan state!*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Mates for the Dust-Devil

SOON after Kay and Dr. Larmer had taken the unconscious girl away, I stood in the prescription room of the drug-store with several others, staring at that queer mass of matter. Walters, the pharmacist, had carefully scooped it onto a rubber pad and carried it in there, and while he examined it, I began to get control of my thoughts. I realized that the unknown girl's clothes could have been torn from her by some freakish whirlpool in the dust, and the grey object must be something floating in the storm which she had convulsively grabbed. It wasn't—it couldn't be—*life*.

But the four or five men who had followed us inside were strained and silent, as Walters got tongs and probe from a drawer and fearfully poked at the gelatinous mass on the pharmaceutical mixing slab. The Reverend Clark Wilson ad-

justed his tie, cleared his throat and said huskily, "Perhaps Dr. Larmer had best be present at the analysis."

Jan Christman, the town's huge blond plumber, shot a quick glance at the stern, aristocratic face of Banker Jordan and said, nervously, "Maybe some of you think I got a nerve crowdin' in here, but I'm here and I got my opinions. Let's don't stall about this thing. Let's look at it right now."

With only one purpose, I spoke: "Our people are in the grip of a grave menace—the menace of fear. Unless we can find a solution to this mystery that will satisfy *them*, we can not save them from themselves. They will desert this place as they so long have been on the verge of doing, and, here on the very eve of recovery, all our reclamation work will go for nought. I'm sorry to have spoken so long, but—"

"You are exactly right, my boy," Banker Jordan said between thin lips; "if the people desert now, they cannot pay off their mortgages, and I'll be ruined—left with countless acres of barren, worthless land on my hands."

It was like him to be thinking only of himself, even at a time like this. A hot retort sprang to my lips, but at that moment, Monroe Shelton, director of reclamation, and "Dynamite" Tate, his right-hand man, pushed into the little room. Shelton, with his usual over-politeness, shook hands all around, and his long, bony hand in mine was like ice.

Immediately Walters began to poke at the ugly grey mass, and all heads stooped low above it. As a cleft was forced in the dark, gelatinous substance, I forgot my glib rationalization, and once more a deep, instinctive fear began to stir in me. The thing was boneless, and without definite form. All the way through, it was like gelatine impregnated with dust, or—I could not keep the thought back—like dust-engendered *protoplasm*, congealed

because cut off from the source of life!

Walters' pale eyes behind the huge, shell-rimmed glasses were wild and excited. He was muttering under his breath: "God! Why not? . . . Protozoa were engendered from primordial ooze. And this—the monster rhizopod from which this tentacle came—could be bred of the dust. The friction! . . . The static electricity of the dust storm! . . ." His voice rose hysterically—"Why not? Why not?"

"God in Heaven!" Jordan licked his thin lips. "It's even easier to believe than the other. Every one accepts the first theory of the spontaneous generation of life. Then why not this? God! It is as true as life itself—*your* life, *mine*!"

**N**OTHING but harm had come of our awkward attempt to examine the thing that looked like the tentacle of some amorphous monster. And when Dr. Larmer joined us later, his nervous examination of it and his few pretentious remarks added nothing. So we wrapped the thing carefully, planning to send it for analysis the next day to the science department of Midwest College.

I lingered a moment at the drug-store to inquire again if anyone had seen the Hermit since the storm, and to question Dr. Larmer about the lovely stranger who had suffered such peculiar disaster from the duster.

His usual garrulity seemed to have deserted him. "Coma, my boy, coma," he said, brushing past me.

But I stepped outside after him and went with him to his office door. I had to ask one more question. "And the queer, glutinous wounds—what caused them?"

"Seem to be from some acid capable of producing glutinosity," he mumbled hastily, and bolted into the door, leaving me standing in the street. . . .

A feeling of sadness and a premonition of disaster swept over me. It was Saturday afternoon, and yet there were no

children racing gayly in and out with candy and ice-cream cones. No romances budding on street-corners and at soda fountains. No chattering women peering through windows at gay prints. No men swapping yarns at the curb.

Instead, families were huddled together in old Fords and ramshackle wagons, in the care of the strangely-silent women-folk, while nearby knots of men talked together in urgent tones. One throng caught sight of me; the group pressed together and lowered their voices to a whisper.

In front of the barber shop, a cluster of my men—laborers on the reclamation project—suddenly stopped their talking, and looked toward me, as if hoping for some reassurance. But I only waved and passed on, for what did I have to say?

So, with a queer intangible dread tagging at my heels, I walked the few blocks to Kay's house. I wanted to see if I could get some clue from the girl she had taken into her home.

But Kay would not let me arouse the girl, who lay on her bed, waxen eyelids closed, black eyelashes making a fringed shadow on the ivory cheek. Nor would she let me draw her wounded hand from under the cover to examine it. So, leaving Anna, Kay's assistant, with the sick girl, I drew Kay into the living-room, and pressed her dear warm body close to me, trying desperately to regain a feeling of normality.

But she herself was strangely nervous and distraught. It was almost as if she, a woman, knew something I could not know.

For long minutes she clung to me silently. Then fearfully she asked me the one question I hoped she would not think of: "Dan . . . darling . . . did— What about the thing the girl held in her hand?"

"Well, dearest," I tried to answer casually, "naturally, there's no one here who is capable of—"

"But what," she insisted in a frightened whisper, "does it look like? What do you believe?"

"Don't bother your head about it, darling, for tomorrow it goes to Midwest College for analysis, and the strain of uncertainty will be—"

The telephone bell shrilled into the room. Nervously Kay jumped to answer. "For you," then she said.

It was Walters' voice, excited, hysterical. "Dan, it's gone!"

"But who—where—" I began, not needing to ask what he was talking about.

"I don't know. I locked it in the poison-cabinet—the thing, the tentacle! And now it's gone, or—*dissolved!*"

A FEW minutes later, I was with Walters in his little cubby-hole. His excitement had been all out of proportion to what had happened. It was very simple. A bottle of acid had overturned and broken the thing down into a harmless pool of dust and almost-clear fluid. And somehow I felt relieved. I was just going to phone Kay to reassure her, when from out somewhere in the street a cry of terror rose up. It spread, grew, surged, until it overflowed the street and filled the stores around.

With insane visions of some indescribable monster crawling over mangled corpses toward new victims, I dashed to the front part of the drug-store. The door was open and screaming children, gibbering women, white-faced men, were piling in through the narrow entrance.

"What is it?" I cried out. At first no one answered.

At last Clem Jones, whose farm I had terraced for him only the day before, croaked in terror, "A dust-storm! Two in one day! 'Taint natural! Another dust-storm!"

Another dust-storm. . . . Two in one day. I had never heard of dust-storms coming so close together. For a moment



I myself felt that our world was besieged by some sinister, inhuman force. But of course, that was silly. This thing could *not* be supernatural. It was only unusual.

"Nonsense, Clem! It's only—"

"But this morning—" he whispered, "the thing that—"

As if the mention of "the thing" were a signal, sharp cries rang out from those up in front who stood gazing out the window. I pushed my way in among them, stood behind the plate glass where Kay and I that very morning had watched the first dust storm. And a cold, fatalistic premonition swept over me. I felt that the gears of time had slipped backward—that I had lived this exact moment before, knew what had happened, and must therefore happen now, predestined from the beginning.

As before, the street was deserted, only this time not even John the Hermit was there to cry out his frantic warnings. The dust-cliff was slipping down the street. Now it was scudding past Rankin's Hardware across the street, now beginning to draw a curtain across the show-window of Henry's Cafe.

It was like a movie film I had seen before. I knew its inevitable sequence. So, in a queer daze, I stared into the street, waiting for what must come, waited until, at the moment the storm was almost upon us, there appeared, as was fated to appear—a girl, one lone girl!

But this time it was not a regal stranger; it was Gertie Glass, the pretty, little blonde waitress, coming out of the Rosebud Beauty Shop across the street, a newspaper held over her fresh finger-wave. She was dashing for Henry's Cafe, just two doors west of the beauty shop, hurrying to her five-o'clock shift.

Blind, unreasonable fear clutched at me—fear for the girl—fear that I was on the verge of some cataclysmic, soul-shattering discovery. Something my mind could not support.

She was in sight only a split second, but I saw a teasing finger of wind reach out and press the flimsy green uniform-blouse against her breasts; another eddy whipped the green skirt close about her firm, young hips. Then in the boiling palisade of dust that was almost upon her, I seemed to see a denser, more definite blob, with long hideous feelers pushing out from its huge amorphous body—like some rhizopodic monster bred from the dust, eagerly seeking a victim. My wild imagination saw a long, grey tentacle reach out, slap the newspaper from the girl's hair, clutch the still-wet, yellow ringlets, and—

Somehow I broke my paralysis, and sprang to the door. But by the time I was outside, I saw her hand reach out toward the latch.

The door opened and then the storm hit, blotting out everything. . . .

The illusion of a monster in the swirling dust had lasted no longer than the flicker of an eyelash, yet as I jumped back inside and stared into the dust-darkened street, I could not keep from picturing an insatiable, inhuman menace stalking our town. I tried to recall my glib explanations of what had happened to the strange girl whom Kay was now giving shelter. But all I could think of was the queer, gelatinous disintegration of her flesh and the grisly tentacle torn from her attacker.

I was completely oblivious to the nervous crowd around me. Held by a queer illogical excitement, I waited for the storm to blow over, never taking my eyes from the spot just outside the cafe door where I had last seen Gertie. It was as if I knew that, when the storm rolled over, another nude girl would stand in the streets of Gem City—a victim of the Dust Devil!

The thought was absurd, I knew. Besides I had seen the girl's hand on the door, and knew she must now be safely inside serving the refugees that crowded

the cafe. Yet, I watched. . . . When the storm passed on and I could see through the fine drizzle of dust it had left behind, the street was completely deserted. I was turning away, feeling relief as illogical as my fears had been, when something on the sidewalk just outside the cafe door caught my eye. Something green, lying on the walk.

Gertie Glass's uniform! But what had happened to *her*?

**I**N A second I was across the street. The clothes were not thrown about the walk nor yet lying in a heap as if someone had undressed her, but together in proper order, still holding limply the shape of her body. The orange-cuffed sleeves wildly outflung; extending from beneath the flimsy green skirt, the cheap silk hose reaching out limply into the high-heeled pumps. The Weekly Clarion, the newspaper that had covered her fresh finger-wave, scudded toward the gutter.

I knelt above that strange arrangement of garments, and peered at the row of buttons, beginning at the close-fitting orange collar and running down the front of the blouse—*still buttoned*. And the skirt-belt that had fitted so snugly around the girl's small waist—*still hooked*.

Dully I ran my eyes from the neck of the dress down the limp bodice, skirt, and hose to the tips of the patent leather pumps. But how— Before I could force my mind to admit the answer that seemed to be pounding at me, an excited crowd had gathered, and Constable John Sears blundered through, exclaiming testily, "What's this? What's this?"

He snatched at the green dress, and from within it slid to the walk, two small bits of cheap silk underwear!

Then the wild thought I had been resisting crashed through to my consciousness. Side by side in my mind, was an amoeba's shifting, fluid form and the huge grey tentacle of some gelatinous substance

like congealed, dust-infused protoplasm. "One is as easy to believe as the other," Jordan's trembling voice had said.

I remembered the hand of the unknown girl and the path across her breasts and hips—glutinous, like the primal stuff of life.

And now this! I could not escape the admission of what these clothes suggested—a body converted to protoplasmic fluidity, flowing out of civilization's garb to become—a *mate for the Dust Monster!*

While my thoughts dragged back through time to the primordial ooze, I was one with the wild-eyed, superstitious crowd that stared with me at the limp garments. We seemed all bound together in an eternity of terrified silence. The world would go on like this forever, without movement or sound. Then suddenly, from far up the street, a wild shrill scream of agonized terror rose, keened its way into our raw minds.

God! Can the mind of man endure more? I cried to myself as I plunged up the street toward the cry, the others stumbling after me, crashing into each other in their panic. Two blocks up, we came to the creature who had uttered that scream of agony—a mother, standing in her front yard, staring with glazed eyes at a strange arrangement of dainty garments—like a limp, paper-doll cut-out! Another girl gone!

Then before the full horror of that scene could sink into our minds, from farther on in the deepening twilight, another scream. Hoarse, agonized, torn from a strong man's throat. And others, to the north, to the south, rising up from every direction.

Like leaves driven by a gust of wind, the terror-maddened crowd swept through the streets of that little town, tracking down tragedy. But I did not follow. Heart cold with fear, I ran into a corner grocery and called Kay's number.

At the blessed relief of hearing her

voice, I clung to the phone-box weakly. "Darling! Darling, are you all right?" I shouted wildly.

"Yes, of course, dear. But I seem to hear shouting down the street. What is it?"

Thanking God that the little school house and cottage was at the edge of town and she could not know the horror sweeping around her, I calmed myself to say, "I'm coming right up. Promise me you will not go outside until I get there."

As I turned from the phone to start to Kay, Shelton came in the door of the grocery. Pale and tense, he forgot his usual annoying over-politeness and spoke to me without greeting. "Dan, I've got to get Mrs. Shelton and our daughter out of here. Dynamite will drive us into Oklahoma City. You'll have to hold the works until I get back. The men have their orders for tonight, so there'll be just the Sunday shifts. We'll be back by Monday morning."

Then, the full weight of my responsibility settling upon me, I stepped into the dusk of the street, and saw "Doc" Walters stumbling down the walk back toward town.

Catching sight of me, he stopped to try to tell me of the swath of horror cut through the little town. With terror-drunk tongue, he enumerated the names of the victims, described the nuclei of grief and madness, scattered among the people—two, four, five, seven! Seven feminine costumes lying limply in the street! Seven lovely bodies, by some hellish metamorphosis, delivered into the power of an incredible monster!

*Seven mates for the Dust Devil. . . .*

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Into the Darkness

I HAD found Kay at the point of collapse, for she had learned, after my telephone call, of the disappearance of the

girls. And Anna Falk, her assistant, was among them! But now a dull incredulity had settled upon her. There on the table was Anna's volume of Swinburne, marked with her favorite book-mark. Over a chair-back was flung her blue scarf. In her desk, letters from her mother and her sweetheart waited to be answered.

But she was gone. And there was nothing we could do. No coffin to buy. No body for the undertaker. How? Where? In what hideous state did her body exist? Impatiently I jerked my mind back, for I must not let it slide off again into the wild thoughts I had had when I looked at those empty clothes on the side-walk.

"It can't be," Kay kept saying; "things like this don't happen."

Yet they *had* happened. Gertie Glass, the pretty waitress; clear-eyed Jane Thomas on her way to a violin lesson; the lovely, black-haired bride of Lloyd Jones; the vivacious, red-headed Kelsy twins, in town from the farm; the taffy-haired, blue-eyed, slow-speaking Bertha Christman; and Anna—here at the edge of Kay's lawn!

It was madness to enumerate them, trying to force some pattern from those awesome tragedies. The only certainty was that these girls were gone—gone most horribly. . . . !

Suddenly, a thought burst in my brain. The victims had not been chosen indiscriminately!

There *was* a pattern! A frighteningly obvious one: all victims were *girls, beautiful girls!*

Again the wild thought flashed through my mind that these girls had been taken to become mates for the dust monster. The lovely unknown in the adjoining room had *won* the struggle—at the cost of only a bit of flesh. The others had lost, and their bodies had, at the vile touch, flowed out to—God knew what!

Disgustedly, I checked my thoughts,

for I knew I must get rid of these wild, intangible ideas. Now was the time for common-sense; there was danger here. No use to deny that. Menace was lying in wait for every lovely woman in our town. And Kay—Kay was the loveliest of them all!

And it seemed to me, now that I had forced myself to think straight, that there was only one answer. Some degenerate monster was loose in our land; some sex criminal, under the cover of the dusters, had invaded our town, stolen the flower of our womanhood. Thank God, Kay had been inside attending the sick girl!

I had come here to make sure of Kay's safety and await the telephone call to announce that the posse, which was being organized, was ready to start. I was more eager than ever to start now—to track down the fiend who stalked our girls; and I began charting a route of search in my notebook.

Kay excused herself saying, "I must prepare my sick guest something to eat. I succeeded in getting her to take some soup at lunch."

While Kay was making the soup, I went into the bedroom and looked in pity at the lovely ghost-pale face, framed in heavy black waves of hair. The cover rose and fell with her quiet even breathing, but her waxen face was like an exquisite death mask. When Kay came in to feed her, I went back through the living-room to the kitchen and stood looking at the stubbornly silent telephone. Suddenly, I heard a crash—a tray of dishes clattering to the floor, and Kay was calling, "Dan! Dan!"

I hurried back through kitchen, dinette, and living-room to help Kay with her patient, and pulled up sharp, staring in dismay at—emptiness!

Dishes lay in a shattered heap beside an overturned chair. The covers of the bed were in wild disarray. The bedroom's outside door swung ajar against

the darkness outside. *Both* girls were gone!

I DON'T know all the things I did during those next few hours. I plunged in all directions down dark streets, even beyond into the country road. I flooded the little two-roomed schoolhouse with a flashlight, and searched in every closet and corner. I called, I wept, I cried out Kay's name. I went down town and begged Constable Sears for help. He said that the posse had been difficult to organize, but that it would be ready to start before long. To him, Kay was just another girl—not the only girl in the world.

Completely exhausted and defeated, I went back to the little cottage, for then I seemed closer to Kay. I threw myself on the bed, buried my face in her pillow and tried desperately to make sense of the last ten hours.

God! Only ten hours, for it was not yet midnight, and it had been almost two when I had stood over the nude body of the beautiful stranger who had been the first to be attacked by the foul fiend.

And as my thoughts came around to her, I realized how selfish I had been in my grief for Kay. Not one thought had I given the girl whose scarred body had been snatched from the sick-bed. In what cabin could she and Kay be? Were they at this minute in the arms of a sex-crazed fiend? How could he have stolen them with so little noise? . . .

Suddenly, I heard the door-lock click, softly. I raised my head, stared, as slowly the knob turned. I never moved, gaze riveted to that little brass ball moving almost imperceptibly. At last, the door fell back, and, framed in the doorway, against the black background of night, was—the lovely stranger!

Her beautiful, perfectly-molded body was covered only by the sheer flowing folds of a chiffon night-gown. The classic strength of her—the long, firm thighs;

the plastic, curving waist; the proud, lifting breasts; the straight, smooth throat—was like the perfection of a beautiful, Grecian statue.

I sprang to her, gripped her fine, white shoulders. "Kay!" I cried out. "Where is Kay?"

Her dark violet eyes looked deep into mine, her arms encircled my neck, her tall body swayed against me, wilted in my arms.

Hastily I guided her to the bed, tried to stretch her out upon its tumbled sheets, make her comfortable. But she pulled me down to the edge of the bed, and curved herself close against me, her strong, young arms fast around my waist, her hair a black pool against the grey lapel of my coat, her eyes closed as if in deep contentment, her full scarlet lips smiling provocatively.

Impatiently I shook her. I shouted at her: "Where *is* Kay?"

Her beautiful mouth curved as if for speech. My heart stood still as I waited for her words. But suddenly her lips closed tightly and terror seemed to flick over her features. Then all the tenseness was gone out of her and, with a long sigh, she fell back in my arms, unconscious. . . .

When the call finally came and I rode through the dark village to join the posse at the court-house square, I could see, here and there, lighted windows where, I knew,

bereaved families were keeping the death-watch without even the comfort of the cold, peaceful body of the loved one.

We searched every possible hiding-place in the whole barren countryside, including the shacks at the reclamation camp, and when we returned in the chill prairie dawn with no word for the bereaved, I wondered if it were possible that their grief could match the aching despair in my own heart.

Now, as I had never ceased to do through the long futile night of searching, I kept thinking of the stranger who lay in Kay's bed. And it seemed to me that the clue we needed must rest with her. By what strange coincidence had she escaped—twice!—when the others had been swallowed up so completely? Was she a hellish decoy, an accomplice in the diabolic plot that had carried away our girls? It is true *she* couldn't have carried Kay away with so little struggle; but she could have signalled to someone outside. How else could anyone have known that for that brief instant, Kay was out of my sight?

Yet, if she were a fake; if she were not a girl in a hypnotic trance induced by fright, then she was the cleverest deceiver I had ever seen. At the edge of town, I left the posse, and went by the cottage where I had left her with Dr. Larmer, the only person I had been able to persuade to stay with her. But he said



that there had been no change, except perhaps a deepening of the coma.

So I left for the mass-meeting that was to gather about sun-up. My feeling of futility deepened as I had to pull aside to let pass an old wagon loaded with shabby household goods upon which rode man, wife, and five children with grey, hopeless faces and fearful eyes. And a little further on was a ramshackle Ford, its trailer filled with pitiful remnants of a home.

**T**HEY were on their way out I knew. These were the people Kay and I had tried so hard to help. This is what had become of our dream of enriching our love by service. My grief became identified with this tragedy of the people and settled more inexorably upon me.

But the deserters were few. And when the mass-meeting was over, I had a new appreciation of the courage and commonsense of these level-headed, laconic men. For even though an ungodly, superstitious fear gleamed in the eyes of many, they had, with a few, brusque words, bound themselves together in a pact to stick with their homes and their land. Rather than drag their families out to join the thousands of hopeless, unwanted wanderers driven from town to town, they were going to stay, pinning their last hopes on the work of reclamation—our work—today, *my work*. For the first time since I had lost Kay, I remembered that the whole project was in my hands for the day.

At the thought, courage rose in me to match the hope and determination of these people. I got my car and drove the five miles to the center of operations—the almost-finished irrigation well and its system of canals—to supervise the day shift. Though I was late, and the night-workers were already off duty, the day men had not yet gone to work. They were all huddled in nervous groups around the

long pine breakfast tables, talking furtively. It was the first time work had ever stopped since we had begun operation six weeks before. As soon as they saw me, the night men scattered, and the others went to work.

The day was a tortured blur. I was torn between duty and love. Yet, I know I would have deserted the work had there been anything to be done for Kay. But during the night, our posse had covered everything. Soon the state police would be out. Now there was *nothing* I could do.

But I wore myself out dashing into town to inquire for news, and back to camp to try to keep the nervous, restive men on the job. As the day wore on, my activities no longer seemed separate events, but were all jumbled together into one blur of restless unhappiness. I kept wishing there were forests, or hills, or some place in this barren country where I could spend my energy in search. And it must have been a need for a change that took me, late in the afternoon, over to the dry coulee which I had always felt, in spite of Shelton's arguments, should be made a useful part of our work. And when I stood on the steep cliff at the top of the arroyo, I wondered crazily, if I found good use for this sun-baked, dust-blighted hollow, the Almighty might accept it as a sort of bribe to help me find Kay, safe and untouched by horror.

Suddenly, far down at the other end of the dry coulee, I saw a little cloud of mist hovering close to the ground, strangely like the mists that hovered over the new earth when first life began to stir. Then the mist curled, thinned, and I could see what it veiled.

All sense of reality left me. It was as if my wild thought had transported me a million years back in time—a man forced to look upon his own meaningless, protozoic origin. For through the thinning cloud of mist, I could see tiny creatures,

moving about designlessly in what seemed a pool of black slime.

Like a visitor upon a backward planet, I stood in the huge, lonely prairie and looked upon this spot squirming with senseless, primal life—crowded and sluggish like that in a drop of stagnant water under a powerful microscope.

A big grey shape with long waving feelers dominated that little drop of life. The smaller white blobs around it seemed to be alternately attracted and repelled to the monstrous thing by some strange, sub-normal force.

*A big grey shape . . . and smaller white ones!*

Suddenly my mind broke through the fetters of unreality. I snatched my field glasses from my belt, trained them upon the far-off cluster of squirming life, and then—sanity left me!

The grey shape became a monster, huge, hideous—with one of his slimy tentacles *shortened, ragged as if a piece had been torn from it*. The smaller white figures were nude girls, drifting about in the crowded pit with a queer, uncertain aimlessness. It was, I thought with horror, as if they had lost all sense of *purposeful* locomotion—had reverted to primordial vagueness.

With shaking fingers I sharpened the focus of my glasses. The white creatures' skins had a pearly translucence. And beneath, I seemed barely to see blood coursing sluggishly through the flesh that must have turned to protoplasm.

I thought of the gelatinous deterioration of the unknown girl's hand where the *thing* had touched her. I thought of Gertie Glass's *empty*, green uniform. I stared at the creatures below. And I had to accept the crazy idea that, since the first disaster, had terrorized the minds of the people.

These girls *had* reverted to a lower stage of life. They *had* become mates of the dust devil. I could no longer deny it.

*I had seen it with my own eyes!*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Satan Rides the Storm

THE big grey thing reached out one long tentacle and drew a white figure to him, letting the formless tip wander down the firm hollow of her back and then slip lower, and cling. Close against the filthy chest glowed the blond curls—Gertie Glass! No—it was what *had been* Gertie Glass!

Then the *thing* shoved the girl from him and insinuated a feeler among the surging feminine bodies, and drew another forward. He turned the beautiful body around, and pulled the snowy white back close to him. The obscene tentacle curled around her graceful body, moved with slow undulations around the slender waist, desecrating that loveliness with its unholy caress.

And the hapless creature was Kay!

Over and over I said those words: "That is Kay!" But for seconds the fact did not explode in my mind. It thumped dully, like a dud bomb, and lay sizzling uncertainly. Then it burst crazily, slitting my mind with red streaks of insanity.

That hideously lovely creature, whose movements were vague and aimless, whose skin had taken on a sort of ectoplasmic translucence, whose body was in the embrace of a grey rhizopodic monster—*that was Kay!*

With agonized eyes I measured the distance, then jumped into my car and raced around the dangerous, rocky edge of the coulee, losing sight at times of the awful group below, and then regaining it, only to lose it again. I had no plan, no definite thought. I only knew that now I had something tangible to fight, and my body was powerful with fury.

At last I skidded my car to a stop above the point I thought must be the pit where the monster was toying with the girls he had made his creatures. I

flung myself to the ground and started to plunge down the steep, rock-strewn slope. Despair stopped me in mid-stride.

Balanced grotesquely on the edge, I stared, unbelieving, into the coulee below. Yes, the pit was there—a black, slimy spot in that stretch of sere brown. But it was empty! Deserted! There was no monster! No creatures who had once been girls! No Kay!

Stumbling crazily, I plunged down the slope. My existence became a kaleidoscope of futile action. I examined every crack and corner of that shallow black hole. There was no way for anyone to disappear beneath it. I raced back and forth across that small, narrow coulee, tearing at the cliff walls with bare, bleeding hands, examining every stone, every dry shrub. And though I knew they could not have got out on top without my seeing them, I found in the gulch *no hiding place!* . . .

It must have been a long time before I tore myself away from my futile search, for the prairie night was falling swiftly before I climbed out and crawled dazedly into my car. And it must have been habit or a subconscious sense of responsibility that directed me back toward project headquarters.

The first thing I knew I had parked my car down behind the bunkshacks. All were dark except one where Bill Sharp, the old timekeeper for the day, sat in the door, whittling. As usual, the day-men had all gone into town. As I started up the little slope that carried me over to the almost-finished canal on the other side where the night shift must now be working, I remembered, uneasily, the powerful undercurrent of restlessness and queer excitement that had hung over the camp all day. I recalled with new emotion—new understanding—the snatches of wild conversation I had overheard at the table at noon. The laborers had dwelled too much on the disappearance of the

girls, and their unlettered minds had seized upon parts of the attempted scientific explanations mingling them with the worst of the superstitions. And in half-fearful obscenity, they had been speculating upon the terrifying pleasure of consorting with a dust-monster's mate.

AT THAT time, I had felt only deep disgust that the kidnaping of seven of the town's loveliest girls could breed such vile and insane thoughts. And I knew with fierce anger that some of them must be thinking of Kay in particular, for I had often brought her to the project, and seen these men, who had been too long in a men's camp separated from wives and sweethearts, look covetously upon her feminine loveliness.

The flood-lights that lit the night work were out of sight behind the hill, and the weird ruddiness that hung in the air just above was like the sullen glow from the forges of hell. The huge pistons of the well-drill thumped into the great empty night like a giant heart, and the earth shook under my feet with every impulse of the snarling drill as it bit its way into the earth seeking ruthlessly the water that the Creator had seen fit to hide from man. All the conventional world of cities, night-clubs, factories, homes, seemed to break off and drift away, leaving this bit of dry, dusty prairie an island to float helplessly in infinite space. It was as if—

Suddenly I was yanked back into reality. My cold, leaden heart leaped to my throat. And then I was running, running madly to the crest of the slope, for, as if set into motion by a hot, vicious puff of a monster's breath, on the other side toward the ruddy aura of light swept a small cloud of dust!

It was moving fast, and in a second it hovered over the little hollow where I knew the men would be working. Faster and faster my feet pounded up the slope. I

don't know what I expected to find, but my tortured, unreasoning mind told me one thing: Disaster and destruction ride the dust!

God! Could I get there in time? And, "Time? Time for what?" my whirling brain echoed. Still I ran. One flying foot caught on a mesquite root. I stumbled, recovered, and at last leaped to the crest of the slope.

The dust-cloud had just swept past, and the little hollow, halved by the canal with its high ridge of loose dirt alongside, was clearly revealed. I don't know what I expected to find, but the thing I saw was inconceivable. I think I cried out. I know my legs stiffened, became cold, dead props beneath me, as I stared at the panorama of horror below.

The girls! All of them! As I had seen them in the coulee! The protoplasmic translucence of their white skin. Here and there, smooth shoulder, rose-tipped breast, or full curving thigh accented by a wisp of greenish, slimy algal deposit. White, soft arms curving and waving aimlessly, like—boneless tentacles! Hideously beautiful, revoltingly alluring, they huddled together in an uncertain blob, like a cluster of microscopic life in a drop of water. And around their feet spread a thin wet splash, as if they had just been lifted from some alluvial pool!

And the men! Dirty-faced, horny-handed, clad in their greasy overalls, they stood opposite in a tense ragged semi-circle, staring wildly at those white, nude bodies. Astonishment . . . fear . . . and then—a beginning of something else. It flamed in their hungry, red-rimmed eyes, showed in convulsive hands and the nervous jerking of strong, muscular limbs.

Suddenly Butch Blunt broke the semi-circle with a lumbering step forward, head lowered like an advancing bull. And one of the nude creatures, with that queer, floating motion, moved from the little white cluster toward the man. With her

movement, a wisp of slimy green loosened from a translucent shoulder and slithered over the mound of breast and floated to the ground. With a deep, hungry bellow, Blunt leaped forward and snatched the girl's slender body to him.

And the sharpness of the horror broke through into my consciousness, for that girl—that creature who had surrendered—was Kay!

Tugging at my gun, I plunged down the slope and scrambled upon the high, loose dirt that flanked the narrow canal.

As if Blunt's advance had been a signal, the other men had plunged forward. The white creatures had broken from their group, and now all was one mad, milling jumble. Only one thought drove me—to put an end to the thing Kay had become at the dust devil's disintegrating touch!

My eyes searched the mad melée, caught sight of her. I raised my gun, finger to trigger. Then somewhere from behind me, a heavy, crushing blow thudded upon my head. And the hideous scene, the white, nude figures, the tense, advancing men—everything—was wiped from my consciousness.

**M**Y BODY had no existence except as an anguishing heaviness without mobility or form. I could not move. I could not open my eyes. I knew only unutterable agony.

I felt a trickle of blood oozing from a red-hot streak across my head, slipping down upon my leaden eyelid. I tried to raise my hand to brush it away, but I had no hands, no legs, no feet. My body was a solid, imponderable fusion of pain and pressure—pain as huge and heavy as the universe.

Thin and far away in the cosmic void, I could hear the murmur of amorous voices, men's fast, excited breathing, and teasing, lascivious laughter of things that were once girls—the tantalizing pretenses that precede surrender. But it had no im-

port to me. It was only a part of this meaningless world in which I existed only as a titanic block of solid pain.

Then one voice separated itself from the others, became individualized. The travesty of a voice I had once known, in a deep ecstatic ripple of wordless passion—rose and then was smothered as if by the pressure of eager lips. A feminine voice—Kay's!

Kay! I knew then I must open my eyes. With an agony of effort, I forced up my burning lids. But the red pain obscured my vision, and the scene somewhere in front of me was a meaningless blur of moving forms.

Yet terror such as I had never known rose up in me as I became aware of a strangeness about myself. My eyes were almost on a level with the ground. My chin touched the earth. And I had no body!

Again I could hear that voice—the voice of the thing that had once been Kay—raising in amorous excitement. With almost superhuman effort, I slowed the mad whirling in my head, squeezed my eyes tight together, stretched them open. And for the first time since I had been struck, I returned to full consciousness.

I realized where I was, and madness seized me as I surveyed the horrible situation. I could not understand why, but I knew it was a *shrewd*, human hand that had struck me down and imprisoned me in such horrible way. And the girls—it was no weird and unnatural change that had come over them. But in some queer, crazed state, they, the loveliest girls of our community—Kay among them—were giving themselves to this orgy!

It was some fiendish, human plot!

Only a cruel mind could have conceived such incarceration—such entombment—as mine. My body had been placed upright in a hole, up to the neck, and dirt had been shoveled in and packed, tightly. The fiend had planned my torture shrewd-

ly, for I was on a slight elevation, forced to face a sight to drive any man to madness.

The little basin that had been the scene of our sane, scientific reclamation efforts was now a hellish pit of lewd bacchanalian revelry. God! I had never realized how action, even impotent or futile threshing around can relieve strain. If only I could have clenched my fists, lunged against rasping bonds, thrown my shoulders against restraining bars. But all I could do was look. Let my eyes communicate to my aching brain horrors too ghastly for comprehension.

The revelers had built a bonfire and, like savages, were flinging themselves wildly around it, the girls' translucent bodies floating, as if with primitive instinct, through an unspeakable dance, with tantalizing prolongation of each shameless gesture, like a picture in slow motion. The men's clothes were partly torn off, and their strong, muscular bodies jerked to some fierce, inaudible rhythm.

**T**HEY made one twisting, writhing mass of violence and lust—these creatures who seemed mates of the dust monster and these men who had dreamed of their unholy love. But for my eyes there was only one—Kay, the girl I loved! And in its cruel grave, my body could find no expression of the revulsion it felt except the tearing pain deep down in my vitals.

Her white body threaded its way in and out of the moving figures. Every floating movement began slowly, languorously, with the smooth legs, ran up the round white columns of the quivering thighs, flowed over the soft swell of stomach, and slowly pushed up to the quivering breasts.

I felt I had suffered every weird, damnable thought of which man is capable, when suddenly the tempo of the bacchanalia changed. The group began to shift as with a purpose.



The Kelsy twins glided over and fastened themselves around the big hulk of Ed Sowl, the bright red of their curls mingling with the coarse, black hair on his dirty chest. Before Ed's huge arms could close around them, Slim Skile, tall, rangy, dived over and snatched one of them. She went to him, red lips uplifted, and entwined her lax body around his. Then the four withdrew from the flickering fire and sank down upon a bed of upturned earth.

That acted like a signal upon the others, and in a moment the wild dance had turned into something unutterably worse. Sixteen-year-old Jane Thomas stirred amorously in the arms of old Pete Barto and let his toothless, drooling mouth close on her fresh, red lips and his dirty, gnarled hands caress her young body. The taffy-haired, naive Bertha Christman and little Peewee Turner; Gertie Glass and. . .

God! It was too much! Anna Falk! And the lovely, black-haired bride of Lloyd Jones—all withdrawing in languorous embrace.

Until only Kay was left. Kay—and Butch Blunt standing aside, his red, snaky eyes upon her. With that aimless floating motion she continued to drift, alone, around the heathen fire, her body slowly turning as if spun by a whorl of languid air, the red glow painting, one after the other, every lovely curve.

She moved around until she was close to where he was standing. He never moved. She drifted closer, her soft, translucent hips arching provocatively toward him. Still he never moved.

She drifted over to him, and twined her white arms around his big, bull neck. He stood still, unbending, his arrogant eyes holding hers. Then she lifted his big, beefy hand and placed it around her waist. Fierce fire leaped into his eyes, a bestial triumph gurgled in his throat, as his huge hairy arm snatched her to him and he started for the shadows.

A bellow of rage and unendurable horror split my throat. Then I saw the amorous couples in the shadows stir, and Butch Blunt stop, throw his head up, as if startled, but still holding Kay close. And it took me a second to realize that it had not been my voice that had broken in upon their lewd love.

Not my voice, for I saw their eyes lift far above and behind me to the crest of the hill. Above and behind me, a wild, frantic voice had risen to drown out my own, and was whipping over my head to hold the frenzied couples below.

A frenzied voice and mad, mad words: "God is not mocked! This country belongs to the Dust Demon. Reclamation is sin. *You must destroy this unholy plan!*"

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Death by Wholesale

I COULD not turn my head, but I did not need sight to tell me that the voice belonged to John the Hermit. At that realization, chaotic thoughts arose in my mind and tried to combine into a new interpretation of the terror that had destroyed us all. But they made no pattern.

The voice rose higher and wilder, and that strange motley of ragged, rude men and lovely, nude girls rose up and listened, with gleaming, fanatic eyes. The pleas of the hermit grew more definite, took on the fervency of an inviolable edict.

"It must all be destroyed!"

And with his mad words, some of the fantastic pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place. This old street preacher, whom we had considered harmless, had somehow, with his fanatic fervor, thrown these men and girls into a horrible hypnotic state, and was driving them to destroy the project. They were under the spell of a lunatic!

Yelling in unholy glee, the men and girls broke for the unfinished canal and, with their hands and with shovels began

pushing the excavated earth back into the ditch.

"Fools!" the fervid voice cried, "The death-sticks are in the store-room!"

It took a moment for the thought to drive home. Then, like fiends out of hell, they raced up and over the hill. And I knew where they were going. Death-sticks, as everyone in the Midwest knows—mean dynamite! Handfuls of violence and death!

I could hear picks hacking at the door of the powder house. God! When would the day-men return? And where was Bill Sharp, the old timekeeper? In a moment, shrieking and laughing, the pack were running back down the hill, carrying sticks of dynamite. And all hell broke loose!

Agonized, I searched the mob for Kay, and there she was—waving a stick of dynamite in her flaccid hand, as if it were a child's fire-cracker! I cried out her name, again and again. But my voice seemed to mean nothing to her. Or else she could not hear it through the noise of high, obscene laughter that rose from the crowd, and the hermit's continuous, fervid exhortations. I cried out the names of these men who had worked so faithfully and intelligently on this job; but they paid me no heed.

Peewee Turner, like a prankish child, stuck into the flames of the dying bonfire, the fuse of a death-stick—stuck it in and held it there until it was well lighted and then threw it down the vale to the farthest end of the canal. It hit, exploded with a shower of dirt, and the neat canal end was a ragged, yawning hole.

Everyone was thrown to the earth with the shock. Screaming in idiotic delight, Gertie Glass and Bunk Hawk, scrambled up, ran hand in hand toward the scene of destruction. Then I saw Butch Blunt scratch a match, hold it to a deadly fuse, and then fling the stick high, swift, and true after the speeding couple. I watched

through a century-long instant as it sailed through the air over their heads—to burst in their faces.

The earth spouted, two bodies sprawled grotesquely into the air, and exploded into bleeding fragments.

The crazed revelers paid no heed to their dead comrades, but began to light their death-sticks and throw them, wildly, in all directions. And above all, the voice of the crazed priest of destruction shrielled, driving them on.

**D**EATH was bursting all around. God only knew why it did not strike again. The concussions of air almost split my ear-drums, the earth shook, huge rocks showered around me. And the bacchanal of destruction became more frenzied.

The hermit's voice grew more exigent; louder he shouted until a lull came and he could make his voice heard: "The well! The demon-well must be destroyed! Go to the well!"

But during the last few minutes something strange had begun to happen to the mad mob. For a moment they turned their eyes to where the well-drill chugged away in the darkness, but on their faces was no understanding, and no unholy zest. They looked back at the chaos around them, and one or two men lighted matches but, like bewildered children, let them go out again. Their movements were slow and dragging, like a phonograph record run down. As if some excitant with which they had been drugged was wearing off.

Hope rose in me. Perhaps I could get free before the victims did any more damage to themselves. I knew I could handle the poor, old, crazed preacher. Wildly I struggled in my imprisoning grave. And made a dizzying discovery. The dirt around me was loosened! The explosions of dynamite had rent the earth. I jerked one hand free. I knew that my tight-packed body was a long way from freedom, but my elation mounted.

Then, suddenly, on the far side of the basin, in the shadow of a clump of mesquite, I saw a figure stir! Grey, dim, vague. I strained my eyes into the distant shadows, but I could not see with any distinctness beyond the circle of the flood-lights.

For a moment, the frightful thought came that this was the revolting, shapeless creature I had seen with the girls in the coulee.

Then the figure moved forward. And I saw it was a man—a *masked man!*

**E**VEN as I struggled to free myself, I wondered what this man had to do with the scene of destruction before us. But the question was driven from my mind as I saw a restless stirring beginning again in the huddle of the lethargic men and girls. God! What now?

A single figure—a girl—detached herself from the group. Falteringly, but with seeming purpose, she began to drift away from the others, gazing like a bewildered child, out upon the ravaged basin. Then, as her face turned toward me, I saw it was Kay.

With hope that she might be recovering from whatever drug had enslaved her, I called out her name. For a moment, she hesitated. Then she went on. More loudly I called. She turned her head and looked in my direction. Again I called her name. She turned around, took one faltering step in my direction. Hope rose higher. Surely, somehow. . . .

Suddenly, the shadows at the edge of the basin stirred, and a figure stepped out of the dimness and seized her. The masked man!

More violently I jerked my racked body against the tight imprisoning dirt. What was he going to do with Kay? *How much time did I have?*

Harder I twisted and wrenched, my eyes on the two. He snatched his tie off, knotted it around Kay's slender waist, his

long, skinny hands lingering in vile carcases. God! What could be the meaning?

Too soon I knew the horrible answer! For he picked from the ground a long-fused load of dynamite—so huge that it made the small shots the others had used seem like toys—and stuck it into her improvised belt. Then directing her toward the group of men and girls so strangely and quietly huddled in the basin between us, he—struck a match! I knew that, when the fuse was lit, she would in her strange trance, do his bidding—go down to them carrying this messenger of death—their death and hers!

Directed by the will of this fiend incarnate, she would become a *living bomb!*

But there are things more bitter than death, even violent death. And it was the masked fiend who forced me to drink to the dregs.

With a sudden motion, he flipped his match out. Without touching it to the fuse, he whipped out its flame. And his long, thin arms drew Kay to him.

With surprising strength, he lifted her until her tiny feet no longer touched the ground, and his thick, slaving lips roamed over her lovely, white face, closed over her red mouth.

Frantically I dug with my one free hand. Then I had a shoulder uncovered.

For the first time the man seemed aware of my desperate struggles against my entombment, for he looked sharply in my direction. Then, regretfully, he relaxed his grip on the girl. He shot another look at me as I was gradually pulling one numbed leg from the soil that imprisoned me. And then, striking a match and lighting the fuse of the bomb which was still held by the narrow strip of blue silk that engirdled her, he raced down into the basin, dragging her with him.

Trailing the spark that slowly climbed toward that tube of death, he ran directly toward the pitiful huddle of humanity, and pushed her into the midst of it!

Death by wholesale! Death for my loved one.

My eyes upon my beloved as she stood dazedly watching the death spark eat closer, I scraped, and twisted, and pulled with my tortured body. And then God—the God who I thought had turned his back—was good. I felt my legs pulling free! In a moment I would. . . .

I tore my eyes away from Kay as I realized the masked man had run up the little slope, and was almost upon me. He catapulted his body across the ditch and lunged straight at me. We went down together in a shower of flying dirt.

He would be an easy adversary. I could feel that. But he was on top; my feet were sunk again in the loose soil, my muscles had already been wrenched almost beyond enduring, and my legs were numb.

And the deadly spark was crawling nearer to Kay! A second's delay and she would be. . . .

God! I forgot all the rules of civilized combat and kicked, punched, butted the masked fiend. We turned, twisted, and, locked in a murderous embrace, rolled over. And my feet were free of the bog of loose earth!

But Kay?

I tore myself free from the creature's desperate clutches, lunged past him, knocking him sprawling into the drainage canal. And then, with a prayer on my lips, I threw myself toward that helpless huddle of men and women, toward that tube of death that lay against Kay's white body—toward that flying spark!

How many thoughts can shoot through a man's mind in a split second of stress! The men! The girls! Kay! The primitive pleas for self-preservation! What if I should get there in time—but *just* in time?

I made the last wild leap, and then the dynamite was in my tight-clenched fist. My eyes held by the spark nibbling at the

nub of the stick, my fingers, tightened by a paralysis of fear, clung to it for an eternity. God! Could I never turn it loose?

Then I whirled, drew back my arm for the throw, knowing that I must hurl it far! But even then I think I knew I was too late.

The stick left my hand—and then it exploded. The world split into a million pieces, and I was blasted backward, into a sea of nauseous blackness. . . .

Dynamite, if it is not handled by an expert, is as unpredictable as it is dangerous. And, thank God, the shot which in my desperation I hurled so tardily, did not explode in all directions as was to have been expected, but shot most of its force forward, blasting the hill where I had a few minutes before been trapped.

Of course, we all suffered from shock and from flying rock—Kay, the other pitiful victims of mad greed, and I. But we are all well on the way to recovery now, and there's not even a scar left to mar my fiancée's perfect beauty.

But the explosion was fatal to the masked man. The masked man? Monroe Shelton, forced by Banker Jordan into a fiendish plot that he could not reject because the banker knew that the reclamation director had embezzled project funds. And, on the promise that Jordan would replace the funds, and make no report of the theft, Shelton had promised to frighten the people from their land and let it fall back to Jordan, the mortgagee—because the banker had recently discovered oil under those dusty wastes!

As he lay dying, Shelton told us that much. "But," he cried out hysterically, "he promised me there would be no violence. He promised me! He said the people would be easily frightened away; that all I'd have to do was to kidnap the girls in some way that would arouse superstitious fear, and the people would leave. We got the idea from the hermit's rantings. And then I saw by my special

weather reports that there was to be a siege of dusters. I thought everything would be easy, but. . . ."

But the plotters had underestimated the courage of the westerners, and Shelton had been driven deeper and deeper into crime, while hysteria and sadistic impulses rose crazily as he went on.

That is the heart of the tragic story, but it took many weeks to unearth explanations for all the details, interesting but tedious, necessary to the ever-growing plot. And there are some things that have still to depend on inference.

Destruction of the project had not been a part of the original plan, but when Shelton found out it would be necessary, he knew he would have to scheme carefully, for the project was never alone for a minute. So he put a drug—excitant and aphrodisiac—into the men's supper and, under cover of the small dust-storm brought the drugged girls and the fanatic Hermit, also drugged, to the reclamation center.

The drugs wore off sooner than he had planned, and Shelton saw he was going to have to kill his dupes and finish the work himself, in order to create a confusion that no routine investigation could unravel.

The unknown girl who lay in a trance was the famous woman-photographer, Marie Gil-Martin, come to take pictures of the "Dust-Bowl."

Out of the horrible maelstrom only one disturbing puzzle remains—the "monster" I saw in the coulee. Shelton admitted that he had kept the girls in a cave in the coulee wall, and that he had used the pit to prepare them with their coats of glutinous pomade. But he swore with his dying breath that he never had used a hideous, grey "monster" disguise.

Because the cavern had been caved in, we have not yet been able to follow it to its end. It seems to lead onward and downward into the bowels of the earth. And we never did find the grey disguise!

Yet, I saw Shelton's lasciviousness express itself that horrible night at the project when he held Kay in his arms; and, of course, I believe he was lying—that he *did* use a disguise for some sadistic reason. Or else how can I explain the great, grey shape I saw with the girls?

Yet when I look down into that black, bottomless pit behind the caved-in hiding-place, strange thoughts crowd into my mind. Man's knowledge of the stuff of life is so puny, that he must not be too quick to reject new ideas. And today when I think of Walters' theory—that the creation of a monster rhizopod by the friction and static electricity of the dust storms is as plausible as the universally-accepted theory of spontaneous generation of the lower forms of first life in the primordial ooze—I can ask with the studious little pharmacist, "Why not?"

THE END