

SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

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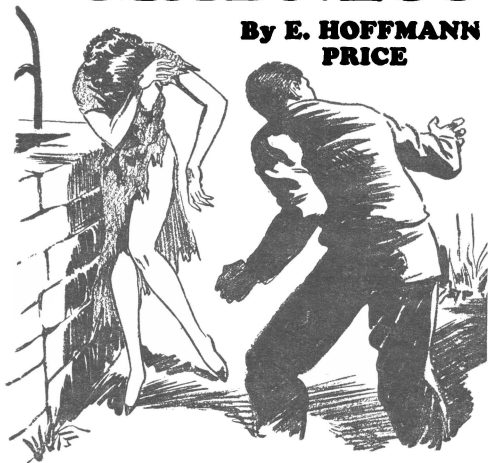
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MOJAVE MADNESS

By **E. HOFFMANN
PRICE**

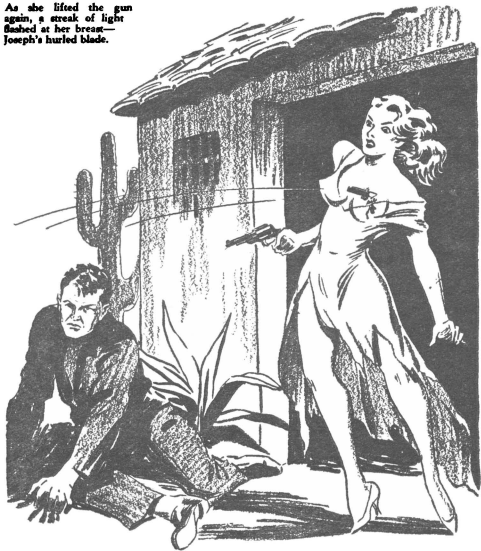


To Ray and Linda, it all sounded like a trick to keep them from getting married. But you can't reason with a madman . . . and at the things they found in the desert with him, they almost believed they were mad too!

THE dark haired girl stirred languorously in Ray Patton's arms, pressing her chiffon clad loveliness closer to him. She was high breast-

ed and supple; and her sleek legs were glorified by frail hosiery—all of which tempted Patton to delay the immediate packing of Linda's half filled suitcase.

As she lifted the gun again, a streak of light flashed at her breast— Joseph's hurled blade.



"Do you still think I'm worth the loss of a fortune?" she murmured, catching her breath after a kiss that left her dreamy-eyed.

"What's a million!" scoffed Patton. They had decided to defy crusty old Uncle David, drive to Yuma, and be thoroughly married. "Disinheriting me because he hated your father is crazy—crazy as his notion of living out in the Mojave Desert!"

Patton, fascinated by the cream-tinted

curves that smiled seductively through the wisp of lace and Nile-green chiffon that covered Linda from brassiere to just a bit below her shapely hips, found it easy to make his decision: "To hell with stalling, waiting for him to croak. He may live another twenty years, even with his bum heart!"

There was genuine love. Linda's appreciative sigh lifted a pair of firm, sweetly rounded curves that made Patton eager to postpone the trip for an

hour or so . . . but before he could quite kiss her to the dizzy and gasping stage, she slipped from his arms, and turned toward the suitcase.

The packing, however, was interrupted by the doorbell. A Western Union messenger handed Patton a telegram. A quick glance at the signature sufficed, and he tossed the boy a coin.

"No answer! Beat it!" Then he took time to read the wire. He blinked incredulously, reread it. "I'll be damned! Last minute change of heart—listen, darling! Uncle Dave wants us to drive out so he can give us his blessing."

But Linda shook her head. Her gray-green eyes were sombre as she slowly said, "I can't believe it. Until dad died, your uncle hated him. And that grudge extends to me. He must suspect we're going to defy him, and this. . ." She shivered. "Sounds like a trick to separate us in some way or other. Anyway, there's something ghoulish about waiting for an old man to die. . ."

But finally Patton persuaded her from her qualms.

THEY drove north from San Bernardino, emerging from the mountains and into the vast silence of the Mojave Desert. The narrow highway unwound into an expanse of silver-gray and dun and gold—illusory colors that shifted and changed before their eyes. And far ahead, and on either side, towered sullen, iron black peaks. As the sun sank, infernal reds and purples smouldered in those eerie strongholds of illusion.

Then, as night fell, the air became a thin blade of chill. Joshua trees loomed like black spectres guarding the road to a frozen hell, and the uplifted arms of giant sahuaros menaced their advance.

Linda shuddered, snuggled closer to him.

"Cold?" He slipped a reassuring arm about her.

"No. . . afraid. I can feel live things slinking stealthily. They have to slink . . . the desert hates life. Just as your uncle hated my father. And those colors—they didn't belong to this earth. Neither does anything that exists out here. It's a waste of madness."

Patton forced a tolerant laugh, and denied his own qualms. They drove on, and shortly after moonrise, a thin gray ribbon branched from the highway: the fork that led to Uncle Dave's corner of inferno.

Far to the left, the salt bed of a dry lake glistened icily, the ghost of dead waters. From somewhere in that eerie glamour came a long drawn, quavering wail that shivered between anguish and mockery. But Patton convinced Linda that it was only a coyote.

Presently the narrow road was swallowed by the blackness of an oasis fed by a deep artesian well. Half shadowed by it was a cubical white bulk whose face was broken only by a dark doorway, and two small windows that pierced the forty inch thickness of *adobe* wall. It was like a tomb masquerading as a fortress.

Patton helped Linda to the crunching gravel. Their footfalls mingled with the almost animate protest of dead palm fronds stirring in the breeze; but before they could knock, a door opened, and the inner light revealed a stocky, red faced man at the threshold.

Uncle Dave; and despite the fullness of his face, it seemed grim and tortured as the hell spawned crags at sunset. Yet his welcome was cordial, and in a moment he was leading them down a dimly

lighted corridor that skirted the spacious central patio.

"Got my own power plant," he explained, turning toward a living room in the left wing. "And a short wave radio set takes the place of a phone. That's how I wired you this afternoon. I bet it surprised you."

"In more ways than one," smiled Linda, whose spirits had risen when she saw that Uncle Dave was not a shrivelled, half-crazed desert rat; yet that moment of brightness passed when the housekeeper appeared and served beer and cold cuts.

Her hands were slim and shapely as her arms, and the mellow light gave Patton gilded glimpses of plump, firm breasts that peeped from the yoke of a cotton blouse; but her face was uncanny. He studiously avoided looking at her, and instead watched his uncle fumbling with the dial of a wall safe. That one glance, however, had chilled him.

Her face was frozen, corpse-like, set in an immobile mask that made every lithe movement of her body seem like the slinking of something from a grave. And her voice, as she acknowledged the master's orders, was hollow, toneless, macabre. Patton sighed his relief when she finally vanished in the corridor.

"You'll get used to Maruca," observed Uncle Dave. His eyes were haggard, strangely gleaming. He regarded Linda for a moment, then added, "She's an outcast from an Indian reservation. I'd have gone mad out here, but for Maruca."

"Mad?" groped Patton.

"Your father," continued Uncle Dave, still addressing Linda, "has been coming back, talking to me. I'll tell you. I've got to. I robbed your father of the Wolf Springs mine that's made me rich. So I hated him. We usually hate anyone

we wrong. But I couldn't stand it any longer. He's coming back, cursing me at night!"

THEY did not know what to say in the presence of that unbarred, tortured soul. It is hard to talk to a madman. So they watched him spread out the new will which he had taken from the safe.

"Say something!" he croaked. "Don't stare that way! Do you think I'm crazy?"

Before either could answer, a long drawn, ghoulish wail lanced in from without, echoing in the room; a curse and a laugh, at once a sneer and a moan of intolerable agony. Uncle Dave leaped to his feet. Linda cried out, and Patton, catching her in his arms, quavered, "Another coyote—"

"Coyote, hell!" groaned Uncle Dave, gesturing toward the barred Spanish window. "That's Bert Whitman—Linda's father—tell him I'm doing the right thing—speak up!"

They looked, they saw, and their hearts stopped. A tall, thin faced presence that gleamed with the strange glow of fireflies was undulating from the palm grove. It approached the window, gestured, then intoned, "They needn't tell me, David Thorne. The dead know all. I am here once more, to warn you against any change of heart. Do as I commanded, and win peace."

Linda screamed, clung shuddering to Patton. The brightness thinned, faded, vanished; and as a fearsome farewell moan stabbed them, she found words: "Ray—that was father! Just like that picture. The only thing mother left me to remember him by."

"It's a fake!" Patton protested, voice shaking. "I'll look for footprints. Give me a flashlight."

But Linda clung to him, and Uncle Dave cut in, "That's what I thought, until I failed to find any footprints out among the palm trees, except my own. But now he knows that when you two are married, his daughter will have her share of the Wolf Spring claim."

The spectre and the old man's confession had left them numb and dazed; and Patton was beginning to feel the strain of the evening, and the long drive in an open car in the desert glare. Illusion and sun devils still danced before his eyes. He drained his half emptied glass of beer, and found it flat and bitter. And as he arose, he reeled slightly, until he controlled the strange half-numbness of his legs.

The old man gestured toward the hallway. "Maruca's put your baggage in your rooms."

Patton wondered at the anxious, speculative glance Linda flashed at him. As they followed Uncle Dave, he caught her hand and whispered, "Better not walk in your sleep tonight, darling. He may have old fashioned ideas. And the ghost doesn't come into the house, I gather."

"If it's dad's spirit, I'm not afraid," she solemnly assured him.

He could hardly wait to see Linda to her room. Then he retraced his steps down the corridor to his own, and for a moment heard a far off droning in his ears. Uncle Dave was bidding him good night. Damn that treacherous Mojave sun!

Somehow, he found his bed, though he could not be sure whether his feet trod hard tiles or billowing mists. It was tilting, not only sidewise, but end for end. . . now it was upside down, but strangely, he did not fall. . .

PATTON lost all sense of time. There was a surging and rumbling in his ears. And strangely, he could now see all that lay beyond the four foot thickness of adobe wall. The desert was smiling like a beautiful pale woman who beckons from a tomb, inviting the living. . . .

He was lost in a swirling maze of illusion where in substance and recollection were hopelessly confounded. Thus when a woman approached his side, he was neither startled, nor frightened at her unearthly beauty.

She was luminous as though the ghosts of countless fireflies had been infused into her skin, and to see the loveliness of the body that mocked her tenuous gown was like listening to exalting music. The sway of her hips was a slow, sensuous ripple. She moved effortlessly, yet her ripe breasts quivered as in harmony with her supple waist. Her tapering legs, and the rounded flare of her thighs completed the wonder that had come out of the ancient desert.

Then, still wordless, she was in his arms, and he could neither question nor repel her. The unearthly chill of her body cooled the fever that raged in his throbbing temples, and those cold lips drew the sun-blight from his whirling brain.

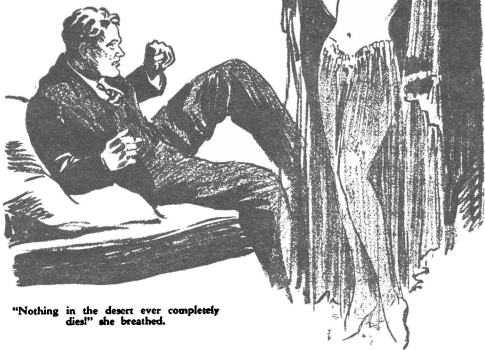
"Nothing in this desert ever completely dies," she breathed, slim arms holding him now like suave, cold serpents. "And sometimes we accept newcomers into our shadow life."

She was right. He was already part of her life, and nothing ever did completely die. Not even Linda's defrauded father. And then her cold kisses robbed him of all understanding save the ancient wisdom of the senses. Patton was like one of the shadow creatures that

live on the further side of a mirror, and Linda was now something from an alien world. . .

A sudden blaze of light smote him like a physical blow. Then as from incalculable distance a woman cried out in wordless amazement. The shock had him on his feet before he realized he had moved. For an instant, the shadow world and the one he had forsaken were dismayingly blended. Then he saw that Linda was at the threshold.

Her face was drawn and white.



"Nothing in the desert ever completely dies!" she breathed.

Through her filmy gown he could see the throb of her breasts as she gasped for breath, finally shaping her indignant outburst: "I couldn't help hearing you two—so I came to tell you that your uncle's trick to separate us is working perfectly!"

Before he could break in or glance about, she snapped the lights out, and hurried down the corridor. He bounded

after her. He was dazed, trembling, stumbling drunkenly; and before he could overtake her, she was in her room, hastily packing her suitcase.

"Linda, listen!" he stuttered. "I tell you—I didn't—"

"Please don't bother, Ray," she said, voice now level and passionless. "I understand your uncle's sudden qualms of conscience, and why that ghost didn't

drive him out of here. Go back and play with the lady he used to trick you. He invited us here to humiliate me!"

"I tell you, it was uncanny—like a dream—she wasn't a flesh and blood woman—search the house—try to find her!"

But Linda pityingly regarded him, then finally said, "Desert glamour has its limits, Ray. And please give me your keys. I'll drive home and send someone back with your car, if you ever want to leave. Don't you see, it would be terribly embarrassing if we drove back together?"

There were tears gleaming in her eyes, but the utter lack of wrath in her voice left him nothing to fight. He was still too bemused and dazed to do other than obey. Somehow, he could not resist the suggestion.

His room was empty as the desert, and as cold. He finally found his keys, and when he returned to Linda's room, she was dressed.

He handed her the keys. She could not miss the road back; and the Mojave had no further terror for Linda. She silenced his last protest by assuring him that any place was preferable to an oasis haunted by spectres, and uncanny women who contrived to be very much flesh and blood.

And presently, Patton heard the drumming of the engine as Linda roused it from the night's chill. His head ached, and his lips were parched and thick. He snatched a carafe beside his bed and gulped half its contents. Damn that brackish water. Rotten, like everything in that accursed Mojave Desert.

PATTON tumbled into bed. His troubled half sleep was a feverish confusion. Voices whispered and mocked and muttered, and at times he started,

sweat drenched and heart pounding, sensing that he had not been alone during those moments when he must have dozed. No need to hunt the apparition; she'd return!

His face felt clammy, half paralyzed, as though it were a mask instead of flesh. And finally, Linda's voice was dominating the nightmare, whispering as if actually at his side. Wildly hoping that she had relented and returned, he roused himself, reached into the darkness; but there was only emptiness, not luscious curves and supple, yielding body. . .

Then he heard clearly, and it drove him to a slaying frenzy. It was not his name she was murmuring, but Uncle Dave's. And after a silence, she sighed as though kissed to ecstasy. Patton staggered to his feet, reeled toward the corridor. Her voice was plainer now. . . all too plain.

Patton, drunk with wrath, stumbled down the hall. His ears guided him. He lunged, wrenching the doorknob, and plunged into his uncle's room. The moon cast a barred square of silver on the tiles, and beyond that patch of glow, just perceptible in the spacious darkness, were the two whose voices he had followed: Uncle Dave and a girl in a chiffon nightgown.

He caught a bare, soft shoulder with one hand, and thrust aside his uncle's blow with the other. Then, impartially damming them both: "Clever work, side tracking me and getting at this old fool! You damned idiot, do you think she cares any more for you than she does for me?"

Impelled by Patton's thrust, she landed in a sprawl in the moonlight, her frail gown a misty tangle about her hips, her lovely legs flailing wildly as she screamed and instinctively tried to regain her

footing. Her gown had torn at the yoke, half exposing palpitant breasts. Linda, face pale and frozen, stared up at him during that instant when his eyes followed her crash to the floor.

Uncle David snarled and swung a hard fist. As the blow connected, he panted, "You jackass, that's Maruca—now get out, or—"

He groped in the darkness, cursing and fuming. There was a dull gleam of blued steel: a pistol barrel. Patton struck his arm aside, yelling, "Drop that gun!"

A switch clicked, and a floor lamp glowed dully. But before they could grapple, before the hot-headed old man could make an effort to shift his pistol or the nephew pluck it from his hand, Patton's rage was overwhelmed by the sudden change in his uncle's expression.

His eyes had become white discs; he recoiled, and his mouth worked, making gurgling noises. His mad stare was divided between Patton and the woman who lay groveling on the tiles. After an endless moment, he groaned, "My God—I didn't know—it was your daughter—Whitman—I didn't—I swear I didn't—"

He was calling his nephew Whitman, *Linda's father!* He reiterated his frenzied protest, shrinking as from horror beyond reckoning. His face became plum colored, then a ghastly purple. He made a defensive gesture, the other hand clutching his throat. And Patton was for an instant too shocked even to try to dodge, or strike aside the rising pistol.

Then the peril in those blazing eyes stabbed into his lethargy. He hurled himself forward; but as he moved, a crackling blast seemed to lift the top of his head. Nitrous flame blazed in his eyes, and a hammer blow smote him.

There was no pain; just an extinction of all senses. . .

WHEN Patton's wits returned, his head was a splitting agony, and the concentrated light of a floor lamp blinded him. Even before his eyes drew into focus, he recognized Maruca's frozen mask, bending over him. Then he clambered to his knees and saw Uncle Dave lying in a huddle not far from him.

The round, purplish face glared up, mouth gaping, eyes glazed but mirroring horror beyond expression. A dark, circular spot stared accusingly from his forehead, and beyond him was a welter of blood and brain.

"You shot him. As you quarrel," said Maruca. Her voice heavily accented, was hollow as a tomb echo. Face averted, she shrank back into the shadows, and went on, "He mus' have hit-you, an' you take the gun and shoot him. But I do not blame you. I heard the quarrel about the girl. Only, I do not find her. She ees go away."

Patton knew that he might in a moment of peril as he faced his crazed uncle, have done just as Maruca said. He ran through the house, calling Linda, but there was no answer. Neither could he find a trace of her or the car out in the oasis. And a chill breeze was blotting out all tracks. He could be sure of nothing except that his uncle had mistaken him for the spirit of Linda's father; and that Linda, or some diabolical creature of night had tricked them both. Vague recollections of the legendary *lamia* who whispered madness into men's minds made the oasis a vortex of horror from which he could not escape.

The radio telephone, however, was a salvation. To notify the authorities and face whatever charges suspicion could

bring against him would be a refuge, even though his story would more likely lead him to the madhouse, than to prison.

Patton stepped to the transmitter, and while his knowledge of radio was confined to having watched several operators at work, he was not entirely at a loss. He closed a switch, heard the whirring of the little rotary converter. Then another switch—but as he cleared his dry throat to address the microphone, he smelled the reek of hot insulation.

He reached for the master switch, but choking fumes poured from the set, and a red glow blazed from the interstices of the bakelite panel. He was too late. The wiring had burned out.

"God. . ." he muttered. "I'm here, from now on. Can't cross the damn desert on foot. . ."

He rubbed the lump on his aching head. Linda might have snatched the pistol, fired in panic, and killed Uncle Dave by mistake. But however that was, he could not hope that she would attempt to clear him.

His uncle had no car. Supplies came from Barstow, by truck. If he did not starve before some friendly tradesman came out to inquire about Uncle Dave, he would go mad, or he and Maruca would kill each other. . .

The fumes of smouldering insulation drove him from the room, just as Maruca approached the threshold. She caught his hand, saying, "This place she is crazy. Before I come here, your uncle was in love with a woman-spirit who walks by moonlight, looking for men to kiss. Then I come, and he likes me because I am not dead in daylight. . ."

That stolid, frozen-faced creature's remarks confirmed his weird suspicions. Uncle Dave's spirit mistress, jealous,

had taken shapes best designed to accomplish her vengeance.

"First," concluded Maruca, after listening to his stammered queries, "she make love to you, and frighten this Linda who come weeth you. Then she take Linda's face and go to your uncle. When he see her in the light, and see you also, he goes crazy, and you keel him, and she fades, like that. The vengeance, it is complete."

Maruca went on, "I am the only witness. Some day some wan will miss your uncle, and you will be suspected. But that ees nothing. You marry me, and the law is that the wife cannot be a witness against you, no?"

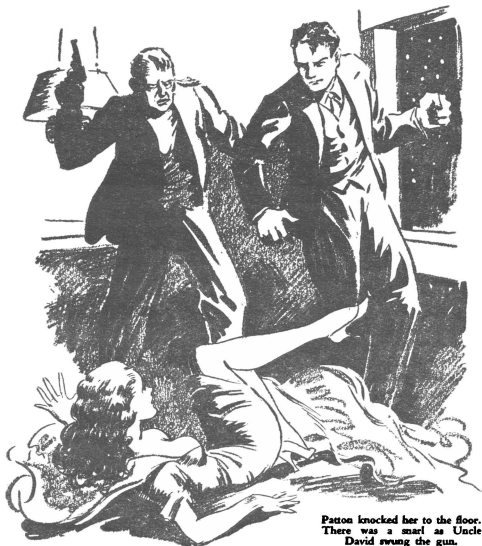
He recoiled, growled wrathfully; but as anger gleamed in his eyes, Maruca laughed and warned, "If I am dead, you weel be suspect of *two* murders. But if I live, I can protec' you, no?"

He had to hang on, humor her whim; anything at all until he could think it out by daylight, find some fragrant of sanity. He closed his eyes, trying to blink the phantoms from his tortured brain. And then Maruca came nearer. Her arms twined about him, breasts flattened against him as she murmured and clung tighter. He wrenched his head aside as she tried to tiptoe and kiss him, but he could not evade that amorous embrace. Yet every quivering curve tantalized him, arousing emotions that made him hate himself and shudder. . .

BUT they recoiled from each other at the sound of an approaching car. He froze, nerved himself for the ensuing encounter. Then there was a tapping at the door.

He followed Maruca. As she snapped on the patio lights, he saw a tall, thin faced man wearing clerical garb.

"This is Dr. Joseph, the missionary,"



Patton knocked her to the floor.
There was a snarl as Uncle
David swung the gun.

said Maruca. "Maybe you weel receive him instead of awakening your uncle, no?"

Patton for an instant eyed the sharp eyed, swarthy man with the prominent cheek bones; but before he could answer, Dr. Joseph affably began, "Don't disturb your uncle—and so you're Mr. Patton? He's often spoke of you. Though I'm sure he never mentioned me to you."

50

"No, I seldom saw Uncle Dave," groped Patton.

"Little wonder," smiled Joseph, closing the door behind him. "But I've spent years out in the desert, trying to dispense spiritual benefits to those who live out here." His face became grave, and he added, glancing sharply about, "Too much solitude is bad for the soul. A trial, even for the saints who fasted in the wilderness.

"I wouldn't disturb you at this hour," apologized Joseph, "except that I was delayed at my last stop, so I had to press on to your uncle's place to rest. I have business in Fresno tomorrow."

"Better let Maruca fix you a room," suggested Patton.

If he booted the missionary out of the house, that would later be incriminating. He tried to hurry him down the corridor to the room Linda had occupied; but as they passed Uncle Dave's door, the missionary seized the knob, saying, "He'd never forgive me for not greeting him."

Before Patton could check him, the door was open, and Joseph and the purplefaced corpse stared at each other. He whirled, crying out in horror; but that was cut short when Patton lunged.

The missionary ducked Patton's frenzied rush. He was awkward with his fists, yet he was agile and solid. Patton's hard fist drove him against the wall, but before he could plant a square knockout, the cornered missionary launched himself like a wildcat, sinewy fingers catching Patton's throat.

They grappled fiercely as they crashed to the floor, kicking and scrambling athwart the corpse. Red spots danced before Patton's eyes, but despite his efforts, he could not break the strangling grip. There was a terrible roaring in his ears, and he seemed to be plunging through a dark abyss; and then, exerting a final savage effort, he drew up his knee, catching Joseph in the stomach, catapulting him against the wall.

Patton, recovering, staggered forward. And then Maruca, who had been crouched in a corner, flashed forward, Uncle Dave's automatic ready.

"Don't, you idiot!" yelled Patton as a blast shook the room. He lunged, knocking her in a heap, pistol clattering from

her hand. "He's out cold! Killing him won't do any good! They're expecting him in Fresno."

He dashed to the front, Maruca after him. As he bounded to the running board of the missionary's car, she panted, "But we must kill him—he will tell—"

"I'm going to report everything, right now!" declared Patton.

She paused, face averted, hand gripping his arm. Then she said, "Maybe that is right. They will miss him. They will hunt him, and he is a witness. But if we go across the Nevada line tonight, to the justice of the peace, in Las Vegas—"

In Nevada, only a little over a hundred miles away, he could marry her at once, and counteract the missionary's testimony. In California, however, where they had to waste three days filing notice of their intention, Patton would be in jail, and Maruca a witness against him. She had him cornered, and he knew it.

"Get in," he muttered, stepping on the starter.

For Linda's sake, he had offered to sacrifice his inheritance, but now that he was heir to a million, she was through with him. And this grotesque creature who was forcing him to make her the mistress of that *adobe* fortress in the heart of desolation probably did not even realize that Uncle Dave had been wealthy, as there was little about the house that would have betrayed that fact.

Patton, corroded by the hideous irony, laughed at the desert night. A coyote ghoulishly echoed it. . .

THEY drove southeast toward the road to Las Vegas. At last he caught the far off spectral gleam of a dry lake. Beyond it was the paved high-

way at whose end was his damnation. Wrath made him reckless. He tramped on the gas; and desert illusion tricked him.

He swerved, jammed on the brakes to avoid plunging headlong into what seemed to be deep water filling a dip in the road, the result of one of those rare local rainstorms that for a few hours flood the bed of some dry stream. The car skidded in deep dust, plunged crazily, caromed off a boulder. Glass tinkled, metal crunched; tires screeched, then gritted as Patton fought the wheel.

It was over in split seconds. And then he saw that there was no water, only a deceptive crust of salt. Maruca, moaning and half conscious, was huddled on the floorboards. The impact against the windshield had stunned her, and the fragments had slashed her throat and breast. Though he loathed this grotesque bride of hate, his first humane impulse was to keep her from bleeding to death. Flinging the door open, he dragged her from the car.

Her skirt, sodden and disarrayed, exposed bronze-hued legs whose lovely curves made that frozen mask of a face seem an outrage. Then he stared, wondering at the white flesh beyond her knees. *White* flesh! But he did not understand until, tearing a strip from her skirt, he fashioned a bandage, to compress the artery at her temple and check the blood that poured from a slash in her face. Though cut in half a dozen places, only one spot was bleeding; and the reason was simple. She was wearing a mask of plastic composition. He stripped it off, despite the suction that held it in place.

Maruca's face was white, and through rents in her blouse, he saw that the under curves of her breast were white. And the blood trickling down her throat

had removed some of the stain that discolored her skin. Maruca was the spectral creature whose uncanny beauty had come between him and Linda! Uncle Dave's housekeeper had played a strange part that night.

He bundled his still unconscious companion into the car and headed back toward the oasis, first to look over the scene of mystery by day, and in the light of his discovery, then to drive to Bakersfield to report everything to the authorities. To hell with Las Vegas! Face the music; fight to a finish.

That grotesque mask which had concealed Maruca's face suggested more than Patton's weary brain could at the moment fathom; but now there was hope.

Dawn became gray, then a sullen red before the cluster of palms rose from the wastelands. Maruca, swathed in bandages, seemed not to realize their destination. Shock and the loss of blood had drained her vitality.

And then, braking to a halt, Patton wondered when nightmares would cease. His own car was parked in the grove, and from within the *adobe* house came a woman's voice, high pitched from sudden terror.

The door was just ajar. Leaping to the threshold, he raced into the shadowy patio. The woman was Linda, desperately struggling with a tall, lean man—Dr. Joseph, whose swarthy face was raked and bleeding from her nails. She slipped, and her assailant, toppling off balance, crashed with her into an angle of the wall.

For a moment there was a dazzling tangle of silk clad legs, and flashes of her bare torso gleaming through what remained of the upper portion of her dress. But Patton for once had no eye

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Mojave Madness

[Continued from page 65]

for the ivory fascinations that blossomed into view as her brassiere slipped in the skirmish. He lunged, just as Joseph recoiled from a well placed kick.

The amorous missionary, hammered end for end by Patton's fist, landed in a thorny cluster of agave. Patton turned to Linda, who lay panting and gasping on the ground, her streaming hair combining with a few scraps of green chiffon and the remains of a skirt to keep it from being a complete showdown.

"Oh—Ray—thank God!" She extended her hands; then she screamed, "Look out!"

HE pivoted. Joseph, now that the agave spines had taken his thoughts from love, was coming into action with a slim, venomous knife. Patton sidestepped the thrust, took a raking cut that ploughed his ribs, and slipped on the grass as he swung for the missionary's jaw. Though dropping, he tackled the fellow about the ankles, toppling him to the sod.

Both were battered and winded. It was anyone's game. Linda was scrambling for an earthenware *olla*, an ornamental pot harder than any man's skull; but before any of the trio could strike, a pistol blazed in the patio. Linda cried out, slumped.

Maruca, shrieking her rage, bounded from the arcade, automatic in hand. It crackled thrice in as many instants, spattering Linda with *'dobe* chipped from the wall. Joseph yelled, ignoring

Patton, who scrambled to his feet to seize the slaying apparition.

"So you like her, too!" screamed Maruca. "You—"

But as her pistol blazed again, a streak of silver whizzed through the red dawn—Joseph's hurled blade. Maruca's smoking weapon dropped from her grasp. She reeled, clutched at the knife haft projecting from her breast, then collapsed, a bloody froth welling from her lips.

The deadly clash was over before Patton fully realized that Linda, now on her feet and clutching her wounded arm, was no more than grazed; that death checked Maruca's wrath. There was no more fight in Joseph. His swarthy face was drawn and sallow.

"Missionary, hell!" growled Patton. "You and Maruca were teamed up. What's the score? Come across with the answers, and whatever you and Maruca were up to, it can be squared on account of your saving Linda from that mad woman. Otherwise, there are two witnesses against you, and that sweet love scene I broke in on will settle your hash."

Joseph knew that he was across a barrel; so he talked. "You must suspect, since you saw her without her mask. And if you look out in the grove, you'll see *marijuana* plants, and jimspoon weed, which the southwestern Indians use as a hypnotic, and for producing illusions. You and Linda drank beer, drugged in varying degrees.

"I was the ghost of Linda's father, wearing a plastic mask designed after a photo taken from her rooms in San Bernardino, one day she was out, months ago. And since I wore a pair of your uncle's shoes, he never saw strange footprints."

"But why, for God's sake, why?"

Linda cut in.

"Simple," said Joseph. "To make Patton's uncle send for you two, and thus quiet the ghost. And Patton, who was drugged, was easy game for Maruca. That was for your benefit. To make you leave.

"Next, during Patton's drugged interval, after you left, she put that ghost mask of your father on his face. She made herself up to resemble you, using a plastic mask based on several photos and my observations of you, months previous."

"I get it," growled Patton, before Linda could repeat her query. "After breaking us up, I was framed for murdering my uncle. Maruca was to marry me, so you two could blackmail me to a turn. But one of you two shot him—"

JOSEPH smiled maliciously, and corrected, "There is no wound on him. That was faked for your benefit. Maruca sapped you. Your uncle's notoriously weak heart failed him when he saw what he thought was Linda and her father's ghost in his room."

"You two knew that'd kill him!" flared Patton.

"Try and prove it!" challenged Joseph.

"Stalemate," admitted Patton, swallowing his wrath. Then, "But why did Maruca go wild and try to kill Linda?"

"Because," answered the fake missionary, "Linda's return threw a hitch into our plan. We had to get you and Maruca married before you got wise to the drugs, and illusions. Maruca flew into a rage, not realizing that you had already unmasked her. An insanely impulsive move. And I—well—I'd seen enough of Linda to—ah—admire—"

"So I noticed," she cut in, before Patton could resume the skirmish. "And to save my life, you killed your accomplice?"

"The jig was up, and I had to think fast," was the brazen retort. But his regretful glance at Linda's loveliness told her that that was not quite the truth.

"Joseph," said Patton,, "With Maruca dead, nothing can legally be proved against you. Though I'm taking your car keys, just to keep you bottled up in the desert until I can notify the law of my uncle's death. And instead of the hanging you deserve, you'll probably end up as the hero who saved Linda's life."

Then, as he caught her arm and turned to the patio entrance, he said to the disheveled girl at his side, "Vengeance is futile, darling. And throwing that knife did somewhat level the score. But why the devil did you come back, after—"

The red in his face was not entirely the sunrise glow. Linda laughed softly at his embarrassment, and answered, "Later, I realized that you'd looked drugged, acted unnaturally. I thought it was your uncle's plot to separate us, so I came back to spite him."

"Just for spite?" wondered Patton, taking her in his arms.

"Idiot," she sighed, "do you think I was going to let Mojave madness keep me away from anyone who could kiss a ghost till she was thrilled silly?"

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