

EERIE STORIES

*Startling Adventures
in Chilling Horror*

AUGUST, 1937

- VIRGINS OF THE STONE DEATH (Novel)** . GATES ALEXANDER 10
The glorious young body of the girl Terry Grant loved was fated to feel the cold embrace of death, instead of his own warm, protecting one—as her shapely limbs turned slowly into solid stone!
- THE SOUL-SCORCHERS' LAIR (Cover Story)** . RONALD FLAGG 36
He had a mad desire to scorch his wife's soul, sending the intense heat of a blow-torch through her flesh.
- CORPSE GIRL'S RETURN** ERIC LENOX 44
She was alluring, desirable—but the newshawk shuddered. For he knew she had slept the sleep of death with the cadavers in the morgue.
- DEVIL'S BREW** BRANTON BLACK 52
Sardonically, Gavin Clark planned murder, and visioned his trembling young wife bestowing her caresses upon a corpse. . . .
- HER ISLE OF HORROR** CLIFF HOWE 55
Loretta's dark-eyed invitation made the young investigator face the horrific monsters of her storm-lashed island.
- THE PAIN MASTER'S BRIDE** REXTON ARCHER 67
It was stark horror that Edmund Neymores learned when he witnessed the ghastly torment of a helpless girl as she posed for a statue of agony.
- SINISTER SKEIN** HORACE STONER 76
Trooper Trant had to untangle a bloody murder skein—depending on the help of a beautiful girl who didn't trust him because he had seen her wearing the briefest of clothing.
- REHEARSAL WITH DOOM** TERRENCE FLINT 86
Middle-aged Graham Munster arranged a rehearsal with doom to force his pretty young ward to become his bride.
- LUST FOR BLOOD** CLIFFORD GRAY 94
The boat club's secretary floated over corpse currents to a madman's hideaway where the price of life was blood.
- MATE OF THE BEAST** LEON DUPONT 102
Len Oakley found that no mortal man could steal a bride of the beast.
- TERROR'S TOMB** JOHN GREGORY 107
Private Detective Manton wanted to know why lovely Anne Seymour went willingly into a pit of terror with a parchment-faced fiend.
- STEP-DAUGHTER TO GREED** PETER REGINALD 119
Terrified, the girl forced her trembling legs to carry her into the tomb of the dead—to search for an inheritance in hell. . . .

*Cover by Norman Saunders
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Sinister Skein

By Horace Stoner

TROOPER TRANT kicked his motorcycle brakes. Locked wheels threw up a spray of cinders. Barely three feet from the isolated grade crossing, he steadied the throbbing machine. His headlight shot a probing finger into the black night. Its beam glinted up the twin tracks—to the form of a man. That man was stretched across the rails.

Out of the night, dangerously close, came the shriek of a locomotive whistle. Again and again it shrilled.... The Flyer!

That man on the tracks had his head turned, looking in the direction where the hurtling train would round the curve. He moved, seeming to settle himself more comfortably on his steel death bed. Trooper Trant yelled. But the man paid him no heed.

Another blast from the metal-mouthed monster. It charged around the curve, glaring headlight silver-washing the ground on the far side of the track.

Trant dropped his motorcycle and sped up the track. He yelled hoarsely into the grinding thunder of giant wheels. Then he grabbed the man and braced his feet against the wooden ties. The snorting engine seemed to crash down on his head as he heaved backwards.

A shock of wind hurled him flat on his back with the man on top of him. The Flyer thundered by, roared away into the distance. The engineer had been on the far side

of the cab, and had seen nothing. Trooper Trant rolled the man off of him.

"You would-be suicides give me a pain!" he growled.

The man was breathing heavily. But his arms and legs never moved. Trant peered closer, then swore. The man's arms were strapped with a leather belt, and his legs bound with a silk necktie.

Trant became involved in a strange murder skein—depending on the help of a beautiful girl whose confidence he had to win because he had seen her wear but the briefest of clothing.

Trant pulled him over into the beam of the motorcycle headlight. He propped him up while he took a knife from the pocket of his gray and black tunic. With swift strokes he freed him.

The man was white-haired, had a kindly, fatherly looking face. He was about fifty-

five. His clothes were dark and baggy. The collar of his white Oxford shirt was open, his necktie missing. And he wore no shoes.

Trant's lips pressed together hard. He shook his head.

"Who'd want to kill an old codger like him?" Trant got down beside the unconscious man and rubbed his wrists briskly.

Moments later the man nodded groggily. His head weaved from side to side. He licked dry lips. Sound rumbled in his throat.

Trant said, "You'll be all right, friend. Take it easy."

The old man mumbled again. Then incoherent words came. "Hidden—House . . . We'll—" his voice trailed off into a mumble again.

"Hidden House?" repeated Trant. "What about Hidden House?"

The man's eyes blinked in the glare of the headlight. Trant shielded those eyes with his wide-brimmed campaign hat. Then the man dazedly took in Trant's natty tunic with crisscrossing Sam Browne belt and gun-lan-yard. His eyes lingered on the big .45 Colt in its open holster.

"Cop?" he asked weakly.

"State trooper," said Trant. "You're safe now—"

A cinder rolled down the track bed behind him. Trant whirled—got half-way around. Then something like a ton of bricks thudded down on his bare head. He folded up into a void blacker than the night around him.

TROOPER TRANT opened his eyes. And it seemed that he had just closed them and opened them. For everything was the same as when he closed them. His motorcycle was still there, headlight glaring. The old man was still propped up against the stone. The only difference Trant realized was that his head felt like a dull chunk of lead.

Then Trant looked closer. His throat tightened. His eyes narrowed to the ground beside the old man. That ground was wet—as if coated with a dark enamel. And that dark enamel was smeared on the front of the old man's white shirt.

Trant flung himself to the man's side. Words—oaths—boiled to Trant's lips—but those lips were so tightly clamped that no sound escaped them.

The white-haired fellow was as dead as ever a man could be. A knife had ruthlessly slashed his stomach, then had been contemptuously wiped on the tails of his white shirt.

Trant swayed on his feet, his spurs crunching the track cinders. He had seen a lot of Death's handiwork, but none so vicious—so horrible—as this.

The trooper, grim of face, searched through the murdered man's clothes. Not even a cigarette had been left for identification. And the brand tag had been ripped from the inside of

his coat. Trant studied the tragic scene for long minutes.

"The killer wasn't sure—and came back." Trant looked at the dead man. "He's sure—now!"

Picking up his purple-corded campaign hat, Trant gingerly put it on his aching head. A gust of late fall wind nearly whipped it off. With a grimace, he set it more firmly. Then he walked over and righted his motorcycle, straddled the wide, sheep wool-covered seat.

"The poor devil said something about Hidden House." Trant wheeled his machine back in the direction from which he had come. "We'll see what that ritzy city girl has to say about this." The trooper thought a moment. "Funny. Thought she closed up for the winter and went to New York. Soon find out."

Headlight lancing the night, Trant hurled his motorcycle along the wild, desolate road. And the road became wilder, more desolate, as he skidded sharply to the left and flashed on over a wheel-rutted lane. So rugged and isolated was this country that it seemed almost impossible that a New York debutante would choose it for a summer home. But far overhead, wires snaked through the tree tops—wires that supplied heat, light, refrigeration and telephone.

Then right where the trees seemed thickest, Trooper Trant sped into an arenalike clearing. And in the center of this clearing was a large two-story hunting lodge with an eight-car garage behind it. A gay spot in mid-summer. But now, in late fall, it was a desolate, wind-swept blot against the night.

The big living-room was lighted, but the rest of the lodge was in inky blackness. Then above the throb of Trant's Harley-Davidson came an ear-piercing shriek:

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

TRANT jerked to a stop, kicked out the motorcycle rest and leaped up on the wide veranda. He

tried the door. It was locked. Then he pressed his face to the curtained glass door—and saw a very strange sight indeed.

A dark-skinned, wiry man ran across the room, jumped into the air and wildly swung an iron poker. Trant pressed closer to the glass to look beyond the man, but he saw nothing—nothing that the man could have swung at. The dark-skinned man turned his face up to the rafters and wagged the poker viciously. Trant followed the man's gaze and saw a big green and red parrot awkwardly waddling across the rafter.

Trant thumped on the door. The dark-skinned man twisted about, his face contorted angrily. He tossed the poker into the dead ashes of the fireplace. With a shrug he straightened his clothes and walked over to the door. He called out, "Who's there?"

"State police," said Trant. "Open up."

The man's shadow on the glass grew rigid. After a moment's hesitation, he opened the door. His dark face was expressionless. "Well?"

"Trooper Trant," announced the policeman, stepping in past the man. "Sorry to bother you, but I'd like to ask some questions."

The wiry man's eyes followed Trant's uninvited entrance into the room. His dark lips peeled back over gleaming teeth. "Do come in." His smile crept higher on one side of his face. "And those questions—"

"About a murder," said Trant. "First, who're you?"

The smile left the man's dark face. "I'm Packley—Anton Packley. I'm a guest here."

Trant crossed the room and picked up a continental phone. He lifted his head back and glanced at the rafters. The parrot was perched up there suspiciously eyeing him. Trant tapped the phone signal bar. He looked at the dark-skinned Packley. "Dead?"

"Stupid of me," Packley hastened to say. "I could have told you. Yes,

the service was discontinued yesterday."

Trant said something under his breath. Then to Packley, "Seen anything of a white-haired old fellow around here?"

"Yes, I've seen a lot of one white-haired man." Slowly, an expression of alarm spread over Packley's face. "You—you—don't—"

"How was he dressed?" cut in Trant.

"Why, a brown suit—white shirt—Say, you don't—"

"That's the old fellow I mean," said Trant. "He was knifed—murdered."

Anton Packley swayed unsteadily on his feet. His arms stiffened at his sides, like a man bracing himself against a great shock. "It can't be!" he muttered hoarsely. "It can't be. That man—is my father!"

ANTON PACKLEY slumped into a chair and stared with unseeing eyes at the brightly colored Navaho rugs. His fingers clenched and unclenched. "Where is—he?" finally asked Packley.

"At the tracks. But you'd better stay here until I can get the medical examiner." Trant laid his hand on Packley's shoulder. "Nothing you can do, anyway."

Packley sat up. "What have you done?" he demanded.

The trooper told him briefly what had happened.

"It's awful!" muttered Packley. "Our hostess will be shocked—when she gets back."

"Let her rot!" shrieked the big parrot from his perch on the rafter. "Let her rot!"

Packley sprang to his feet, looking for something to grab hold of. "Damn that bird! I'll—"

The parrot lost its balance and slipped down the side of the rafter. Almost falling, he hooked his powerful bill into the wood and wildly beat his wings for balance. Slowly, he climbed up to safety.

"Let her rot!"

Packley grabbed a heavy iron book-end. Trant took it away from him roughly. Then asked:

"Whose parrot?"

"That damn—" Packley bit his lip and scowled up at the long green and red tail feathers. "It belongs to—our hostess."

Trant put the heavy book-end back on the table. "Then let it alone. I think I'm gonna like that bird." He whistled. The parrot stopped its waddling. Trant asked, "Who's gonna rot?"

The parrot squawked something, then continued along the rafter.

Trant looked thoughtfully after it. "I know I'm gonna like that bird."

"They're no damn good," grunted the dark-skinned Packley.

Trant slowly shook his head in contradiction, but said nothing.

From somewhere above them came a dull knocking sound. There was a moment's pause, then it was repeated. Trant looked at the parrot. But the bird was twisting his head to survey the ceiling. Anton Packley was looking up, too. He was the first to speak. And his voice was hoarse, his words thick.

"Maybe—the murderer—"

Trant sprinted up the rough-hewn staircase, flinging over his shoulder, "You stay here." He got to the second floor, fumbled for a light switch. He found it and the hall glowed with shaded amber lights.

The knocking sound seemed to come from directly over the center of the living-room. Trant turned left and flung open a door. Into a woman's bedroom he dashed. The air was heavy, as if the room had not been occupied for days. He looked under the bed and in the closet, which held only a row of bare hangers.

Trant spun into the hall again and into the next room. Another woman's room. Didn't look like the hostess had allowed for many male guests. The beds in this room yielded nothing. The clothes closet did.

On the floor, securely bound and gagged, squirmed a young girl. Trant dropped to one knee, taking the pocket-knife from his tunic. The girl's hair was black, stylishly bobbed. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black. And they smouldered like black fire. Trant cut the gag away, then patted her face with his handkerchief. It was a pretty face, distractingly pretty even with the red marks of the gag marring its softness.

She quickly pushed her skirt down over ridiculously brief panties that didn't quite reach the upper, high swelling of her legs. Embarrassedly she lowered her eyes with an expression that plainly told that she realized he had seen her bare thighs while freeing her.

"Who are you?" gasped the girl. "What—"

"Who're you?" countered Trant, cutting free her slender and shapely ankles. He picked her up bodily and sat her on the edge of the bed. "Who're you?" he repeated, briskly rubbing the circulation back into her wrists and ankles.

The girl flexed her cramped muscles. "You're a state trooper, aren't you?"

Trant faced her squarely, impatiently. "Right. Trooper Trant, New York State Police. Now—who are you?"

"Thanks for freeing me," said the girl. "I'm Natica Nason. I live here."

"Thanks," nodded Trant. "Who tossed you in the closet?"

Natica's eyes flashed angrily at the thought. Words rushed from her lips:

"Packley did it!"

Trant moved toward the door. "So friend Packley did it, eh?"

"Do you know him?" asked Natica, jerking up her head in surprise.

"Sure," Trant turned. "He's downstairs."

The girl came to her feet. "Then he's still here?"

From downstairs rose a shrill squawking. Something heavy hit the

floor under Trant's foot. The squawking stopped.

"I'll say he's here," snapped Trant reaching the door. "And I don't want anything to happen to that parrot!"

Natica reached the door the same moment Trant did. She entwined her fingers in his Sam Browne belt. "Don't let him get away! Arrest him—"

She was so eager in what she was saying that, at first, she didn't realize she had pressed herself close to him. Quickly she took her hands away from his belt and looked at him through half-veiled eyelids, remembering again how high her skirt had been when she was tied up.

"Sure!" barked Trant. His voice got hard. "Let's go!"

The girl darted through the door and along the hallway. "Don't let him get away!" she called out again.

TRANT caught up with her at the head of the stairs. His hand shot out and grabbed her arm, jerking her to a standstill.

Downstairs, the dark-skinned man was backing to the door. Under his left arm, held in a viselike grip, was the struggling parrot. His left hand clutched the back of the bird's neck, safe from the gnashing beak. And in the man's right hand was a black automatic. The man's dark face split in a gleaming smile as he swiftly swung the automatic to cover the head of the stairs.

Trant neatly tripped the girl, shoving her away from him. Whipping out his big Colt, he dropped to one knee.

The automatic cracked. Bullets jerked the air over his head. The dark-skinned man ducked out the door. Trant sent two slugs crashing through the glass panel.

From out of the night came a wild screech:

"Honest—honest—I haven't got it!"

Trant flung down the stairs keeping his balance by a miracle alone. Three rapid shots cracked outside.

Three shots ending in dull, metallic thuds. Trant half guessed their meaning. He skidded around the open door and bending double dashed out on the veranda. No bullets greeted his reckless rush. He leaped off the illuminated veranda and landed in the dark shadows, crouching, listening.

No human sound came out of the night's black maw. Only the rustle of dead leaves, wind-lashed across the clearing. Trant threw an anxious glance at his motorcycle. And the meaning of those three shots was no longer a guess. They had been turned into the engine of the motorcycle, wrecking it completely.

Trant swore roundly — then stopped! From the back of the lodge came the whirring noise of an automobile starter. Trant dug his toes into the ground. Reaching the side of the lodge, he heard a grinding mesh of gears. He ran faster. He was just in time to see the rear wheels of the sedan disappear around the corner.

The careening sedan was three-quarters the way across the clearing when he caught sight of it again. Trant's Colt kicked with thunderous explosions. The right rear tire of the sedan blasted wide open. The car lurched madly, looked like it was going over. It bounced crazily but held the ground. Trant was feverishly loading when it hurtled out of sight.

He snapped the Colt back into its holster and dog-trotted to the lodge.

Natica Nason met him at the door, a pearl-stocked revolver gripped firmly in her hand. She lowered the little gun.

"He got away?"

"Yeah," Trant scowled at her. "Yeah."

He took her by the arm, crossed the huge room and pressed her into a chair. Standing before her, he hooked thumbs in his Sam Browne.

"Well, let's have it."

NATICA'S black eyes regarded Trant from under long-lashed lids. She shrugged. Then reaching

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into the pocket of her tweed jacket, held out the little pearl-stocked revolver.

The trooper wagged his head impatiently. "I want the lowdown on all this. What's it all about?"

Natica slipped the gun back into her pocket, said, "Oh." She crossed her legs. "May I have a cigarette?"

He gave her one, lighted it.

The girl smoked a moment. Then she waved her hand to include the room. "As you see, I'm preparing to leave for the city—"

"I know," said Trant. "The phone's cut off. What about Packley?"

"I was getting ready to leave," went on Natica, unruffled at his abruptness, "when an old man ran into the house. He had a big parrot with him. A minute later that dark man, Packley, followed him in."

"Packley said he was your guest," said Trant.

"I never saw him before tonight."

"Then how did you know his name?"

Natica's eyes flashed. "Don't cross-examine me! I knew his name was Packley—because that was what the old man called him." Natica leaned forward in her chair. "They fought. Packley hit the old man on the head and knocked him out."

"Did Packley take off the old man's shoes?" butted in Trant.

Natica's lips opened, "Yes," and closed quickly. Then she added. "I think so."

Trant's spurs clinked as he shifted his position to look about the big room. Without a word he went over to the fireplace and poked around the dead ashes with his toe. Suddenly he stooped and pulled out what was left of a pair of shoes. Trant whistled softly.

"Looks like the parrot or maybe a tiger chewed them up. Hmmm. What's this?" He picked at a little brown spot on the ripped leather. "This looks like cement. Good stuff, too. See the way it sticks?" When the girl looked, Trant held her eyes

steadily. "And what were you doing while all this was going on, Miss Nason?"

"I tried to call the police, but the service had been stopped. Then Packley tied me, took me upstairs and put me in the closet."

Trent nodded. "Guess that's where the parrot heard, 'Let her rot!' That bird could help me a lot." Trant fingered his gun-lanyard thoughtfully. "What happened to the old man?"

"I don't know. But while I was upstairs in the closet I heard an automobile leave and come back twice."

Trant's fingers slid along the lanyard to the black butt of his Colt. "Yep. That's when Packley took the old man to the tracks, then went back and knifed him."

"Knifed him?" echoed Natica. "You mean—"

"Murdered," said Trant flatly. And while the girl stared hard at the floor, Trant quietly crossed to a small packing case which he had not noticed before. It was partly concealed behind a big chair. Trant leaned his head to one side to examine the label. It read in part:

From—BERNICE HARGRAVES
Hidden House

To—BERNICE HARGRAVES
Park Avenue

Trant shot a glance at the girl. She was still staring at the floor. Trant pulled on his campaign hat and gauntlets. Walking to the door he said:

"I'm going after Packley. I'll have to take your car from the garage."

Natica swept her eyes from the floor to the trooper. "I'm sorry—but my chauffeur has the car. He is going to call for me later."

Trant scratched his neck. "Then I'll have to patch up my motorcycle. It's out front here."

When Trant stepped off the veranda, he didn't go near the crippled motorcycle. Instead, he swiftly ran to the back of the lodge and crouched in the shadows. He had not long to

wait. For the back door slowly opened and closed. In the dim light, Trant made out the graceful figure of Natica Nason. She stood at the door listening, then suddenly ran straight out across the clearing.

Trant knew she was taking the short-cut to the little village of Edgerock. He smiled grimly. Letting her get a good start, he followed, keeping to the shadows.

THE fall wind made Trant's task quite simple. The noise of wind-tossed dead leaves effectively covered the sound of his running feet. Natica set a brisk pace, so brisk and steady that Trant marveled at her stamina.

The girl topped a small hill and disappeared from sight. When Trant reached the hill, he saw Natica entering the rambling village from the south end. He waited until she disappeared around a building, then he went down the hill at a dead run.

He came out between two buildings onto the main street. Twenty yards ahead he saw the girl stop before the village hotel to look at a dark sedan parked at the curb. Then she went in.

Trant followed quickly. One glance at the sedan showed him that the right rear tire was blown. Into the hotel he went. The sleepy clerk got wide awake at sight of Trant's gray and black uniform. He told Trant that the girl went up to 202. Trant went swiftly and silently up the carpeted staircase.

He reached the second landing and went quietly to 202. Voices came out. He recognized Natica's:

"I'll keep this rod for you, Packley. And no funny stuff—Leave that parrot alone!"

Then came the dark-skinned man's voice:

"I'm gonna make him talk!" There was a pause. "Say, who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Me?" the girl's voice was sugary. "I'm an investigator of the Reliance

Insurance. My boss insured the Blue Ball—"

Packley's voice was a snarl of triumph. "Then you've got it! Say, do you think that cap pistol is going to stand between me and—"

The girl laughed contemptuously. "Do you think I'd be here—if I had it? Use your head."

"But it was at Hidden House tonight!" growled Packley.

"Certainly," agreed the girl. "The old man stole it from the DuMont's in Albany. I followed him here, learned he was going to meet you at Hidden House. I got there first!"

"The old fool had it!" insisted Packley.

"Sure! But you took it—and murdered him." The girl's voice sharpened. "Now hand it over, Packley. This means my job—so—I'm not fooling."

Trooper Trant listened carefully at the door. He loosened his Colt in its holster. Packley spoke, whiningly:

"I haven't got it."

Then a far sharper voice than Packley's called out:

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

"Damn that bird!" Suddenly Packley became crafty. "Listen to me, girl," he said. "The Blue Ball is worth close to fifty grand. How about working together? Wait! Think of that. Why, it's more than you'd earn in ten years! Here's my scheme—"

"You're wasting breath," cut in the girl.

"Wait! The old fool always had this damn parrot with him. It repeats everything he says. We'll take it back to the house and talk about the Blue Ball—"

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

"See!" yelled Packley. "The parrot will lead us right to it. The old man always muttered to himself when he did something. You can bet he muttered plenty when he hid the thing. You just heard the parrot. And do you remember how the old fool yelled that he didn't have it?"

"Yes—I remember," the girl's words were thick at the thought of it. "But—" she pointed out, "—you're forgetting that trooper. He's nobody's fool."

Trant grinned to himself on the other side of the door. But his grin vanished when Packley laughed.

"Leave the hick cop to me . . . I won't miss this time."

"No soap," said the girl flatly. "You double-crossed the old man . . . You're a dirty killer!"

"Now — now," soothed Packley. "But I wouldn't cross a sweetheart like you. Fact is, I think we'd get along fine. Why, I'd do anything for you—"

"That's great," snapped Natica. "You can start by writing a confession to killing that poor old man!"

There was a long silence. Trant tensed. His hand gripped the doorknob. Finally Packley spoke, and his voice carried the note of a broken man.

"All right. You win."

And through the door came the scratching of a pen on paper. Trant twisted the doorknob and stepped quietly into the room. He had the door closed again before he was noticed.

"As you were," he ordered coldly. "Natica, you just let that gun drop to the floor."

The girl saw that Trant's big Colt was still in his holster. But she remembered how fast it had come out when he shot from the head of the stairs in the lodge. Without a word, she let her weapon fall to the floor.

"That's fine," nodded Trant. "Now, Packley, you finish that confession. Oughta be interesting to read how a man confesses to killing his *father*. Your father, eh?" Trant looked from one to the other. "You've both lied yourselves blue in the face all night."

TRANT narrowly watched Packley as he said. "You searched the old man for the Blue Ball, but couldn't find it. Then you decided to get rid

of him in a way that would cover your whole scheme. You put him on the railroad tracks to make his death look like an accident. Then you went back to the lodge to search some more. You did a good job on his shoes. While searching the lodge you must have gotten the idea that the old man swallowed the Blue Ball."

Trant paused a moment, his face hard as granite. "You went back to the tracks, slugged me—and made sure with your knife *that he hadn't swallowed the Blue Ball!*"

Natica gasped. The room seemed to swim about her. She reached out and steadied herself by gripping the back of a chair. She looked at Packley and nearly fainted.

"That knife-work," said Trant, "told me that some one was searching for something valuable. You made your first mistake—in not killing me."

During Trant's accusing deductions, Packley had been studiously writing. And when Trant finished, Packley looked up. He pointed a dark-skinned finger at the confession, saying:

"It's all there—every word of it. See for yourself."

Trant glanced at the paper. "Sign it. Then stand up and raise your hands."

"I know when I'm licked," mumbled Packley. He lifted the fountain pen to sign the paper. And when the point of the pen was in line with Trant's eyes, Packley thumbed the refilling button on the end of it with a vicious punch.

Black ink sprayed into Trant's face—blotted out his sight! He stumbled backwards, frantically brushing his sleeve across his face.

Packley chuckled, kicking back his chair.

A scream of warning tore from the girl's throat.

"He has a knife! Look out—he has a knife!"

TROOPER TRANT'S left arm stopped rubbing his burning eyes. It swept out and caught hold of the girl. In a swift shifting of his feet, he put Natica behind him. Then his right hand flashed down and up in a blurring movement. His blue-black .45 Colt came into his hand. And then Trant's dryly humorous voice cracked across the room:

"You've blindfolded me, Packley—so I can't call my shots!"

Trant fired point-blank straight in front of him. Into the thunderous echo of that shot, he placed another a fraction to the left. Then he rapidly triggered another, to the right. The little room rocked with the terrific reverberations. To the left, farther out, he threw another bolt of gun-lead. With the last roar came a screech of pain!

A heavy body crashed to the floor.

Natica cried, "You got him! In the shoulder! . . . It had to be that last shot—he was going to throw the knife!"

"Take the knife," Trant told her.

She threw it across the room. "Nothing to worry about him any more. He's fainted." The girl then ran into the bathroom and came out with towels and a glass of warm water. She made Trant sit down while she bathed his eyes.

Minutes later, he blinked his eyes open, free of the ink. He sat there a moment and looked at the girl. "You could have gone back to the lodge and searched for the Blue Ball—while I floundered about."

Natica shook her head. "Not me, trooper. We'll work together. I'm willing to take lessons from you in this game any time."

"Okay," grinned Trant. "Now I'll show you where the Blue Ball has been all night." He walked over to the parrot. The big bird eyed him suspiciously, started waddling, getting ready for a take-off toward the ceiling. Trant pulled on his gauntlets.

Suddenly he dived and snared the bird's feet and neck.

"Natica, tie its feet with this lanyard. Take it off my neck."

The girl, a little frightened at the gnashing beak, finally secured the the parrot's feet with the tough leather lanyard.

Trant stood on one end of it, stretching the bird out and rendering its clutching talons harmless. Then Trant poked his gun-barrel into the parrot's face. Like a dart of light, it fastened its powerful bill around it. And just as quickly, Trant gouged his gloved fingers back of where the jaws met. Slowly, he forced the bill open. Then he trapped the flapping wings under his steel-muscled arm. The bill slack, the gun dropped to the floor.

Trant's gloved forefinger probed the inside of the bird's upper bill. He snagged against something. Trant added pressure, taking care not to injure the muscled membrane joining the beak to the head.

Finally, something gave. Trant moved his finger. The parrot caught a brown object on its tongue, held it there a moment, then spat it out to the floor.

Trant released the bird, but tied it to a table leg. It was in no pleasant mood.

Then picking up the brown object, Trant broke away the outer crust with his fingers. He smiled at Natica.

"You remember that brown cement we found on the old fellow's shoe? Well, that gave me the idea that perhaps the Blue Ball was cemented on the inside of the parrot's bill. It was the only place to hide it. And this bird had a large bill. There is a space between where the upper bill slides in and meets the lower bill, and where the membrane starts. The Blue Ball was safe there from the lower bill. And the parrot's tongue couldn't dislodge it. That old fellow must have trained the bird a lot to get him accustomed to it."

Trant finished picking the cement off the Blue Ball. A flashing, brilliant diamond glittered in the palm of his hand.

Natica's black eyes lingered on the diamond, then she looked up at Trant. "Well, you've done it. You've accomplished in two hours what I've been trying to do for two weeks." She smiled. "How did you know I wasn't the owner of Hidden House? Gee!" Natica laughed a little. "I sure tumbled for that trick of yours to get me over here."

"The label on the packing case told me you weren't the lodge's owner. The rest came easy." Trant bent over the wounded Packley, murmured, "He'll be okay. Call a doctor, will you?"

The angry parrot sank its beak into the yielding wood of the table

leg. For a moment it took it off to screech:

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

Trant laughed outright, glanced at Natica. "That's the first word of truth I've heard all night."

Natica came closer to Trant, holding her shoulders well back because she knew that gave more of an up-lifted roundness to the front of her figure, and said, with a sly provocativeness: "Well, this has been quite a case. Don't you think we ought to celebrate?"

Trant grinned, taking in the graceful femininity of her figure as he answered: "Celebrate—yeah, but don't you think we could get together on something that'll call for a real celebration?"

Smiling, she said softly: "Yes, I think we could. Let's go."



Natica Nason