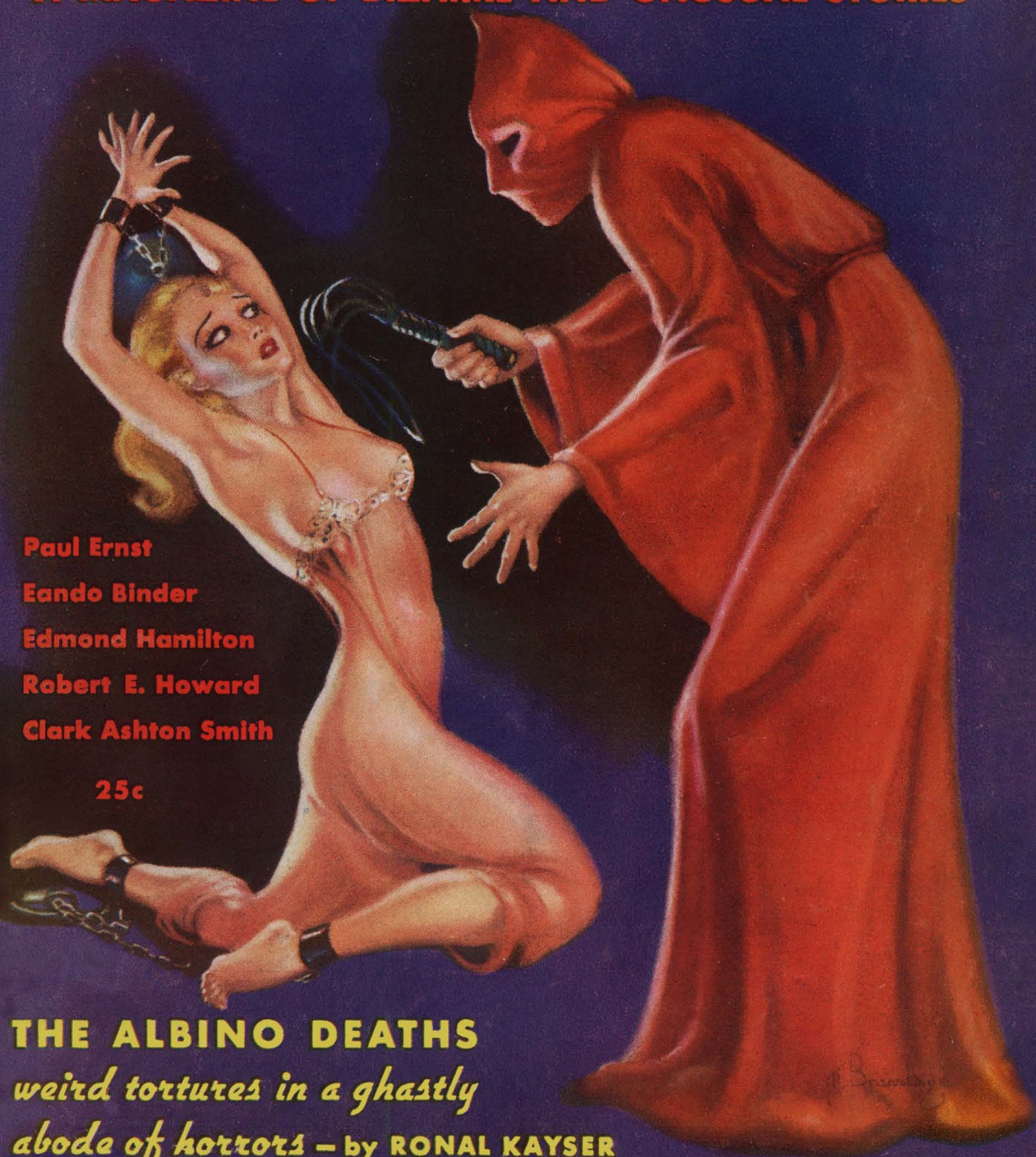


Weird Tales

MAR.

A MAGAZINE OF BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL STORIES



Paul Ernst

Eando Binder

Edmond Hamilton

Robert E. Howard

Clark Ashton Smith

25c

THE ALBINO DEATHS

*weird tortures in a ghastly
abode of horrors* — by RONAL KAYSER



A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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Volume 27

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Albino Deaths

By RONAL KAYSER

[A grim, weird story of torture on the Wheel of Death, and strange albino mice and snakes in the torture cells of a castle under the iron rule of a Dictator]

THE first day I said to the waiter: "Garçon, who is the lady?"

He replied: "I don't know her name. She comes here often, she minds her own business, she likes to be let alone."

"Always alone?"

"Always."

The second day I tipped the waiter. "Ask the lady if she will not share her table with a gentleman who admires her beauty."

He returned. "She says she prefers to be admired at a distance."

Her order was always the same: a glass and a bottle of the native wine. This she drank slowly, scarcely lifting her eyes from the red-checked table-cloth. In the afternoon, the café was deserted except for a few sailors tipping at the bar in front. Surrounded by ugly red drapes which festooned the back-room walls, the lady was watched only by myself and the large circular eye of a spotlight veiled with a cataract of crimson mica. I couldn't imagine what attraction this miserable pot-house held for her. She was obviously not a *fille de joie*, in spite of her heavy rings, sultry rouge, enameled nails, and black metal-cloth gown that revealed her breasts. As for the wine, that sour fluid even the peasants despised; besides, she generally left half the bottle. Why did she come?

I consumed four or five whiskies daily while I sat watching this mysterious creature. I longed to meet her. It was not

her physical charms, though she was handsome enough; rather than her firm body it was an atmosphere which she exhaled that suggested a ferment of strange intrigue. Not very often, she raised her large, bronze-green eyes. They were the eyes of a woman who has been steeped in dark plots, who has lived outside the law, and who exudes with her breath the warmth of a thousand illicit kisses. They were eyes which had looked on forbidden things.

Such women are dangerous. Those full, scarlet lips could surely have revealed secrets . . . secrets I wanted very much to know. I would have liked to follow her home.

But at four o'clock I had to return to the hotel.

I walked out into the streets. Sunshine, always scalding white, flooded the dusty, cobbled *piazza* and winked on the rifles of the soldiers who tramped around and around the bitter fountain. Sunlight scorched the flat roofs of the buildings and the blue surface of the sea and the warships anchored inside the headland. Perched on the dark cliff, the white dome of the castle resembled a bleached skull. It was a very old castle, and had been inhabited by generations of bloodthirsty nobles; now an equally bloodthirsty Dictator lived there. Inland, the volcano continually smoked a dun cloud into the sky.

The town was very quiet; quiet like the sleeping volcano, it seemed to me, burn-



"The wheel fell, and he went down with it."

ing with hidden violence and cruelty. I sensed medieval savagery in the air. Maybe it was the olive-trees, twisted and maimed like cripples, clawing for life in the rocky soil. Maybe it was virago-faced old women who wore amulets on their withered arms and who crossed themselves against the Evil Eye if you aimed a camera at them.

But mostly it was the rumors that ran like wildfire from lip to lip: whispers about vendettas, secret societies, warnings chalked on walls, men stabbed to death in the alleys, and other men just disappear-

ing; men going out for walks and never returning to their families — generally men the Dictator didn't like.

PPROMPTLY at four-fifteen the Count strode into the first-floor parlor of the hotel. He wore a white uniform, and had a saber cut on his cheek. He was the "spokesman" for the Government, and therefore very polite. He bowed, clicking his heels, as he handed us statements typed on pale, onionskin paper. The statements were written in bad French, and there was never any news in them,

We all shouted a question:

"What about the political prisoners?"

The Count never answered this question. He still smiled, but something like a veil came down over his eyes and his smiling lips. The whole country was like that. You could never really get next to it.

All we could do was rush to the telephones, call our Paris offices, and read the statements over the wires.

"The Dictator says——"

Our Paris editors cursed us at the rate of twenty francs a minute. Were we reporters, or parrots? Couldn't we dig out the real news? Today my editor was especially bitter. Did I know that the *Planet* had scooped me on a story? Didn't I know there had been a mutiny on one of the warships?

I answered: "Do you want me to put on skirts? The *Planet* reporter is a girl. She is a blond, and she dances with the naval officers. I suppose some dumb lieutenant told her about the mutiny to show her what a big hero he was in putting it down. Do you expect me to flirt with naval officers?" I hung up the receiver.

The next day I met this girl reporter in the hotel lobby. Her name was Beatrice Field, but we all called her "Betty", and she called us "Bill" or "Jacques" or "Happy", as the case might be.

She grinned at me. "Want to come swimming, Bill?"

She had on a rubber cape that parted in front and showed her tanned legs and the curve of her bosom against the tight scarlet swim-suit. Her hair was yellow and very curly; her eyes were blue, and very innocent. You wouldn't think she could have scooped an old-timer like myself.

"No, thanks," I said.

"It would do you good to soak some of the alcohol out of your hide, Bill."

She walked out the door and got into what passed for a taxicab in this town. Her legs showed when she stepped up into the cab. I noticed the cabby looking around and grinning. He had a nasty-looking mug.

It made me sore. I thought the *Planet* was up to pretty small business, letting a kid like that risk herself in such a joint as this. I even had a notion to get up in the cab with her, just to be on the safe side. . . . But what could happen in broad daylight, with a soldier on every corner, too?

Besides, I had other business. I walked down the street behind the cab, and across the *piazza* into the café.

THE lady in the black gown was already at her accustomed table. I sat down boldly facing her, across the room, and ordered my whisky. The waiter looked down through thinned, hostile eyes:

"The lady asks if you will not sit with her today."

I stared. But the woman sat gazing straight at her wine-glass. It was impossible to guess what thoughts went on behind her handsome, rouged face. Walking over to her table, I bent and kissed the lady's hand. A hot smell of musky perfume clung to her sleeve.

"You are very kind," I said.

The waiter brought the whisky. "You will put the lady's wine on my check, also," I told him.

She smiled. "You too are very kind."

"No, I am just lonesome." This was meant for the waiter's ears.

When the man had gone away, I pulled my chair close to the lady's and said rapidly and softly, "My name is Bill Kyle, and my address—the Hotel Continental. I am a reporter. I send news to an American paper—when there is news to send. Sometimes I pay for informa-

tion, and I spend good American dollars."

The lady took a handkerchief from her sleeve, wet it with the tip of her tongue, and began to polish her blood-bright nails. "You can call me Madame Charlotte."

"I have heard that name somewhere," I said. But I could not remember where. Perhaps it was one of those names that rumor passed from lip to lip. Puzzled, I looked into her eyes. Glints of fire swam in their clouded, green depths. I looked at her white throat, her full round bosom, and at her hands.

Then I saw on the handkerchief a sign. It was a little red circle traced in finger-polish. Then I knew. The Red Circle. It was one of those secret, royalist societies which the Dictator claimed to have stamped out.

My pulse jumped. I felt that at last I had got hold of something. I said, "You can tell me about the political prisoners?"

The lady rubbed her handkerchief against her wine-glass and wiped out the telltale sign. A shadow frowned on her face. Her lips did not move.

"You would be doing your friends a great service," I urged. "You want world opinion on your side, don't you? Then you must tell the foreign press your side of the story."

"I could tell you much, but you would not believe." She sipped a little of the wine, looking at me over the glass. "You must see with your own eyes. Can you hire a boat for tonight?"

Afterward, I walked down to the sea and found a fisherman sitting on the bow of his boat mending a net. I told him what I wanted.

He was very much afraid. I took twenty-five dollars from my pocket. "This is for the boat." I added another fifty dollars. "This is for silence." His eyes jerked away from me and wandered up

and down the beach. It was easy to guess that he was thinking about the Dictator, the secret spies, and the many men who had disappeared. At last his wet, tarry hand closed on the bills.

"Sometimes I forget and leave the oars in the boat," he muttered.

As I trudged up the beach, my glance fell on a patch of blue in the hot sand. I picked it up. It was Betty Field's cape. My watch announced five o'clock, so I decided she must have swum down to the wharves and then hurried to the press conference. I folded the cape over my arm.

IN THE hotel bar, I found "Happy" Thislow of the Associated Press. "I 'phoned the statement in to your office for you," he said. "I explained you had been in an automobile accident. Your chief said to put you in a cold bath and give you lots of black coffee."

He stared at the cape. "Where's Betty? I 'phoned her office, too. I thought she was with you."

"She must have paddled out to the fleet to see some of her boy friends," I said. "Maybe she will dig up another mutiny and scoop us again."

Then I ordered a quart of whisky sent up to my room. In the room I sat smoking cigarettes and waited for darkness to cover the town. The night fell like a black shadow lengthening from the headland where the Dictator's castle stood. It got very dark, and when they put out the street lights at ten o'clock there was only the pink spark of the volcano shining in the night.

I tore the brown drapes from the window and wadded these into my pockets. Uncorking the whisky, I spilled a half of that over my coat, and pocketed the bottle also. In case the sentries halted me, it would be well to be taken for a harmless

drunk. The revolver went into the waistband of my trousers.

It was a seven-foot drop from the window into the courtyard. The courtyard wall was high, but had strong vines to climb by. I ducked into an alley. It was unholy dark. The furry bodies of bats circled around my head and shoulders. Invisible rats squealed underfoot. The air stank. It was good to get down to the beach and feel the cool sea wind against my face.

There was no sign of anyone among the nets where Madame Charlotte had promised to be. I went knocking and tripping among them, falling over the ropes and swearing softly. Then a figure rose up from one of the boats. I knew that she had been watching to discover whether I came alone. Perhaps she thought I had sold out to the Dictator's secret police.

The fisherman had "forgotten" his oars. I pulled the curtains from my pocket. We wet them in the sea and wound the soaking cloth around the oars and oarlocks in order not to be betrayed by any creak.

IT WAS a long row down the bay, hard, silent work. We kept our mouths shut, knowing how even a whisper would carry over the dark water. Twice we got badly scared. A party of sailors in a motor launch chugged by, not two hundred yards away. Luckily, they were coming offshore and were hilariously drunk; luckily, because if they had seen us they would have shot first and asked questions afterward. Then a searchlight on one of the destroyers stabbed at us. It looked like a blue crayon pointing over the black slate of the harbor. When it came close we lay flat in the boat and hoped we could not be seen against the midnight hulk of the cliff. The cliff was old and wrinkled, and it gave off a feeling of evil.

The waves slopping against it made a sound like blood gurgling in the throats of dying men.

Madame Charlotte's hand flagged out, white. I backed water on one hand and pulled hard on the other oar. The boat nosed around, and it looked as if we were going to break on the cliff. We slid in between two wrinkles in the rock, and I shipped the oars in a hurry.

We went in—straight into a hole in the cliff. Inky blackness swallowed us. I couldn't see a thing. What I felt was millions of tons of rock pressing in at the sides and down over our heads. Even the air was thick and somehow hard, and I seemed to breathe it in lumps. The boat slid along with oily, gulping motions. It was like gliding into the throat of a dragon.

Then we were in the dragon's stomach. Madame Charlotte switched on her flashlight. I saw the oily, greenish surface of a pool maybe fifty feet in diameter, washing up against gray, ribbed walls that were plastered with a sickly moss looking like hanging shreds of membrane; not healthy membrane, but diseased, mucus-coated. The stuff sagged in bloated folds from the ceiling. The flashlight's beam crept along the wall and stopped at an iron pin projecting over the water.

"There," said Madame Charlotte. I dipped the oars.

"Tie the boat." I knotted the painter to the pin as Madame Charlotte, gathering up her skirts, stepped onto the ledge. I followed. As I did so, my hand touched a blob of the membranous moss. A shudder darted up my arm. The stuff was spongy, elastic and blood-warm. And it was slippery, like living viscera.

A sense of horror crawled through me.

"Come on," Madame Charlotte was saying.

The ledge slanted upward. It widened and became a floor. The flash-ray wav-

ered around, and showed a huge subterranean tunnel of gray, volcanic stone at the end of which jumbled blocks of black basalt formed an eccentric stair. Queer, nameless moths flapped under the groined roof. Lizards and salamanders slithered into great cracks in the floor. Along the shelving walls ran hairless mice. They were albinos, and I knew that they must have been breeding for thousands of mouse generations away from the sunlight. They had evidently shed their hair on account of the heat—heat that brought sweat to my face.

"You know where we are?" Madame Charlotte asked.

"Somewhere under the headland."

"We are three hundred feet below the castle. The dungeons are directly over our heads. You will see the political prisoners—and other things which it is not good to see. . . ." She laughed harshly.

The flashlight played up the basalt stair.

"God!" I cried, and sprang back. Fear, like a hot flame, dried my throat. My hand clawed for the revolver—leveled it.

Flowing down the black steps was an enormous snake. An albino like the mice, its skin showed mottled patches of faint pink. The pale, scabrous head lifted and reared back. The body, as thick as a man's thigh and twenty feet long, undulated over the blocks of rock and formed in coils. Venom slavered from the fangs, juiced milkily over the wattled throat.

"No, don't shoot."

Madame Charlotte pushed my arm down. She approached the serpent, playing the torchlight full into its red-rimmed eyes. A crooning whistle puckered her lips.

The snake answered with a shrill, windy hiss.

A terrible contest of magnetisms ensued. In the reflected light I saw the

lady's face drain bloodless around the painted O of her lips. Her eyes glared green. The snake twitched. The red, forked tongue shivered and spilled venom.

Suddenly it sprang. The thing happened quickly—far faster than I could think to raise the revolver. The fanged head fell short of its mark, and dropped insensible upon the stones. The body stretched numb at our feet.

MADAME CHARLOTTE sprang up the steps. I wasted no time in following her. At the top of this stair, what appeared to be a wall of solid rock barred our way. Madame Charlotte seized one of the nodules of stone which hobnailed the wall. Immediately a square boulder slid back, and a wavering tongue of light played red on our faces. We passed into a second chamber, long, low, and pillared with gray columns of volcanic slag. The strange red light paled, and then waxed bright with a sinister blush.

I took care to mark with my eye the stone knob which Madame Charlotte touched to reclose the wall.

She turned to me. The red rays pierced her garments and traced the swelling curves of her form. Her full bosom rose.

"We're on the lower level of the dungeon," she breathed. "There is a guard—bribed. I will go ahead and explain about you."

Her eyes gleamed, cat-like.

"Will you give me the gun? In case the guard has been changed."

She glided away. I was alone. I lighted a cigarette, which I badly needed. With the aroma of the tobacco, I drew into my lungs another odor, biting sharp, sulfurous.

Two or three minutes passed.

Then I saw *it*.

The Shape shuffled soundlessly from

behind one of the pillars; its shadow blotted out the red, shifty light.

I knew what it was. Certain pictures in old, lore-filled volumes—certain grim race memories—told me. Terror scalded my wits. For a moment I was not a modern man. I was a medieval poltroon quivering under the lash of a centuries-past fear. My muscles hung flabby on their shaking bones. I could only stare. . . .

A peaked hood covered its head and neck, down to the red, sepulchral robe that fell from the wide, lank shoulders. A crimson cord girdled the waist and supported a ring of large, rusted keys. They were such keys—each a foot long, as belong in times five hundred years gone.

Lurid eyes blazing through the slitted hood stabbed warning. I snapped out of my trance.

I got my fists up. A little practise in boxing had taught me to watch a foe's feet. I watched these feet—laced in leather gamashes, queerly shuffling below the stiff folds of the robe.

The torturer—yes, I knew him for that—came close. . . . The hand that dangled at the end of the loose black sleeve was putty-colored, like dead flesh. It swung, and struck. The blow fell ludicrously short.

No! Not short! Not a blow—a noose!

God! A strangling wire around my throat!

I fought. I rushed, charged. But the fiend knew his art. My punches never got to him. I clawed at the wire. Too late! It bit deep in the flesh, it constricted and crushed the cartilage.

My own blood in my windpipe. . . . And darkness. . . . I was against the wall. My last thought—escape. I clawed at the stone knob. . . .

I felt his knees in my back. He dragged me down. Something like a photoflash

bulb popped in my skull—blinding light—midnight black.

LIFE came back like a thief trying the doors of a locked house. Distant sounds banged, knocked. Lights probed at curtained windows.

Then I knew that I had a body, that the curtained windows were my own eyes. There was raw heat that stabbed in my throat, that seared my lungs. I coughed and strangled on it. I felt brimstone pouring into my mouth and nostrils.

I propped up my lids, was glad to squeeze them shut again.

Wetness slapped across my face. I squinted and saw—a circle of gold? No, yellow. . . . I groaned and wriggled and found my arms and legs somehow locked.

The wetness hit me again. My head cleared. The yellow circle swam into perspective, became a fluff of yellow hair. "Betty!"

It was the girl reporter, all right. And the wetness was her swim-suit with which she was wiping my face. A loose, silken *sac de nuit* clothed her body in transparent wispieness that revealed the nubile lines of her thighs, waist, breasts.

And now, with a horrible shock, I got the meaning of those distant sounds and knockings. They were the clankings of the gyves that linked her wrists in ancient bracelets of iron. More—worse—an iron collar bound her throat and united to a stout chain moored on the rock wall.

And the same kind of gyves and collar had been affixed to me.

I stared around. We were prisoned in a narrow cell that had been hewn out of the stone, and that was doored with a latticework of wrought iron bars. A certain gracefulness in the shaping of these bars showed the hand of an ancient artist. Yet there was no beauty; rather, horror—displayed in the wicked, leering

features of gargoyles, monsters, and devils that grinned in the construction.

Through these bars fell a flaming red light, stifling hot, making the stone floor almost searing to the touch.

Outside, the red glowed lurid on a flagged, basalt pavement. The pavement chopped off short at the brink of a pool; a thick, viscid, greenish pool that bubbled and heaved and steamed a virescent vapor which clouded the whole chamber. The noxious fumes curled into our cell. They explained the raw fire I tasted.

I seemed to see in this pool certain oblique, animalish stirrings. . . .

I looked back at Betty. "How on earth did you come——?"

A pitiful shadow of wonderment clouded her face. "Bill, I don't know. . . . I was swimming. A boat came by. An oar must have struck my head. I came to, here—and——"

A shudder rippled her slender body.

"Betty," I groaned, "what have they done to you?"

"Nothing, yet. Just threats. That man—the one that brought you—keeps asking me one question. He wants to know which one of the officers told me about the mutiny. And of course I can't tell him."

"Sure," I said. "No reporter ever yet 'sold out' on an informant. It's the honor of the game, you see."

"But, Bill—the threats! You ought to see what I've seen. . . . The rack, thumb-screw, boot, they're all here."

I tried to grin. "Sure, I've seen 'em in museums. The fellow wouldn't dare—it's a bluff."

She choked, "*Bill!*" and with her manacled hands grabbed my sleeve.

The scream.

It came from down the corridor—not very far away. It didn't sound human; yet we knew that it had been torn from a human throat.

Another shriek split ours ears. And there were many shrieks. They shrilled and grated and jangled and made a Babel of hell that rang through the cavern. In them vibrated horror and terror and pain.

We cowered under the sound. My flesh chilled. My fingers closed on Betty's hands, and found them colder—cold as ice. Her eyes, squeezed almost shut, formed telegraphic dashes of anguish against the pallid skin.

A hoarse shout echoed. That voice! I had heard it before, somewhere. I struggled to remember where.

It said, "Now will you tell? The names of the Red Circle!"

Dull, like a weary sigh, came the answer: "No!"

And the screams again. And another sound, as of a creaking windlass. In the cell, we looked at each other, dreading. We had thought there could be no outcry more horrible than those first piercing shrieks. But *this!*

The moans, the gagging and gurgling, the choked sobs! Pitiful, the cries of agony ebbed into mere exhausted bleats, until there was only a sound of stifled groaning that panted away into tomb-like silence. . . .

The blob in my throat couldn't be swallowed.

I muttered, "There's whisky in my pocket, if you can get at it."

"No——"

"I could use a shot," I grunted.

BETTY stiffened. Her eyes grew round, not seeing me; her ears strained, not listening to my voice. What she heard—my ears caught it, too—was the whisper of leather shuffling over the flagged pavement.

The hooded shape of the torturer loomed up against the latticework. Iron clanked on iron. The door groaned open.

We crouched—the neck collars did not allow us to stand—looking up at the monster. His eyes inside the slitted cloth were rayed with bloodshot veins. His dead-fleshed hand clutched a braided whip, and the tip of the whiplash dripped beads of ruby blood. . . .

The voice flattened against the lank folds of the black hood.

"Now, will you name the officer?"

Betty said, "No," and her lips didn't tremble.

The fiend came into the cell. He unclasped the keys at his girdle and bent over the lock that moored her neck-chain to the wall. I lurched at him—I got my fingers wound around the leather gamashes.

He struck with the whip—not the tip, but the loaded butt. Pole-axed, stunned, I sprawled back against the wall. I shook my head, got my legs under me. . . .

He was dragging Betty out of the cell!

I think I went a little mad, then. I raved and cursed and threw myself at the door, and the collar fetched me back, wrenched and sprained. I fought that chain. I fought the gyves until the iron ached into the wrist-bones. Maybe a circus strong man could have burst those rusting links. Maybe Houdini could have slipped the handcuffs. What good did that do me?

I was helpless. Tears of rage and terror flowed down my cheeks. I squatted on my haunches and waited for the shrieks. . . . To my surprize, the torturer came into the cell again. He unlocked the gyves at my ankles and loosened the neck-chain from the wall.

I did not resist. I got up at his command and stumbled down the corridor—he behind, clutching the chain. . . .

The room widened. I blinked, stared. I saw a niche in the wall, and a flat altar, and a fire that burned with garnet and emerald flames. Its incandescence seared

the eyeballs. Somehow I knew that fire had not been kindled by mortal hands. It was volcanic—that explained the abnormal hotness of the rock, too. . . . But I wasn't interested in the fire.

Against the wall drooped a female figure, nude, arms outstretched and brace-letted in rusted clamps. I recognized Madame Charlotte. Her face, the color of flour, drooped over her naked bosom. One leg, up to the thigh, was gripped in a boot of iron.

At the toe of the boot spread a pool of blood.

She was not dead—yet. Bubbles formed in the froth that thickened on her lips.

My eyes jerked in the other direction, toward the pool. I saw Betty.

The torturer uttered a harsh laugh.

He said:

"I know you Americans! Ordinary torture will not drag a secret over your lips. You can stand pain. But you are weaklings for all that! You cannot stand to inflict pain. . . . Do you understand?" His hand twisted in the chain, flung me toward Betty. "*You are going to torture each other!*"

A curse jerked my jaw. My gaze pitched over the Wheel of Death. I saw the contrivance of brakes and levers that stuck up through the floor. My eyes followed the great iron shaft that crossed the pool and was bedded in the far wall. The wheel turned on that shaft.

There were two wheels, actually. Their spokes rayed off at an angle from the rims and meshed in a series of cogs around the shaft. The outer rim was wide, and had slats around its edge. It looked like a circular ladder, and its spokes were honed to razor sharpness.

The inner rim was smooth. Betty was tied—spread-eagled—inside it. Withes of leather bound her hands and ankles to

the ring. Its spokes, too, had been honed.

"You can't get away with this!" I blurted. And I bluffed. "I left a letter for the American consul. . . ."

Laughter jeered through the hood. "Good. The secret police will search your room."

He thrust me toward the wheel. Now I fought. I whirled, kicked. . . . The fiend's powerful hand closed vise-like on my ankle. I was hurled to the pavement. The shrouded form bent over me. The whip's butt rose and fell. Red waves of pain pumped through my temples.

I did not pass out. I was like a fighter who hears the count being tolled off, who sees the referee's arm rising and falling, but cannot get up off the floor.

I felt myself being lifted and carried to the wheel. I realized that my wrists and ankles were being strapped to the rungs of the outer rim. The iron gyves were loosened and clanked to the stone.

DIMLY, I saw the dead-flesh hand tug at one of the levers. The wheel began to move. . . . The shaft seemed to recede into the distant wall. Acrid fumes bit through my blurred senses. I stared down.

The wheel hung suspended over the pool. The outer rim was but inches from the green, heaving surface. The thick vapor curled around my feet. I heard Betty cough. I stared into her face. Our eyes were but a yard apart.

I said, "It's a bluff." I still tried to believe that.

Seven or eight feet away, standing on the brink of the pool, the monster laughed at us.

"You'll see!" he shouted. He walked to a crate that stood near the fiery altar—came back with a live rabbit that kicked and struggled. He lifted the poor creature by its ears and flung it into the pool.

The viscid fluid bubbled. In the depths, something stirred. Great fins, seamed with gleaming spines of bone, roiled the greenness. A head appeared. The flat, pulpy skull showed white, with eyes the size of dinner plates glittering through a fringe of writhing, eel-like lashes. The body resembled a sheet undulating just under the glaucous surface of the pool.

What sent a shudder of dread through me was the mouth. The open, pinkish slit had no teeth, but twin, saber-shaped ribs that closed on the struggling hare . . . devoured it at a gulp.

Slowly, the giant fins sank into the murky pool.

What was it? Some prehistoric sea-thing, I knew, whose ancestor had been trapped in the earthquake that lifted the headland from the ocean's bed. A thing that had adapted itself to existence in a pool of hot, acrid slime. A thing that fed on living flesh!

The hooded man chuckled. He said, "You like my pets?" He shook with evil mirth as he stooped and lifted from the floor a long wooden pike bladed like a timberjack's peavey.

"Now you shall try my toys."

Fear whiplashed my flesh as he stabbed the pike toward Betty. That blade, blood-rusted, chopping at her hands! I twisted in frenzy. But he only slashed the withes that bound her limbs.

She could move. She could balance herself inside that wheel. Its inner tread had a width of only eight inches, and looked dangerously slick, but she could grasp the sides with her hands. She had to, or fall into the pool. . . .

And now he sliced the thongs away from my wrists and ankles. I clung to the rungs of the wheel.

The torturer jerked another lever. And the wheel turned! My weight carried it down swiftly, toward the slimy, boiling

cauldron where my glance divined the waiting sheeted forms of the pool monsters.

I climbed. For my life, I climbed. And the motion of my climbing treadmilled the wheel around. And that was not all; for, by means of the spoke and gear-box connection, the inner wheel also turned—speeded up by the cogs—driven by my climbing.

And therefore Betty had to keep walking around and around inside its whirling circumference. Her naked feet padded up and down, her hands steadied themselves against the motion.

The torturer howled at me:

"You can save her! All you have to do is jump off."

And he jeered at her. "The name! The officer's name?"

I CLIMBED like a monkey against that wheel. Hand over hand and foot over foot I ran up the slats that kept turning under me. And inside the inner wheel, Betty walked. Her body was very straight and lovely in the wispy *sac de nuit*.

She slipped—tottered. I stopped climbing. The wheel fell and I went down with it. The green slime roiled around the pulpy head of white that struck up. . . .

Damn. My foot.

I climbed. It was only my shoe. The saber-ribbed mouth had closed on the sole. I looked at Betty. She could not keep this up much longer. My own arms and legs ached. Sweat streamed down my face, pattered like the drip of hot grease on the seething pool. The vapor swam up and scalded in my lungs.

And I gulped down the noxious fumes. Maybe I would be overcome by them. That would be the easiest way. And I cursed myself for a coward because I could not throw myself into the cauldron.

A scream!

I twisted—stared—and saw Madame Charlotte's face lifted up from her bosom. She struggled against the wall, and her mouth spilled a name.

"——!" she cried; and the name was the name of the Dictator.

The hooded man turned, looked at her. "I will attend to you in a moment," he said harshly.

But—the Dictator? Grim pictures played through my mind. The frightened fisherman. The whispers in the streets. The men who disappeared. . . .

Was this what happened to them? This, the terror that lived in the land?

Madame Charlotte shrieked again. The sound echoed and vibrated under the roof. And the hooded man's laughter echoed with it.

He did not see what Madame Charlotte saw—what I saw, too.

The snake.

It flowed white along the basalt flagging of the floor. The head raised on its wattled throat, and the forked tongue stabbed. . . . I must have touched the right knob at the moment that the noose tightened. . . . And the snake must have smelled the blood.

Madame Charlotte moaned a warning. Too late, the hooded man saw. He stooped for the peavey—and the snake was upon him. He yelled. That voice! Of course! It was blurred by the folds of the hood, and yet I knew. . . .

I knew even before I saw his face. He tore himself away from the great serpent, ripping and losing his black rope and spilling the hood from his head. And his face was the face of the waiter in the café on the *piazza*.

He rolled over and over on the basalt blocks, trying to push the snake away with his hands. He rolled too far. His shoulders and his hips went over the brink into the pool.

He yelled.

His fingers clawed on the stone, and he half pulled himself up from the boiling slime. But then a formless white thing surged up, roiling the green, suddenly showing its flat head and glittering eyes.

The waiter sank down into the pool. Afterward, a red stain floated and made a murky scum on the viscid, uneasy mass.

The albino snake reared up, tall as a man, looking with its beady lurid eyes at the swirl in the pool where the man had gone down. Then it turned, and oozed across the floor toward Madame Charlotte. In the hot light that fell from the fire on the altar, the pink stains under the scabrous white reptile skin got bright. The venom flowed from its mouth and down its wattles and left milky blobs on the floor.

Madame Charlotte did not shriek now. She bent her head down from the wall, her arms writhing taut from the iron staples, and she puckered her lips. She tried to whistle.

"God help her!" I heard Betty say.

The snake didn't pause. Perhaps the blood about the toe of the boot excited it. There was a motion of striking too fast for the eye to follow. . . .

AFTER a time, the serpent left its victim, and crawled onto the altar and sunned itself before the volcanic fire.

And still I climbed!

There was no hope now. We were alone—horribly alone—in the bowels of the earth. The Wheel of Death turned on, and no hand to stop it.

"This is the end," Betty said. She was very tired, and sick with the motion of the wheel. Her shoulders slumped, her feet dragged in their endless walking.

I groaned. "Betty—can you jump to the brink—if I stop the wheel?"

There was one way I could stop it. . . .

Her eyes implored me. "Bill, oh God! Don't leave me here alone——"

And I was craven. I climbed. Despair like a black tide swept over me. Clawing and stumbling, with hands that slipped sweat-wet and feet that were leaden lumps, I crawled up the endless turning rungs. I sucked the rotten, miasmatic air into my lungs. Fainting with it, I bit my tongue, until blood spurted against my teeth and the pain shocked life into muscles that knotted in burning agony.

In the turgid green fluid at my feet, the waiting bodies of the pool-monsters were crouched like white-shrouded ghouls. . . .

I choked, "Betty, you can jump it?"

But could she? A good eight feet?

Her voice rang clear. "I'm dropping off when you do, Bill!"

And I climbed. I clung to the lower section of the falling wheel, and the weight of my body lurched numb pain into my fingers. The ache crept up the hands, to the wrists, the shoulders. I felt my hands stiffening. Death flowed cold in my veins.

Death! And I wanted to live—though death couldn't hurt—much—and life was a thing of torture.

Climbing, I twisted my head; stared through eyes that dimmed with the surge of blood behind their sockets. I must have gone a little mad then. In that crazed instant I thought of jumping—trying to bridge the pool at a leap.

The man never lived that could have done it. Not while the wheel turned, robbing him of foothold. I wondered how many men had *tried* it—and fed the pool monsters.

C LIMBING, always climbing, I looked the other way, and stared down the raying spokes to the gear box and the shaft. And somehow I knew that men had tried that, too. They would have snatched at the razor-edged spokes, tried

to slide down to the shaft. I saw them—flesh and bone of their hands hacked through by the sword-blades—falling and waving the bleeding stumps of their wrists as they careened into the pool!

It would be suicide to try—just an uglier, more hellishly cruel way of dying.

I climbed.

And now Betty was on her hands and knees—crawling inside the rim—slipping and sliding and clawing at its polished slickness. A giant fin slit the pool murk; a pulpy white head lifted hungry, glittering eyes that feasted on the girl's supple curves.

The bottle!

The whisky bottle in my coat! The bump of it against my ribs as I swayed, sick. . . .

"Hang on, Betty!" I panted. "One more minute!"

God, there *was* a chance! A chance that went straight to the center of the hellish contraption—the demoniacal cunning of it—the fact that it was a double wheel, and that the outer rim turned the inner.

If I could climb with one hand—

I couldn't. For the last ten minutes, it had been all I could do to climb with both of them. This thing couldn't be physically possible. And I did it. Life was stronger than death in me—and I used the free hand to get the bottle out of my pocket.

A chance? Rather, the thousandth part of a chance! But my hand curled on the heavy glass, and my arm cocked itself. *I climbed.* I sighted down the spokes—kept my eye on the target—muttered a prayer.

If I missed—

But I dared not think of missing. I threw the bottle, hard.

The bottle wasn't in the air a million years. It only seemed that long.

The smash of glass! The wheel jerked, *stopped.*

It was luck—or the prayer. I had succeeded in slamming that bottle into the gears. In good American slang—a monkeywrench in the machinery!

And I climbed—dragged myself to the top of the rim. I stared down, across the pool, at the floor. It looked very far away. I wanted to rest. My legs fluttered, were flaccid.

I couldn't trust that glass. It was slippery, it was breakable, too. . . .

The thought nerved me. I jumped. The basalt block seemed to rise up and hit me in the face . . . blessed sight! I staggered to the lever, threw my weight on it. The wheel moved on its sliding shaft—came in—and Betty fell limp, sobbing, into my arms.

MAYBE reporters have printer's ink in their veins. What Betty said was, "What a story!"

"We haven't got the story—yet," I grunted.

Betty's eyes made circles. "Bill Kyle, are you crazy? I'm captured by secret police—tortured to make me reveal the name of the officer who gave me the mutiny tip—I escape by a miracle—and I haven't got a story!"

"Maybe it wasn't the secret police," I said. I went over my side of the adventure. "It looks like a Red Circle plot from start to finish, as I see it. Why did Madame Charlotte borrow my gun, except to get it away from me?"

"She wanted it to defend herself with," Betty said.

"She didn't make much use of it, then. Of course, she might have been tackled from behind. But then why did she suddenly come to and warn the torturer about the snake?"

"Because she knew it'd kill her next."

"And why did she shout the Dictator's name?" I demanded.

"Because," said Betty, "she thought it was him. It sounded just like his voice."

"That's the suspicious part," I argued. "They wanted us to *think* it was the Dictator. Figure it this way. Suppose that snake hadn't come when it did—you'd have named the officer, to save my life if not your own. Suppose even that you hadn't talked! We'd both have been taken off the wheel and thrown into a cell to think it over—that's my guess. The torturer would have disappeared, and again I'll guess that he'd have taken Madame Charlotte with him. Then in a short while one of the Red Circle agents would have come along to 'rescue us'—and I'll bet that the rescuer would have been this same waiter."

"But why?" Betty gasped.

"Because you and I would have shot the story into the American newspapers. We'd have made the front pages, too," I said. "I can see the headlines right now: DICTATOR TORTURES AMERICAN GIRL. And then I seem to see another headline: U. S. LANDS MARINES—and a couple of days later, DICTATOR FLEES; KING BACK ON THRONE. That's what the royalists were shooting at."

Betty shook her head. "It won't do, Bill. It's all guesswork."

The rest was ghastly, nauseating; but I called myself a newspaperman, and I had

to do it. Suspicion wasn't enough. I had to *know*.

I went to the wall—to the gruesomeness that had been Madame Charlotte. There was sticky redness on the iron boot; my flesh crawled, and my fingers were numb on the wing-screws. "We'll see if she was on the level," I muttered. "If she was really tortured—or if she faked those yells."

The boot came off. Madame Charlotte's leg from the knee down dangled queerly; but whole, well rounded, with a delicate high arch of instep. . . . And this was all that *was* whole and rounded and delicate of her.

"But the blood?" Betty gasped.

"We *saw* one rabbit die," I reminded her. "Its mate probably supplied the blood."

ANYWAY, that was how I telephoned the story into the Paris office when we got back to the hotel at two a. m.

I suppose my voice did sound thick; my tongue had swollen badly where I'd bitten it that time.

I heard my editor laugh. "That's fine. Now you take another cold shower and drink another gallon of black coffee." He kept on laughing. "Seeing albino snakes! That's a new one."

But I wasn't drunk. I've told the truth, so help me; and if you won't take my word for it, ask my wife.

Ask Betty.

