

# SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

July, 1937

Vol. 5, No. 3

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SPICY MYSTERY STORIES is published by the CULTURE PUBLICATIONS, Inc., 2242 Grove St., Chicago, Ill. Editorial offices, 900 Market St., Wilmington, Del. Entry as second-class matter applied for at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill. Subscription: Yearly, \$2.50; single copies, 25c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. The publisher assumes no responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.



# The Black

By STEWART GATES

*Always somebody disappeared when the Black Thing came, and only the women ever returned. But they were never the same. Perhaps it would have been better if they, too, had remained lost!*



# Thing Walks

I HAD hoped for a long time to hold Carol in my arms as I was holding her then. Her lovely, taut breasts flattened against my chest, almost bursting from the narrow ribbon of the halter strap tied behind her neck to hold up the trunks of her bathing suit. Her red lips, damp and warm, were quivering while they fitted themselves to mine in whispers of love that I had waited so long to hear.

With her words still singing in my ears I caught her up, cradling her luscious, pliant form close to me, and started toward the house that was a window-lit bulk a hundred yards from the river—the house of Emory Selwyn, whom both Carol and I were visiting.

Suddenly Carol screamed, her soft nestling body went rigid in my arms. She pointed across the beach toward the house.



While the machine tugged at her limbs, the whip lashed out. I writhed against my bonds, helplessly.

Both of us were dripping from our evening plunge into the river below Black Falls. The moisture of her satinsmooth skin, when I slid my hand over her bare back, stirred a madness in my veins, just as my caress sent a quiver from her breasts to her knees.

"The Black Thing! The Black Thing from the Falls. I saw it. It is trying to get into the house."

She slid to the ground and started to run away from me, but I caught and held her. I held her so fiercely that the bow of her halter strap untied and the rib-

bons that hid her breasts slid down, dangling. In that moment of terror she gave no heed that the two lovely mounds, shaking with her agitation, were nearly free to the night air and that her white body was bare from the low line of her trunks.

I tried to soothe her; made light of what she had seen. But inwardly, I raged at the hallucination that might spoil the rapture of our love. For I could put no credence in the tale told by the people of the plantation that spread away from Emory Selwyn's house. An ordered mind can't believe that a hideous monster came out from the waters of Black Falls, carried off beautiful women and sent them back with their bodies bruised and doomed to a living death.

But while I was shaking Carol so hard that her teeth clicked together she gave another shriek and when I looked up the beach *I saw it with my own eyes!*

**A** GROTESQUE shape that was blacker than the night slid across a moon shaft and slunk into a shadow. While I held Carol against me, her back to the house my fingers digging into her warm flesh so that she couldn't see the Thing she had discovered, the front door of the house suddenly opened. The hall within was only dimly lit by light escaping from some other room, but I was certain no one had come into that hall to open the door.

Then, a second later, the black shape was silhouetted in the doorway. Before the door closed behind it I made out that whatever the Thing was, it moved like a man or woman, and that it was completely shrouded in a long black robe and a cowl hood.

Carol still wanted to run away but I urged her toward the house. She clung

to me so tightly that her curved thigh from hip to knee trembled against mine. Her halter straps flew in the air and threatened to slide down to her waist at every step.

At least two people had heard her screams. Emory Selwyn, who was a noted artist, came running around from behind the building. Dr. Bryce, who lived close by but was visiting Selwyn, appeared at deep French windows of the living room and stepped out onto the veranda.

"The Black Thing!" I shouted. "We saw it. I saw it go into the the house."

I think both men thought I was out of my mind, but when Carol added her testimony to the sight, Selwyn said, "We'll soon corner it, then. Leave Carol with the Doctor out here in front to watch doors and windows. You, Cameron, go behind and watch the back and both sides. I'll search inside."

**WHILE** I watched, I could almost hear again the words I'd heard only that day from old "General" Lee, an ancient negro who had lived on the plantation all his life and had told me his wild yarn of "The Black Thing."

"Yes sah, Master Cameron." he'd said, as he had a dozen times before, "the Black Thing, hit comes out from de ribber, I reckons, cause when the black folks sees hit, always hit am wringin' wet. An' when hit comes, somebody hyarabouts, him or her, disappears an' hit am only the women who comes back, like Missy Selwyn an' that white girl who come back the same terrible way Missy Selwyn come back to Master Selwyn."

Old "General" Lee had rambled on, as he always did, and when I stopped him, shuffled off mumbling some voodoo incantation.



The horrible circumstance of the two women the negro had mentioned flashed across my brain again. One of them had been Cora Selwyn, Emory Selwyn's beautiful young wife. She had disappeared one night after a group of plantation people had sworn they saw The Black Thing creeping into the house. For a week the crazed husband had searched for her without finding a clue. Then, one night, he had seen her coming across the lawn from the river. She was stripped almost naked, water dripping from the cones of her breasts and shining like diamond drops on her white body.

*White* body save for a criss cross of horrifying purple welts spread up and down her back from the bend of her knees to her neck. When Emory Selwyn took her in his arms, he found no response from her lips or from her eyes. When he stared into her face, it was blank. She didn't know him, didn't recognize the arms that had so often clasped her before.

She cried out in a moan of agony, "Oh, don't! In God's name, let me go."

Cora Selwyn, who was Carol's sister, was in an upstairs room of the house now. She had never regained her memory, could never explain where she'd been, nor why she had been so cruelly tortured. And still she refused to wear clothes, except for a single garment around her hips and breasts. Her husband had to keep her locked in or she would come out of her room and walk about the lawn, oblivious of her near nakedness.

The night after Cora Selwyn returned in that terrible state, with those horrible bruises, the plantation people found another young woman, whose slim, tender little form was that of a girl hardly out of her teens; she was wandering on a

nearby road, with most of her clothes gone, like Cora Selwyn, also with her memory a blank. This girl now was in a New Orleans hospital, she too defying all efforts to make her stay fully dressed.

SELWYN came out of the house at last. He had found no one, no "Thing", he explained.

Dr. Bryce looked from Carol to me. "I don't like to say this," he said carefully, "but it must have been only a shadow you saw. It would have heard the door open and close."

Selwyn seemed abruptly to come out of a daze of thought. "A shadow?" he muttered, "Come inside, all of you."

Even Dr. Bryce gave an exclamation at the sight of a wide circle of water on the hall rug just inside the door sill! The circle was just as wide as would be the flare of the skirts of a black cloak!

Carol shuddered. And my own voice was full of awe. "It stood right there before the door closed on it!"

We heard the shuffling feet of old General Lee coming onto the porch. He stood there shaking and muttering.

"I done seen hit in de yard! I seen it go back into the ribber!"

We sent the negro off, decided to get The Black Thing off our minds if we could. And I wanted Carol to recapture that mood of her's when she had whispered love words into my lips through her her kiss. I wanted the tender softness of her in my arms again, to feel those breasts, she had managed to hide again with her halter straps, crushed against my heart.

The nearness and sight of her, while the straps were hanging loose, had stirred my blood until I felt that, beside her, nothing else mattered. What was a legendary, incredible phantom compared

to this lovely creature of warm flesh and promising kisses?

But I couldn't bring her mood back. We lay side by side on the damp grass and on bent elbow I could look down upon the sweep of alabaster thighs, tapering down from the high circles of her trunks. It was like looking over a ravishing landscape, ending in two sets of perfectly formed toes from which tiny sandals had slipped. Carol made no move as I pressed my mouth to hers, even though her breath quickened the rise and fall of her bosom. But her lips were firm when I tried to repeat that kiss, and she slipped away from me in an instant.

"No, John. I—I can't think of love now," Her voice was taut, almost a whisper. "I shall lock myself in and fasten the window shutters tight. I know that the Black Thing is true. Maybe it wants me! I'm so afraid!"

I stood in the hall while Carol unlocked her sister's door and went in to look at her. It was to be near Cora Selwyn that Carol had come up from her own New Orleans. Dr. Bryce, who owned the house Emory Selwyn rented but who lived in a much larger one near by, wanted to keep Cora Selwyn surrounded by familiar people and familiar things. He wanted her kept even in the house itself. And he had suggested my own visit because my face was familiar to her. He hoped by these strategies eventually to bring back her memory so that she might tell us the terrible history of those welts on her back.

When I had once more pressed the warmth and smoothness of Carol against me, in a good-night embrace, I went into the yard. There was a plump little upstairs maid who would soon be coming home from a dance in the nearby village.

And Carol's kisses—or want of them!—had made me remember that little Lisette, a Spanish Creole, had a way of letting her short skirts creep up when she was near me. The challenging looks she had given me when she discovered me enjoying glimpses of her tawny round thighs under the edge of her skirt, would mean the same thing in all languages.

WHILE I waited in the yard for Lisette, old General Lee reappeared. "Somebody go this night," he mumbled. "If the Black Thing takes a woman, she come back same way Missy Selwyn come back. If hit takes a man, man doan come back nohow. Them two friends of Massa Selwyn, what the Black Thing took. They ain't never come back."

I started. The negro meant two artist friends of Selwyn who had come down to paint plantation scenes and had, to say the least, abruptly disappeared. That was before Cora Selwyn's experience. Cora was in New Orleans with her husband, having left the visiting artists, George Peters and Randal Crawford, at the house. When Cora and Selwyn returned they found they had left. But letters came back soon after, explaining that the pair had decided suddenly to take a tour of the Caribbean. But General Lee was never convinced but that the Black Thing was responsible for the disappearance.

"De plantation folks, massa, they seed the Black Thing that night!"

Lisette was late showing up. My mind was on her, but I asked the negro when the plantation folks first thought they saw the Black Thing.

"First time folks seed the Black Thing? Dat was pretty soon after Missy



A grotesque shape, blacker than night, slid across a moon shaft.

Bryce. Dr. Bryce's missy, runned off with another man."

I couldn't let the old negro talk about Dr. Bryce's pretty young wife, who had eloped, even if the affair was known by everybody. Lydia Bryce had made no secret to anyone but her husband of her infatuation for a neighbor. She eloped at last and wrote to Dr. Bryce next day, telling him she would never return. Here again, the plantation people blamed the Black Thing—in spite of the arrival of Lydia Bryce's letter of explanation.

**L** ISETTE came finally. She knew nothing yet of the excitement over the Black Thing's appearance. She was doomed to know much, before morning, but she had no premonition. She came laughing, the challenge in her eyes, her plump legs outlined by her tight dress when she walked, her breasts trying hard to burst out to freedom.

I pulled her against me and leaned on the porch rail. She was more of an armful than Carol. Her cheeks were rounder and her lips were fuller. They were a fragrantly dewy red flower while I mashed them against my own; and her

plump breasts flattened into soft cushions as I pressed her tight.

"Monsieur, he squeeze me so tight he break me into two pieces," she whispered up into my ear.

"Let me look into your eyes," I commanded. "I want to see what they've got to say to me."

She held up her rosy cheeked face and laid her long lashes back. Her eyes were a smoky, slumberous invitation.

"The house, it is quiet now," she whispered aloud. "We must make no noise . . ."

**N**OR did the Black Thing, when it crept out of the house, sometime in the middle of the night—crept out with the limp, unconscious form of little Lisette herself clutched in his filthy arms!

An old woman servant brought the news that Lisette's bed was empty while Dr. Bryce, Emory Selwyn, Carol and I were at breakfast.

As soon as I saw the bed I knew it had been Lisette the Black Thing had come from its hiding place to take. Sheets were torn to the floor. Yet there had been no struggle. The print of Lisette's delicious little form still dented the middle of the bed, and the pillows still bore the impression of her black crowned head. Dr. Bryce said, "She has been lifted and carried from the bed. The sheets were dragged along with her for a way!"

It was Selwyn who found, at the river side, the only traces of the girl. At almost the very spot where General Lee swore he saw The Black Thing return to the water, there were two sets of prints, one pair from heavy shoes, and one pair of two naked little feet.

**I** SLEPT little through the next night. My memory of Lisette's last warm kiss only intensified my horror at her unknown fate. Then, with the second morning, came such a thing as I could not have dreamed!

I went to the garage for my car. At the running board I froze.

There was Lisette, propped in the back seat of my car. A tender, almost nude Lisette; with death that had been an untold agony staring out of her glassy eyes!

That little figure whose skin had been so rosy, and so smooth!

I could not bring myself to touch it. I feared what I would find if I picked it up to carry it into the house and should catch a glimpse of her rounded back. I shouted for a yard servant and sent him across the lawns for Dr. Bryce.

He too recoiled, when he saw the body, and for more reason, even, than L. The position of the legs struck at him. They were oddly bent under her hips.

"Good God!" he murmured. "She's been on a rack. Every bone in her legs is broken."

When he picked her up and held her while I found a robe to lay across her, I saw that he was right. Her pretty legs, scarred now and welted, as was her soft back, dangled gruesomely.

"She's been dead only a few hours, probably since midnight," the physician announced. "Broken to pieces!"

I remembered how she had warned me that if I squeezed her tighter she would be in two pieces!

**T**HERE was no trail to follow back, no clues. Whoever had carried the body to my car had left no prints in the yard or on the garage floor. Only the dampness in the car left by the body

shedding the river water that had drenched it.

A search for clues by the officials was as fruitless to them as our own had been. A day and night guard was posted at my insistence when Carol refused to go home and leave her sister. But the posting of guards was a futile gesture against the unknown Black Thing.

**N**EXT night, it was Carol's white bed that was emptied! Below her window a guard lay stretched out dead, a long-bladed knife deep in his shoulder. Old General Lee gave the alarm two hours after midnight. He had been prowling the yard and had seen the black shape.

"Hit was carrying young missy," the negro groaned. I seen hit take her into the water. Hit took her toward Black Falls."

No human being could carry any burden into that tumbling downpour of water; nevertheless I went into the water and tried to get near to the Falls, I could not get within fifty feet.

With flash beaming and pistol ready, I ran along the opposite shore looking for prints, and it was while I was flashing my light ray along the shores close to the Falls that I found myself staring with a sense of discovery. For a long time I didn't know what it was that was trying to impress itself in my brain. Then all at once it came to me.

On that side of the falls the shore was low. The other rim of the Falls was in plain view, as was the space between the water and the rocks behind.

I was staring at a ledge reaching out from the rocky wall. A ledge wide enough for a man to walk along and have the water pass over and beyond him. Some invisible hand seemed to pull me onto that ledge under the water, while

those words of General Lee still echoed—"Carried her to the Falls!"

My gun under my coat to protect it from the spray that was soaking me, I pushed along the ledge, my flash fingering the way. Suddenly I smothered a sharp cry.

There was a break in the rocky wall, a fissure wide enough for a man to push into. And there, shining in my ray, at the foot of the fissure, was a broken string of pearls which Carol Landis had always worn.

No thought came to me to go back for help. Selwyn would not want to leave Cora alone in the house, even with servants. The police could not have arrived. Dr. Bryce was not available.

And Carol was beyond that crevice.

Soon I understood! The fissure widened slowly until it gave into what apparently was a vast underground cave in the rocks, hung with stalactites that shed a million shining colors when my flash swept them. After what seemed an endless traversal of this outer cave, I found an opening that led into another, and still another, and still another.

And now voices were close—voices? No. God help me; the most terrifying screams of women I have ever heard, not of one woman but of more! Not from Carol Landis alone—for hers I recognized, but from at least one other.

**I** STUMBLED on through another long rock bound cavern. In this natural chamber I suddenly stopped dead in my tracks, despite those horrible shrieks of agony coming from so close at hand. I realized abruptly that in this chamber the stalactites had been sliced off the ceiling. There was even some sort of carpet or rug on the rock floor, oozing moisture as were the walls. And all around the sides of the chamber were

chairs, easy chairs, ranged in a circular row.

And before each chair, hung to the rock wall, was a painting, the life size painting of a woman's nude figure. The cries of torture burned my soul — "Oh stop! I can't stand any more! God have mercy on me!" But those paintings gripped my brain and held me spell bound, my flashlight searching out each one.

They were all of the same woman. A young woman whose beautiful form had been painted and tinted with exquisite artistry. Somehow, while I sent my light around the room and counted—eleven of these paintings—I dreaded to look at the face of that multiplied figure. Something told me I would have a shock.

I studied the body, admiring its pose, always the same, but each pose, each artist's grasp of the figure, singularly different. The legs were long and tapering, coming down in a beautiful sweep of sculptural rhythm from the gently expanding curves of slim hips. The feet were dainty, each toe beautifully perfect—like Carol Landis'. The breasts were full, round as twin oranges. The arms were raised. I was conscious of a peculiar impression about the position of those lifted arms. As I am an artist I had the feeling that the poise of the arms was somehow not quite natural. I could not help flashing my beam on each canvas in turn and finding that in each the artist had left the same impression—that the wrists of those arms had been fastened aloft, that the model had been bound to the wall or to the ceiling.

Now I steeled myself to look at the face—those eleven faces on the same body. I had to stop a cry with the back of my hand.

Never have I seen such pain, such terror, agony, soul-scorched horror as the artist had put into features that must

have been, in their repose, as beautifully expressed as the lovely contours of that ravishing body. Each face was contorted. In some the eyes blazed out their terror. On another canvas it was the mouth that seemed to be shrieking the model's untold suffering. And through all the faces ran that note of unnamed terror which is inspired by what is coming more than by what has happened.

Those faces! But they weren't different faces, no more than the bodies were different, despite the different paroxisms of pain expressed in each one. They all were the faces of —

"My God! Lydia Bryce. The wife of Doctor Bryce!" There were eleven duplications of her face, each with its separate contortions of misery!

And I saw another thing. I saw that there still was space on that cavern wall for *one more painting*. Already the frame was hanging in that waiting space!

I STAGGERED while I ran across the chamber at last. Glad I was indeed that Dr. Bryce had not been with me when I discovered the ledge behind the wall of water that flowed over Black Falls!

I was approaching now some extension of the series of caves that was flooded with a brilliant light. Through a narrow aperture I came suddenly into the dazzling fullness of that luminescence. I cursed myself for the mistake of making that sudden entry into this chamber. For a full minute I was helpless, my eyes unable to make out whatever scene confronted me—though I knew that part of that scene was Carol Landis, moaning now, and another who still shrieked her agonies.

And I was aware of a smell of paints, and of some powerful, sweet-scented unguent—my brain even identified that un-

Silently, leaving no trace, the  
Thing bore her off.



gent as a relief to be applied to tortured bodies when their torture was done!

I held my breath, blinking, not knowing at what second something might

spring upon me. I had not long to wait. There was a sudden blur, a black bulk loomed.

My name echoed through the chamber, screamed out in warning by Carol. I

struck out blindly with one fist and my gun barked. I missed my shot but I struck a body. My eyes cleared and I saw the cloaked and hooded Black Thing staggering backward.

I drew back for another shot but the monster was quicker than I. In its hands was the coil of a double-weighted riata such as the pampas riders use in South America to throw a steer or flick out the life of an enemy with its leaded tip. The riata whistled through the air, coiled about me, pinioning my arms. Another shape bore down upon me and jerked my wrists behind me. Despite my struggles I was helplessly trussed.

I was dragged to an upright oblong of heavy timber. A strap was thrown around it and I was deftly strapped and buckled to the heavy boards.

Then a third figure shuffled close. I gave a cry and a curse. Before me grinned the toothless black face of old General Lee! Grinning through his empty gums at my discovery that he, who had so constantly mumbled his terror of the Black Thing, was that monster's helper!

**I** LOOKED around the chamber for the first time and, because I was so helpless, I wished I could have been blind!

Strapped to an old Spanish stretching machine, one of the dread torturing devices of the Spanish Inquisition, was Carol's lovely figure. She was nude save for a brief white cloth held only by a plain string tied around her waist. The stretcher stood upright, as did the rack against which I was bound. Four iron arms reached out from a circular iron hub from which a winch protruded behind. The four forks of this inhuman device were slender, so fashioned that when the victim's arms were bound to the forks that reached upward, and her

feet fastened to the base of the lower forks, her body was exposed on all sides, except for the slender columns of the forks along the upraised arms and downward tapering legs.

The fiendish riata in the Black Thing's hands could lay its hideous welts across Carol's smooth, tender back, while the winch was being turned and her body stretched until its joints were ready to come apart!

All this I saw in a single flash; even to the water-matted condition of Carol's golden hair, and a fresh welt across that creamy flesh of hers, and to the tautness of her arms and legs signifying that already her young body had been stretched.

And then I saw Lydia Bryce!

The black thing had found her, wherever she had gone with the man who had eloped with her, and had brought her into this hellish scene. She, too, was scantily clothed. The voluptuous model which figured in the eleven paintings in the next chamber was now as exposed as on the canvases; and she, too, was bound. Only Lydia was stretched against the wall, her feet on the floor, her hands over her head, wrists and ankles fastened to rings fixed in the wall by heavy chain links.

In her face was indescribable horror and pain, but I had the curious impression that its lines of terror and suffering were not as deeply etched, not as starkly mad, as the artists had depicted in the eleven faces outside—no single human face could contort itself at one time into all those lines of suffering.

There were two more figures in the room. One was close to me. The other a little way off. I had been sensible of them, but those two white and pain-wracked bodies had held me. I gazed at



the other two now and this time my cry was of unbelief.

Peters and Crawford—the artists who had been friends of mine as well as of Emory Selwyn, and who had so abruptly and strangely disappeared from Selwyn's house sending back the information that they'd suddenly decided on a trip to the Caribbean!

I CALLED out their names. Their faces, I thought, were almost dead. They stared at me silently. And then I saw that they, like Lydia Bryce, were chained, only with them it was only their feet that were chained, from welded iron shackles to rings imbedded in the stone floor.

Before them were easels and in their hands their palettes. On the easels were canvases, on each the unfinished lines of a woman's body, its face just taking horrible shape—a beautiful face, the face of Lydia Bryce, but twisted into expressions of agony similar to those expressions outside.

My brain telegraphed me its intuitive interpretation of those canvases. These two great artists, chained to the floor, were painting into Lydia Bryce's face all the terror and agonies it held on its own account; adding to those, without changing the portraiture of Lydia, the varied expressions of pain and terror that stretching machine and the riata in the hands of the Black Thing were bringing to the features of Carrol Landis. Each of those pictures outside had shown more suffering than any one human could endure. My friends were being compelled to paint into still more canvases, one of them destined for that blank space outside, still a new composite of torture! The agonies in Carol's face would be used to make more sickening the agonies in the face of Lydia Bryce!

What hellish purpose could the Black Thing have for such a fiendish desire?

The Black Thing stood before me for a moment. I cursed at him again and still futilely. His eyes peered out at me through two narrow slits in his hood, and those slits were covered by a tinted cellophane that hid the color of those eyes. He moved away without a word and disappeared in some other chamber of the cave.

Carol continued to groan out my name, calling on me to save her, but Lydia Bryce seemed to have become partly injured to her torture. In pain-strung voice she called over to me. "I knew you were coming. He wanted still another artist—another brush to copy our faces—I knew when he persuaded Emory to send for you so he could bring you here—you'll do well—he thinks—with Carol being tortured before—"

She could say no more, nor tell me who "he" might be. The Black Thing returned carrying chains similar to those that held Peters and Crawford. He dropped them at my feet and General Lee came over to attach the shackles but the Black Thing called him away. His voice was muffled deep in his hood and I knew that whoever or whatever he was, he changed it.

"Give the winch a turn," he commanded the old negro. "I must have these canvases completed before this girl has a chance to die like Lisette did. If she lives, our new friend shall work on her tomorrow. He shall watch tonight while his friends put the tortures of this one into the face of Lydia."

I writhed against my bonds when Carol's shriek filled the chamber as the negro, standing behind her, gave that cruel wheel a turn. I could almost feel

(Continued on page 102)

# The Black Thing Walks

[Continued from page 43]

her beautiful legs lengthening, her slender arms stretching. While her face was twisting in unbearable agony, my two artists friends fell furiously to work with their brushes. I guessed that they had been cowed by long tortures of their own.

Once the riata whistled through the air. It curled and while the negro dodged, its lash buried in Carol's back. Curiously, if the Black Thing gloated, it was not before the almost nude form of Carol, even while his riata hissed and stung.

He faced Lydia Bryce and seemed to drink in the terror brought to her face by the suffering of Carol. And when his riata lashed again it crossed the bare and writhing thighs of Lydia, bringing new contortions to her face. He swung upon the two artists, bellowing in his muffled voice, "Get that. Get that down. Both of them into the one face!"

**I** THINK I fainted. For a time my senses were completely dulled. When they revived, responding to a new turn of that torturing winch, and Carol's shrieks for mercy, I saw that Eric Peters, who was the artist closest to me, was trying to catch my eye. I watched him. The Black Thing's back was turned. General Lee was watching him for signals. And Eric was sliding toward me his palette!

My heart leapt. On the edge of the palette was his scraping knife, its blade protruding as far as possible. A dull instrument it would be, but if I could get it into my hands I could saw the cord that bound me!

I couldn't reach for it, of course, but a look from Eric made me know that he

proposed to drop it into the backward crook of my elbow. If it fell to the floor I was lost. If not—

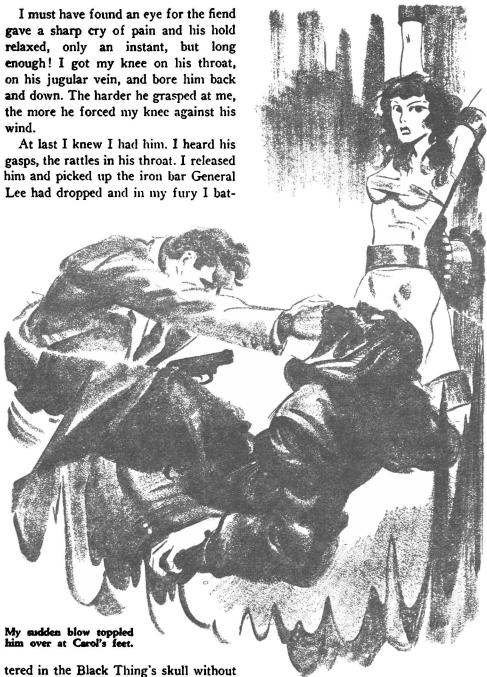
It didn't! and during another twist of the winch, and another fleck of the riata across the soft body of Lydia, my hands were free. I waited until the Black Thing was nearer, his attention fixed on the rising welts on Lydia's legs and the contortions of Carol's face. Now and again he came close to scan the canvases to see if some new combination of torture had been fixed to Lydia's face. At one of these times I sprang.

My sudden plunge toppled him to the floor with my hands at his throat. I knew while he was falling with me on his back that I was dealing with almost superhuman strength, but my own frenzy was not to be discouraged. I think I would have strangled him there and then if the old negro had not come yelling at me, some iron implement in his hand. I had to let go of the Black Thing while I smashed a fist into the negro's face and laid him out unconscious. The Black Thing was on his knees. Strong arms went around my legs and threw me as if I were a child. Again and again my fists battered the face under the black hood but the vise-like arms reached up to pinion my arms.

**N**OW my own strength was superhuman. I broke free and clutched at another scraping knife which Randal Crawford tossed at me. With the dull but strong blade I jabbed at the creature's hidden face through the hood even while I felt that the bones of my chest must crack in his clutch.

I must have found an eye for the fiend gave a sharp cry of pain and his hold relaxed, only an instant, but long enough! I got my knee on his throat, on his jugular vein, and bore him back and down. The harder he grasped at me, the more he forced my knee against his wind.

At last I knew I had him. I heard his gasps, the rattles in his throat. I released him and picked up the iron bar General Lee had dropped and in my fury I bat-



**My sudden blow toppled him over at Carol's feet.**

tered in the Black Thing's skull without knowing the features that belonged to that skull!

My friends the artists were screaming their excited joy. Lydia was shrieking a

prayer of thanks to Heaven. Poor Carol's body was motionless on its rack—she had fainted at last.

I tied the negro's hands behind him

before I made another move. Then I flew to Carol, freed her and laid her now limp body on the floor. Lydia's hands I had to free by breaking her chains with the iron bar.

And it was only then that I ripped the hood from the Black Thing and recoiled before the battered features of Dr. Bryce!

**I**T was hours before Lydia or my friends could talk coherently, and then, while Carol was waiting for me in her room upstairs in Selwyn's house, the whole evil story came out.

Dr. Bryce had discovered that another man shared the beauty of his wife. She had not eloped, but her husband had trapped both her and her admirer. The latter he had killed and then had taken Lydia to the cave, of which he alone had known since he purchased the big plantation.

He had forced Lydia to write him the elopement letter, just as he had forced Peters and Crawford to write Selwyn that they had gone to the Caribbean. He posted the letters. His revenge had taken form in those eleven paintings, twenty-two, in fact, for of each pair painted by his prisoners, he had discarded the one showing the least torture in his wife's face.

He had used his friend's wife, Cora Selwyn, as one of his additional victims, for the tortured contortions her face would donate to Lydia's on canvas. He had used Lisette, but little Lisette had died too soon. He had used the un-

known girl whom he had stolen from the highway—and then Carol.

Lydia explained the amnesia Cora Selwyn and the unknown girl suffered. Dr. Bryce had sent to India for the rare Emorocine drug with which complete amnesia can be effected by hypodermic. Thus, he was safe from his victims if they lived to be released. He would unquestionably have stilled the tongues of Peters and Crawford in the same fashion, and Lydia's, if he permitted her to live. Old General Lee had served him well, carrying food and fresh water into the caves every day, and dwelling upon the Black Thing—the fiend's creation to conceal his movements and spread superstitious fear. That night when Carol had seen the "Black Thing" enter the house, Dr. Bryce had only to hide his wet robes swiftly and appear at the French windows.

**W**HEN I went back into Carol's room she was sleeping. She lay on her side, to escape the burning of the welts on her back, welts that soon would heal. One leg was drawn up under the sheet and it caressed the lines of those slim thighs I had seen lacerated. A white arm was outside the sheet and a shoulder was bare down to the upper rise of her firmly lifted breast.

Carol must have felt the caress of my eyes. She opened her own suddenly, and looked up at me.

"As soon as my hurts heal, darling," she said softly, "and I can bear having you hold me tight again."

