

TERROR TALES



VOLUME TWELVE MAY, 1940 NUMBER TWO

A LONG NOVEL OF WEIRD TERROR

The Book of Torment.....Harrison Storm **6**

How could anyone have believed me when I said I had not committed those horrible torture-murders? For they had read the gloating admission of the ghastly crimes—and the handwriting was my own!

FOUR MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

Where Dwell the Living Dead.....Wayne Rogers **28**

Old Jubel Tandy swore that until the end of time I would remain faithful to the spirit of his dead daughter—and now in that cavern of damnation, her corpse was rising up to claim me in the cold, white embrace of death!

Mistress of the Dark Pool.....Russell Gray **56**

I could not help but laugh when that ancient hag told me I would take the place of her dead lover. For had I not my own lovely Cara? Yet there came a night when I promised to kill—that I might have the love of a wrinkled, leathery crone!

Prey for the Daughter of Hell.....Conrad Kimball **78**

Death lay in my lips! I knew this, but some power stronger than myself forced me on to lure men to their destruction. Was I so accused that even the one man I truly loved could not escape my frenzied madness?

Test-Tube Frankenstein.....Wayne Robbins **86**

I wanted to destroy that slimy, protoplasmic horror that fed on the flesh of the humans it sought to imitate, but even as I locked with it in a struggle of death, it changed into the lovely form of—my wife!

A SHORT STORY OF FEARFUL MENACE

The Night Eternity Ended.....Donald Dale **46**

The Blue Lady of the Sierras was the infinitely desirable embodiment of all man's longing and passion. Yet on one forbidden night of the year none could look upon her—and live!

TRUE TERROR FEATURE

Monsters of Monarchy.....Charles Boswell **73**

Egomaniac of Antiquity . . . the man whom all Rome feared. . .

—AND—

The Inside Story.....The Editors **4**

Are writers men or geni? . . .

Black Chapel!.....A Department **104**

A reader's complaint. . .

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2236 Cross Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. Harry H. Hargis, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter May 27, 1936, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 7, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1940, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A., \$5.00. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. For advertising rates address Russ J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send them to 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

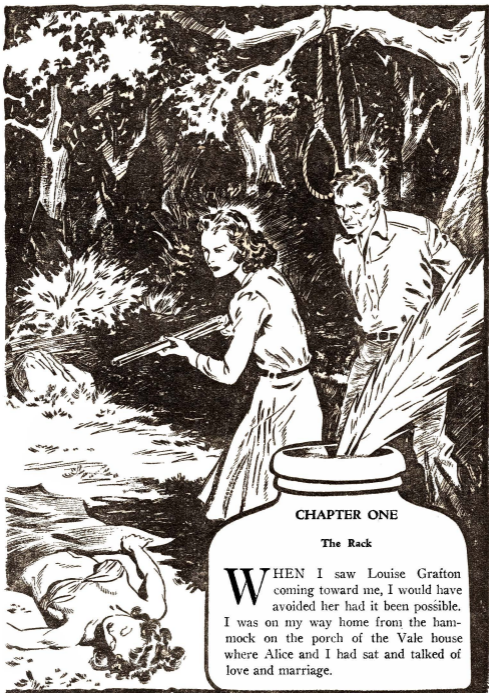


THE BOOK of TORMENT

*A long novel of the
ultimate horror that
can live in a man's body*

by
HARRISON STORM

Was I a monster? I could not remember having written those horrible recitals of torture and death—but I could not deny the evidence of my own handwriting. Only Alice Vale believed that I had not conceived and directed those two ghastly murders . . . and if she were wrong, then she, too, by my own hand was doomed to die!



CHAPTER ONE

The Rack

WHEN I saw Louise Grafton coming toward me, I would have avoided her had it been possible. I was on my way home from the hammock on the porch of the Vale house where Alice and I had sat and talked of love and marriage.

And now on a lonely street an hour before midnight I confronted Louise whom I had once loved. The dim glow of a street lamp fell over her. She was more mature, perhaps, but otherwise unchanged. It might have been yesterday, instead of five years ago, that she had looked up at me with her mouth half-open, dark eyes flashing and breasts stirring under her tight bodice, and told me that she was going to marry another man. She still wore dresses which somehow made her seem unclothed. Although not as beautiful as Alice, she was still the most exciting woman I had ever known.

"Gilles Bodin," she said, extending a soft hand to me. "I really should be angry with you. You have been back in Wistfield for three weeks now and haven't come to see me."

Neither of us made any attempt to drop the other's hand. "I was too busy," I lied.

"But not too busy for Alice Vale," she smiled.

I let it go at that. "How is Wilbur?"

Her face clouded. "As always—good natured and very rich."

"And dull," I added. "You wanted that."

"Yes," she admitted readily. And I'm not sorry. I am the wife of a wealthy man. That's a lot—more, I still think, than being the wife of a college professor. I loved you, Gil, but love alone wouldn't have lasted as long as Wilbur's money."

At least she was being honest with herself and with me; as honest as she had been that day five years ago when I had been offered a job as an assistant professor of psychology at an Eastern university and had asked her to come with me as my wife. She had chosen, instead, the wealth of a man twice her age.

Looking at her now under the street lamp, what I had feared at the sight of her was happening. I loved Alice Vale, yes, more than I'd ever loved Louise; and

yet at the moment I was aware only of Louise's body. Without any conscious effort on my part, I moved toward her. My hands closed over her shoulders.

For a moment she swayed against me so that I felt the soft curve of her breasts on my chest. Then she straightened up and stepped backward.

"I must run along now, Gil," she said. "I'll be seeing more of you, I hope."

I watched the graceful motion of her body hurrying down the street as if she were anxious to get away from me. Damn her! Wouldn't I ever be able to get her out of my blood?

On the way home I tried to call up the lovely golden-haired image of Alice Vale, but remembrance of Louise's enticing body intruded. I hated Louise then as I had hated her when she had told me she had decided to marry Wilbur Grafton; and as a psychologist I know how slim is the line which divides passionate hate and passionate love.

I HAD returned to Wistfield after a five-year absence because of Alice Vale. I had known her since childhood, as I had known every resident in Wistfield, but she had been a gangling high school girl when I had left. Last spring I met her again at a university dance; met a young woman with hair like the sun and eyes the color of corn flowers and a figure which had sent both students and professors into a frenzy of attention. After one evening together, we had known that we were in love.

And so I had come to spend my summer vacation in the little cottage in Wistfield which had been left to me by parents. There was another reason: I was writing a book on the subconscious mind. But that was not important compared to the chance of spending an entire summer with Alice. And after the summer, I hoped, Alice would return with me to the university as Mrs. Bodin.

It was exactly midnight when I snapped on the light of the room I had converted into a library. On the desk were blank white sheets and a fountain pen, all ready for me to get to work on my book immediately after breakfast.

I remember looking at those sheets of paper with a kind of hypnotic fascination as if it were important that I immediately cover their whiteness with words. I wasn't sure what the words would be, but in back of my mind there was . . .

All of a sudden my brain went blank. The room, everything, vanished.

When I opened my eyes again, I found that I was in bed and that the sun was high in the sky. Loud, laughing voices were in the house. I slid out of bed and put on a dressing gown and went into the library.

Through the doorway I saw six people in the library, all dressed for tennis. They had come to pick me up on the way to the courts, and finding the door unlocked, they hadn't bothered with the formality of ringing.

Alice Vale was among them. She was clad in white slacks and a thin, knitted blouse which molded the roundness of her breasts, and her golden hair was gathered up on top of her head for coolness and comfort. Looking at her, I wondered how Louise Grafton could possibly have affected me last night.

There were two other girls: Marie Dexter, a delectable little thing with whom I had had a puppy love affair during my high school days, and Hermine Bauer, plump and jolly, who was engaged to stocky, red-headed Jim Warren, my closest friend during my youth.

Jim, now an up and coming lawyer, was saying to Chester Engles: "You have no business reading Gil's private papers like that."

Chester Engles was seated behind my desk with a sheaf of white paper in his hand. He was thin almost to emaciation—

had been since we'd been children together, with a bloodless bitter mouth and blazing feverish eyes sunk deep in bony sockets.

"It's probably part of Gil's book," Al McWilliams put in. He used to be the town's star athlete, and was now placidly achieving an oversized girth as a real estate agent. "I bet it's dull as hell."

"Not if it's anything like the abnormal psychology I took in college," Hermine Bauer declared. "It used to be our most popular course. All about sex perversion and sadism and what-not."

I remained unseen in the doorway, watching, trying to recall what I could have written last night after I had reached home. It was odd how my mind had suddenly gone blank.

"This'll interest you, all right," Chester Engles chuckled. "I glanced through the first page. Listen to this: 'I, Gilles Bodin, being appointed to the Inquisition of Carcassone in this year of our Lord, 1439, found to my delight that my first duty required putting to the question none other than the very beautiful Madame de Guibourg.'"

"I'll be damned!" Al McWilliams exclaimed. "The same name, only five hundred years ago."

Chester Engles nodded. "Gil once told me that he can trace his family back for centuries in France, and his own name, Gilles Bodin, as well. Maybe this is a bit of family history."

I found that my heart was pounding. Yes, there were family records, but not that far back. I had never heard of an Inquisitor of Carcassone who had borne my name. How in the world could I have written that?

TENSELY I listened as Chester Engles continued to read from the manuscript:

"It was my doing. I, Gilles Bodin, whom Louise had spurned because I was

but a lowly scholar, and had instead wed the powerful de Guibourg for wealth and position, now held her destiny in my hands. The Inquisition will never suspect that it was I who spread the rumors of Satanic rites in the cellars of the de Guibourg castle; that it was I who bribed Madame de Guibourg's servants to mutter of the blood of babies being spilled by their mistress for the glory of Satan and that she supped at the Devil's banquet whereat no salt was served. And when Louise de Guibourg stood before the judges of the Inquisition, she did not know me behind my black hood, nor how my eyes feasted on her beauty which she had denied me for the embraces of a man twice her age.

"Proud and tall, Louise de Guibourg stood before the judges, her dark-eyes flashing as once they had flashed for love of me. Oh, she was a fine lady as she denied the accusations, full of piety and spirit, even when I was ordered to put her to the question. Head high, step firm, she strode at my side to the torture chamber, brave in the knowledge that the purity of her faith would mitigate her agony.

"Not until we entered the dank stone torment chamber did her step falter. A moan trickled from her lips and a spasm shook her as she saw the dreadful instruments of torture. Then her head lifted again as she turned to me with a haughty sneer and said: "Do with me what you will. I am innocent."

"I dismissed my assistants, saying that I needed no aid for the questioning of one lone woman. When we were alone, I tore the clothes from her. She did not cringe, but crossed her arms over her bosom and raised her eyes to heaven and muttered a silent prayer. I laughed then and ripped the hood from my head. Her eyes bulged as if she were staring at Evil Incarnate when she saw who I was, and suddenly she shrank from me in the full

knowledge of what fate awaited her."

Chester Engles paused to clear his throat. There was not a sound in the room as they waited for him to continue. I took a single step forward to tear the manuscript from his hand, then I thought better of it. Louise Grafton, whom I had loved and who had married an older man; Louise de Guibourg who had been loved by a Gilles Bodin five hundred years ago! It had to be a hoax which Chester or one of the others were perpetrating.

Chester Engles went on:

"I caught Louise in my arms, and into a pink ear I whispered that at last she was mine to do with as I would. Her dark eyes flashed me a look of such hatred as would have shrivelled a less calloused soul than mine and she named me Satan himself; but I only continued to laugh and secured her to the rack. How I hated her as I turned the windlass! How I gloated as her body grew taut and elongated! She had spurned my embraces. Now let her be embraced by pain!

"All the skill at my command I employed. When she was about to faint so as to avoid the agony, I relaxed the chains and bathed her face, letting her rest so that strength would return to her in order to bring out her suffering to the utmost. Presently beauty left her form. The flesh of her thighs, once full and tapering, stretched tightly over cracking bones. Her face turned ugly. I brought the hot coals and placed them on her flesh. She writhed with the effort to shake them off, but her movements served but to increase the torment of her racked body. I heated irons and let the glowing metal linger against her armpits.

"It was then that she confessed to abominations of which she was guiltless. Screaming words tumbled from her swollen lips; confessions that she was a witch, that she had been the mistress of Satan. Did the learned holy judges of the Inquisition ever suspect that they them-

selves were serving the Devil in wrenching from tortured souls confessions of evil which never existed?

"Louise had been put to the question and confessed, and it was now my duty to turn her over to the Inquisition to be judged. But she had seen my face and knew my motives, and I could not afford to let her speak to the judges. When I was through with the white-hot irons, I took up a stout rod and broke her bones, one by one. I do not know when she died. But at last I was through and dropped from the rack the shapeless mass which had once been a beautiful woman. I leaned against the wall and laughed until my throat was raw!"

SOMEbody cleared his throat noisily as Chester Engles tossed the manuscript down on the desk. Alice Vale turned and saw me standing there in the doorway. She stared at me with an odd half-frightened expression.

Marie Dexter shuddered. "I've never heard anything so horrible. Did Gil really write that?"

Jim Warren shrugged. "Well, Gil's a psychologist and that's right up his alley. Pretty nasty, though."

I strode into the room. They all looked at me.

"What kind of joke is this?" I demanded.

"There's nothing funny about it," Al McWilliams said. "I suppose you have to have a peculiar sort of mind to write anything like this."

I snatched the sheets of paper from the desk. I had convinced myself that the manuscript couldn't possibly be in my handwriting. But it was! And there were too many words for the whole thing to have been forged. There wasn't the least doubt that last night I'd written it.

Why? What on earth did it mean? Had the sight of Louise Grafton affected me with that perverted commingling of love

and hate which is called sadism? Had my sub-conscious mind put me in the place of an Inquisitor who'd lived five centuries ago so that mentally I could give vent to a latent sadistic streak in me? It seemed to be the only explanation.

"It's something I dashed off for my book," I muttered. "Trying to make a study of the mental processes of a professional torturer. As for the identical names, I couldn't think of any and so I used mine temporarily."

Nobody said anything. I returned to my bedroom to get dressed for tennis. I found them all outside on the porch, laughing and joking and swinging their rackets. They seemed to have forgotten about the manuscript. Alice tucked her arm cozily through mine and we all set out for the courts.

We cut across fields and woods. Jim Warren and Marie Dexter were leading, so Marie was the first to scream. The rest of us were still among the trees which flanked the courts. When we burst into the open, we found Marie with her face buried in Jim's chest, while he was staring with a kind of dazed unbelief at the large oak tree on the other side of the courts.

From the lowest branch dangled a red-and-white horror which had once been a young woman.

CHAPTER TWO

I—Fiend?

HOLDING the tennis racket like a club, Al McWilliams sprinted across the courts. Chester and then Jim followed. I stood holding Alice's trembling body against me and hadn't the power to move. I knew who was hanging from the tree.

Chester Engles cried out and turned to look at me. I had to go then or be forever branded as a coward or something a great deal worse. Gently I pulled Alice's arms

away from me, muttered, "Stay here," and started across the courts.

My three friends were standing a little to the side of the oak tree, watching me as I approached, horror stamped on their faces. Horror which I inspired as much as did the dangling corpse!

The sun slanted across the courts, its beams glittering on the scarlet splotches which practically covered the dead woman. The face, contorted as it was with hellish agony, was still that of Louise Grafton, but the body wasn't like any human body I had ever seen. She had been tied by her wrists to the branch and a heavy wire net had been fastened to her ankles. And as she had hung there naked, heavy stones had been piled into the net; as the weight had increased, her body had been stretched in that improvised rack.

That had been only the start of her torment. Her taut, sensitive flesh had been burned, and then her bones had been broken by a hammer or an iron rod. Sharp edges and splinters of bone which had pierced her stretched skin shone with a terrible whiteness in the sun.

"She's dead," Al was saying in a queerly hoarse tone. "We'd better leave her just like that till the police come. Poor thing can't suffer any more."

Jim put a big hand on my arm and swung me toward him. "Gil, how did you come to write that?" His eyes blazed with accusation. "Louise died the same way as—as that other Louise you wrote about."

I wet my lips with my tongue. "I didn't kill her," I said.

"But how in the world could you have written—" Chester began.

"Cut it out!" Al snapped. "We're not the police. Chester, you go for the sheriff. Jim, you take the girls away from here. Gil will stay here with me."

In every crisis one person will be found to take charge. In this case it was Al. It did not occur to any of us not to follow his orders. Jim and Chester walked off,

slowly, as if in a daze. The three girls were huddled together on the other side of the courts, and I heard Marie sobbing. Then Jim and Chester came up to them and the five disappeared into the woods.

I dropped down on the grass, not looking at what had been Louise Grafton. Al stood near me with feet wide apart.

Presently I burst out: "Go on, say it! You think I'm a monster."

"Are you?" he asked quietly.

"Look here, Al. We've known each other since we were kids. Do you think I would be capable of doing that to anybody?"

"Frankly I don't. But there's that manuscript."

I THOUGHT of the blank interval between midnight last night and this morning when I had awakened. Obviously I had written the manuscript—but what else had I done last night?

"I didn't do it, Al," I said.

I don't know if my words convinced him. I couldn't convince myself.

After another long interval of silence we saw a car come up the dirt road. The fleshy frame of Sheriff Tom Moyer piled out first, followed by a deputy and Dr. Seth Cross, Wistfield's coroner and most prominent physician.

All three of them cried out when they saw the body, and they continued to swear harshly as they cut it down. I couldn't see what they did because I kept my back toward them.

Finally Dr. Cross said: "She's been dead at least six hours. God, how she must have suffered! I'm a mild man, but I'd give a lot to get my hands on the fiend."

"After me," the sheriff grunted.

Tensely I waited for Al to tell the sheriff about the manuscript. He didn't.

When the sheriff said that we could go, I walked off without waiting for Al. I went into the woods and roamed around

for a while. I wanted to think this through, but always I stopped at that blank interval in my mind. As a psychologist, I know the spot of cruelty which exists in all of us. Sometimes it becomes dominant and we turn into homicidal madmen, temporarily or permanently. I did not doubt that a part of my subconscious mind yearned to torture the woman I had once loved; it had satisfied itself through the writing of that manuscript, much as our inhibitions seek outlets through dreams. But what if I had gone beyond that? What if I had translated what I had written into action?

And if I had turned into a fiend once, I could do it again.

Good heavens, in such thoughts lay madness! Perhaps I *was* mad!

I do not know how many hours passed before I found myself in front of my cottage. In the library were Sheriff Moyer and Wilbur Grafton, the husband of Louise. They were reading the manuscript which I had left on the desk.

When Grafton saw me, he shrieked wildly and started for me. Moyer threw his arms around him and held him.

"Let me at him!" Grafton was sobbing, trying to break away. "I'll tear him apart

with my bare hands! I'll kill him!"

I stood motionless. If the sheriff had released him, I don't think that I would have offered any resistance, although I was twice as strong as Grafton and fifteen years younger.

"He'll get his if he's guilty," Moyer rasped.

Grafton slumped down into a chair and buried his face in his hands. I had never liked the man, even before he had married Louise; but now I felt infinitely sorry for him.

Moyer picked up the sheets of paper which bore my handwriting. "Did you write this, Bodin?" he demanded.

Denial was useless. "Yes," I said.

His fat face twisted with rage. "Do you realize that this is a confession of murder? Of worse than murder?"

"I didn't kill Louise," I said hollowly.

Grafton raised his head and laughed crazily. Moyer stepped toward me and roared: "Gilles Bodin, in the name of the law, I arrest you for the murder of—"

"No!"

It was a new voice in the room. All of us turned to the doorway where Alice Vale stood. She put one hand out to steady herself against the wall.

"He didn't kill her," she said. "I came here to tell you that."

"Yeah?" the sheriff grunted. "What do you know about it?"

She said: "I've just spoken to Dr. Cross. He told me that Louise had died at about six o'clock this morning. I've been with Gil continually from about eight o'clock last night until past six this morning."

FOR long moments there was no sound but the thumping of my heart. Her slim shoulders drooped as, with hands clasped tightly before her, she stood waiting for the reaction to her statement. Her face was devoid of color.

"So?" the sheriff breathed. "And you say you were with him every minute? Where?"

"We were at my house until about eleven. Then Gil left me and—"

"Hold it," Moyer interrupted. "Mrs. Grafton was last seen at eleven. She'd been visiting a friend who lives only two blocks away from your house."

"Please let me finish," Alice said quietly. "I went up to my room after Gil left and pretended to go to bed. I waited about ten minutes until I was sure my parents were asleep, then slipped out of the house and came here to Gil. That was less than half an hour after he'd left me. In that time he couldn't have taken Louise all the way out to the tennis courts and— and have done those things to her. I was with him constantly until six or seven this morning when I left to slip back into my house."

Grafton laughed again in a way that chilled my spine. "She's lying, Sheriff. I've known Alice since she was a tot, and she isn't the kind to spend the night in a man's house."

I took a deep breath and decided that it was time for me to speak. It wasn't easy because Alice's story might make the difference between my life and death.

But I couldn't allow her do this for me.

"She's talking nonsense, Sheriff," I said. "She's trying to provide an alibi for me."

"I thought so," Moyer grunted. "I don't understand you, girl—throwing away your reputation for the vilest murderer I ever heard of."

Alice straightened her shoulders, and her beauty and courage twisted my heart.

"Gil is innocent," she declared. "I told you how I know that he is. Gil might try to save my reputation by denying that I spent last night with him and you might say I'm lying to save him; but a jury will believe me. That manuscript isn't evidence. It's an historical fact about one of Gil's ancestors."

Moyer was licked and he knew it. He hadn't a legal case against me. He looked long at Alice and said: "God help you, girl, if Bodin is really the fiend! Having tortured once, he might do it again—this time with you as the victim."

"You can't frighten me," she told him.

Moyer shrugged. "Your father wouldn't like this, but for your sake I hope you really spent last night with Bodin. . . . Let's go, Mr. Grafton."

"He did it!" Grafton cried. "Good Lord, you can't let him go!"

"We only think he might have done it," the sheriff said. "To convict an innocent man of that crime would be as horrible as the crime itself. That's why I have to take the chance of not taking him in."

Dazed and uncertain, Grafton permitted the sheriff to lead him out of the cottage.

I turned to Alice. "You shouldn't have," I said weakly.

"Your life is more important than my reputation, darling." She came to me and put her hands on my shoulders. "Gil, tell me: you didn't do it?"

"I don't know," I muttered.

She stiffened and horror crawled in the blue depths of her eyes. "Gil!"

I said hollowly: "I wrote that manuscript after I returned home. That much I am sure of, although I don't remember having written it. There's no doubt it's my handwriting and my style. You've read some of my papers on dual personality. It might have been my other self, a fiendish, sadistic self, that attained possession of me and tortured Louise. The sheriff is right—I might torture and kill again, and the next time the victim may be you."

She shuddered, but did not draw away from me. "No, darling. You couldn't harm me."

"I would not know what I was doing. Alice, I'm going away. You might be in frightful danger if I stay."

SHE held me tighter. "If you were to run away now, it would be a confession of guilt. You didn't do it. I would know; I would feel it somehow. I believe in you. Believe in yourself."

"If only I could. Yet the fact is—" Suddenly my heart started beating furiously as a thought crossed my mind. "I have it! Listen to this, Alice. Louise left her friend's house last night at the same time that I left you. I came home and wrote the description. All that would have taken at least an hour, perhaps longer. Yet it is obvious that Louise was intercepted and carried off to the tennis courts at eleven o'clock."

"That's it," she said eagerly. "It proves your innocence."

"I could have written the manuscript after the event," I went on, "but I'm sure I started writing as soon as I arrived home because I remember being drawn to the clean sheets of paper on the desk as if in a hypnotic trance."

Alice kissed me ardently. "So now there's nothing more to worry about," she said, a sob of relief mingling with the laughter in her voice.

Wasn't there? Possibly, instead of con-

tinuing homeward, Louise had come to me here. She had loved me and had never loved Wilbur Grafton. I recalled how for a moment in the dark street she had swayed against me before she had regained self-possession. She could have come just as I had finished writing, and my dual self, my monster-self, had carried her or enticed her to the tennis courts and . . .

God, no! I must believe in myself as thoroughly as Alice did.

Half an hour later the front bell rang. I went to the door. The gaunt form of Richard Vale, Alice's father, stood on the porch. He stalked into the house and glowered at me.

"Where's Alice?" he demanded. His hands were fisted; I wondered what I would do if he made an attempt to strike me.

"She's in the library." I tried to make my voice sound casual. "Won't you come in?"

Alice entered the foyer. She blanched at the sight of her father. Ignoring me completely, he went to his daughter and gripped her arm roughly.

"You shameless hussy!" he spat out. "Everybody's talking about how you were here all last night."

Her little chin thrust out, she faced her father defiantly. "Gil and I are going to be married."

"I'll have something to say about that," he shouted. "I ought to kill him, but it seems like the law will do that for me. Come!"

I stepped forward.

"No, darling," she told me quietly. "I'll handle this my own way. I'm of age. He can't keep us apart."

Through a window I watched her leave at the side of her father. She turned to smile at me, and then they were out of sight.

For the rest of the afternoon and evening I puttered around the house, not

having the courage to step out and face any of my neighbors. The horrible murder of Louise Grafton must be the sole topic of conversation in Wistfield, and with it, my name was no doubt coupled.

Later I started a fire in the fireplace and burned the manuscript and selected a light novel. After a while the words were blotted out by a haze before my eyes. I put down the book and stared into the fire. The dancing flames captured my attention and held it. My eyelids began to droop, and suddenly I was asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

The Pinchers

I AWOKE with a start. I was in my bed, clad in my pajamas, and daylight streamed in through a window. Ten or twelve hours ago I had fallen asleep in a chair in front of the fireplace; I did not remember having undressed and gone to bed.

A hollow ball formed in the pit of my stomach as I quickly got into my clothes. Foreboding gripped me. I went directly downstairs to the library. Sheets of white writing paper lay on the desk blotter; and as I moved toward the desk on strangely stiff legs, I saw that the top sheet was covered with my neat thin script.

Last evening I had burned the manuscript containing the story of Louise de Guibourg's frightful death. Good Lord, could this be another?

It was!

With a numb sense of horror, I dropped into the leather chair behind the desk and read what I must have written some time during the night:

"I, Gilles Bodin, having tormented the lovely Louise de Guibourg, continued to carry out the judgments of the Inquisition of Carcassone. Satan, said the Inquisition, was becoming increasingly bold

and many were his converts. Those who would not confess were handed over to me and my assistants to loosen their tongues, and we did not fail. Strong men were turned into children whimpering for death under the ministrations of my racks and irons and pinchers and boots and knives and whips. Old hags suspected of witchcraft endured longer, but finally they too uttered the words which led them to the stake. And there were young girls whose white bodies were sounding boards for our instruments of anguish—fair girls among them, but none as beautiful as had been Louise de Guibourg.

"On an afternoon I came upon Marie Davot bathing her feet in a stream. Standing unseen behind a tree, I watched the water lave over her marble-like limbs as she held her skirt above her dimpled knees. Years ago in my youth we had loved each other in the passing manner of the young, and I recalled the tenderness of Marie Davot's delicate little body and the warmth of her ardor. Truly one who would suffer exquisitely!

"The following day a devastating hail storm struck the countryside. And ere the sky had cleared, I had caused a rumor to be spread that Marie Davot had been seen, immediately prior to the coming of the storm, to have her eyes raised in the direction from whence the storm cloud had come and to have been heard to mutter incantations to Satan. Forthwith she was hailed before the Inquisition, charged with being a creature of the Devil, having obtained the power through an unholy pact to bring down the destructive hailstones on her righteous neighbors.

"Piteously she grovelled before the judges, sobbing her innocence. It was to no avail. I was ordered to put her to the question. She swooned then and I gathered her slight weight in my arms and bore her down to the torture chamber. When we were alone, I bathed her face with water and forced between her lips a

drink which would strengthen her heart.

"She opened her eyes and stared at me in bewilderment. I had removed my hood and she saw a face she remembered well. 'Gilles!' she cried. 'You have come to save me, to take me away from this place of madness?' I laughed so wildly and loudly that the terror returned to her face. When I pulled her up to her feet by her hair, she made no struggle, sagging in my arms and gaping at me as if she could not believe her eyes.

"Then, like a sack of meal I dragged her over to a massive wooden chair. I secured her hands in two iron clamps on the arms of the chair, and her ankles I fastened in other clamps on a sort of footstool attached to the chair, so that her legs were held straight out from her hips. Then I thrust my favorite pinchers into the hot coals of a brazier.

"SHE sat as one dead while I blew on the coals. From her throat issued a thin sound I have heard made by a hurt kitten. But when I approached her with the glowing pinchers, a scream at last broke forth from her lips. And that scream rose higher and higher when the teeth of the pinchers gripped a nail of her right hand. Countless screams of agony had clashed against the sweating stone walls of that chamber, but none had been as eloquent of unadulterated agony as was the voice of Marie Davot.

"When the five fingers of her hand were mangled, bloody stumps, she burst out in confessions of witchcraft of which all the beldams in history would be incapable. Aye, the Inquisition could have another witch to give to the stake. My pinchers could make as many witches and warlocks as would delight the heart of the most relentless foe of Satan. But Marie Davot would be reserved for my own pleasure.

"And so I heated the pinchers again and drew out the nails of her remaining

five fingers. That having been accomplished, I set to work on the nails of her toes.

"I have always wondered how a frail girl can endure more torment than the hardiest of men. All the nails of her fingers and toes had been drawn out, and still her delicate body, covered with a mantle of sweat, continued to writhe and thrash, and her eyes, though misted with pain, were open, and they bulged with madness as I heated the pinchers yet again. Once more she shrieked—what music to my ears!—as I let the white-hot jaws of the pinchers feed on her soft white flesh. And then, suddenly, she was dead. With a sigh of infinite relief she sank back in the chair and her eyes closed. . . ."

The sheets of paper fluttered from my lifeless hands. For a time I sat motionless, bathed in cold sweat, trying by sheer force of will to pierce the veil between the time when I had fallen asleep before the fire last night and when I had awakened in bed a few minutes ago. I was futile.

Then I became afraid. All that had connected me yesterday with the death of Louise Grafton had been a manuscript in my handwriting. Here was another. It must be destroyed.

In a frenzy I gathered up the papers and threw them into the fireplace. Stooping, I tried to apply a match to them, but my hand shook so that the tiny flame went out. As I struck another match, the back door leading into the kitchen slammed. Feet hurried into the library.

Crouching in front of the fireplace with the second lighted match in my hand and my head twisted over one shoulder, I saw Sheriff Tom Moyer and his deputy burst into the room. The sheriff moved with amazing rapidity in spite of his weight. He struck me on the side of the face with his arm, knocking me over. As I rose to my feet, I saw him gathering up the sheets of paper. The deputy held a sawed-off shotgun pointed at me.

"Tried to burn it," Moyer grunted. "Got here just in time."

The creases of his face twisted into a mask of fury as his eyes skimmed over the papers. "Marie Davot—Marie Dexter!" he muttered, and read on.

I found my voice at last. "Is she—has anything happened to Marie Dexter?"

"Don't pretend you don't know," he snapped savagely.

He folded the sheets of paper and stuck them into his pocket. Then he took two steps over to me and smashed his big fist into my face. My shoulders hit the wall; I stumbled about, trying to maintain my balance. He hit me again and my legs folded up.

The deputy put his shotgun on the desk and joined in. They lifted me to my feet and knocked me down and kept repeating the procedure. I offered no resistance. I wouldn't have cared if they had beaten me to death.

But when, after a few minutes, I was so weak that I fell without a hand being laid on me, they desisted.

"That's enough," the sheriff grunted. "We've got to save enough of him to get to jail."

THE deputy fetched a pail of water from the kitchen and threw it over me. Then each of them got me under a shoulder and half-carried, half-dragged me out to the car parked in front of the house. In the windshield mirror I saw a swollen blood-smearred face I did not recognize as my own. Without success I tried to wipe off the blood with a wet sleeve.

Everybody in Wistfield was in the streets, all moving in the same direction. In five minutes we were at the outskirts of the village. At the edge of a copse of trees a crowd had gathered. The sheriff stopped the car and he and the deputy pulled me out. I had recovered sufficient strength to move under my own power.

The crowd parted as we approached, and I saw the blanket which covered something on the ground.

Al McWilliams, looking twice as old as he had that morning, asked the sheriff hoarsely: "What happened to him?"

"Nothing much yet," the sheriff replied grimly. "We found him about to burn another set of papers. It was all about a fiend named Gilles Bodin torturing a girl named Marie Davot. He pulled out her nails with hot pinchers."

An animal howl of fury rose from the crowd. Al McWilliams hurled himself at me. Quickly the sheriff interposed his bulk between Al and myself.

"None of that now," he barked. "He's my prisoner. . . . Del, let him take a last look at what he did to that poor girl."

The deputy whipped off the blanket. I had known what I would see. Hadn't I written about it? But the sight itself was worse than any pen could describe.

"What have you got to say now?" Sheriff Moyer demanded.

What was there to say? I turned my head away. The deputy covered the body.

The howl rose once more from that crowd of grim-faced men. Men who had been my friends since childhood, but who now regarded me as a human monster who had no right to remain alive. Jim Warren and Chester Engles and Al McWilliams were bunched together, looking at me as if they had never seen me before. Richard Vale, Alice's florid-faced father, was trembling with rage. Wilbur Grafton, who had reached the depths of suffering yesterday, stood as if frozen stiff.

Moyer gripped my arm. "Let's go, Bodin."

"No you don't, Sheriff." Wilbur Grafton had at last roused himself. "He's not leaving here alive."

Moyer whipped out his revolver and the deputy brought up his shotgun. "Boys, I know how you feel," Moyer said evenly.

"But I'm the law here and it's my job to see that he gets a legal trial."

"Trial!" Grafton said bitterly. "He's guilty, isn't he? We all know it. And we also know that the law will never hang him; they'll call him insane. No, Sheriff, we'll settle this right here."

Agreement was roared as if by one voice—the voice of the lynch mob.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Third Manuscript

THE attempt of the sheriff and deputy to save me from a lynch rope was a farce. They were armed and the mob was not, yet they didn't even go through the motions of threatening with their guns.

I didn't much care what happened to me. Weak from the beating and sick with horror, I couldn't bring myself to hate the men who sought to kill me. One couldn't look at what had been done to Louise Grafton and Marie Dexter and remain normal.

Moyer and his deputy were caught up in a swirl of furious humanity and hurled aside. Then Al McWilliams and Grafton and several others had their hands on me.

None saw the lone girl dive among the men. Somehow she managed to snatch up the deputy's shotgun.

"Take your hands off him or I'll shoot!" her voice rang out clear and bold.

Every eye turned toward Alice Vale

as she stood a little to the side of the mob with finger curled over the trigger of the shotgun. It was her magnificent poise and the frantic determination in her eyes which showed them that she meant business. She stood there slim and small and lovely, facing a score of kill-mad men, and it was the men who were afraid. Two blasts of that sawed-off shotgun could do a lot of damage.

"I'll shoot," she repeated.

The tall gaunt figure of Richard Vale stepped toward her.

"Give me that gun, Alice."

"Stay back, Father," she cried tautly. "If you come near me, I'll shoot at the others."

He stopped. Alice's beauty and devotion and courage brought back to me the desire to live. I could think of nothing save that she loved me with as great a love as ever a woman had had for a man. I shrugged away from the men who held me. As if hypnotized by the gun in her hands, they let me go. I stepped to her side.

"Don't any of you attempt to follow us." And for the third time, as if to convince herself as well as them, she repeated: "I'll shoot."

Chester Engles was the first to find his voice. "My God, Alice, do you realize what you're doing? He'll kill you like the others as soon as he gets you alone."

"Gil isn't a murderer, and you'd realize-

it if you had any sense," she said dully. "I can't prove who really did it, but I know who he is."

Al McWilliams laughed harshly. "Now I suppose you'll try to pin it on somebody else. Does Gil deny that he wrote those manuscripts?"

Alice and I had started to back away. None of them attempted to follow. I saw that Sheriff Moyer still had his revolver limply in his hand; he would have used it on me readily enough, but not on Alice.

AS WE approached the many cars which were parked on the road, I said: "Why didn't you let them hang me? I don't deserve to live."

"You more or less proved that you couldn't have killed Louise, and whoever murdered her, also murdered Marie."

"Not absolute proof," I muttered.

"I have an idea who the real murderer is," she said. "I might be all wrong, but I doubt it."

My heart lifted with sudden hope. "Who?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I mustn't tell you, darling. You'd only come back to Wistfield, trying to get proof. You'll have to get away and stay hidden. Take one of the cars. I'll cover your escape."

"And leave you here to face them alone?" I protested.

"Nothing will happen to me. After all, I didn't violate any law. All I did was save you from a lynch mob when the sheriff didn't do his duty. They wouldn't dare do anything to me."

We had reached the road. I got into the nearest car and stepped on the starter. The mob was moving toward us slowly. Alice pointed the gun at them and they stopped.

"Go as far as possible," she said. "Don't do anything rash. Remember, darling, how much I love you."

We kissed quickly and then I stepped on the gas. Glancing back, I saw the sun

mingling with her golden hair as she continued to hold the mob off. Something choked me. Even if she turned out to be justified in thinking me innocent, would I ever be able to deserve her?

Several miles out of Wistfield I ran the car into some bushes and plunged into thick woods. The pursuit would probably go right past. After a while I flopped on a pile of fallen leaves and lay there, so weak that I could not move. The strain and the beating and the fact that I hadn't had anything to eat had sapped my last ounce of strength.

Hours later I managed to rise and continue. I came upon the edge of a farm and stole tomatoes and melons which filled my stomach somewhat; and later on I passed a spring from which I drank deeply.

The setting sun found me lying on soft ground at the side of a great rock. I could no longer stir. I lay flat on my back and let a heavy sleep of exhaustion overpower me.

My eyes opened to a white moon directly above me. According to my watch it was a few minutes after midnight.

Groggily I sat up, and something slid from my chest to my lap. It was a notebook which I carried in my pocket to jot down ideas for my book. As I picked it up, I noticed my gold pencil on the ground.

Suddenly a dreadful thought passed my mind. I leafed through the notebook. Straining my eyes, I could barely distinguish the script in the moonlight. Toward the back of the book I came across pages of writing which had not been there before.

Somehow my bloodless fingers managed to strike a match. A name leaped up at me. Alice Vitry. Dear God, no!

BY THE light of matches I read what I must have written within the last few hours:

"I, Gilles Bodin, gazed upon the incredible beauty of Alice Vitry. The glory of her golden hair and the depth of her blue eyes and the erect grace of her figure shamed even my memory of Louise de Guibourg. Not even in my most exalted dreams had I dared hope that such a girl would be handed over to me to be put to the question.

"Then I found myself quaking with fear as the Chief Inquisitor read the long list of charges against her, the mildest of which being that she had offered herself to the Devil. What if she should confess here and now before the Inquisition? She would be given directly over to the stake, depriving me of the unbounded joy of putting her to the question.

"But I need not have feared. Sweeping the hooded faces of the Inquisitors with defiant eyes, she did more than deny the charges. Scornfully she named the Inquisitors as wicked old men whose evil hearts drove them to torture and kill in the name of righteousness. More than one saint had been burned by the Inquisition, and if ever a saint had stood before the judges, Alice Vitry was that person. Certain I was, however, that they could not distinguish saint from sinner, and her words served only to rouse their fury. I was ordered to take her away.

"I led her down to the chamber. When the great iron door had closed behind us and I had dismissed my assistants, the scorn was still in her eyes as she looked at the instruments of torment. And when I stretched out my hands to strip her, she brushed me aside haughtily and herself removed her garments. The splendor of her beauty as she stood naked and contemptuous before me was matched only by her courage. It would take a long time for me to break her spirit—but sooner or later it would break. Strong as her spirit may be, it was after all but encased in flesh and blood.

"I suspended her from the ceiling by

a wire about each thumb so that her toes were above the floor. Then each of her feet I enclosed in a dreaded iron boot and tightened the screws only so far as to give great pain without crushing the bones. Her torment must be the most exquisite of which my art was capable; it must last a long, long time, an eternity if necessary. Whereafter I took a short thin whip and skillfully applied it to her body. She swayed, the weight of the bone-compressing iron hoots pulling down on her thumbs, but no sound passed her lips. Indeed, there was a scornful smile on her red lips as if forever fixed there.

"When I was finished with the whip, I laid out knives and pinchers on the table and blew up the coals in the brazier wherein irons heated. Her eyes seemed loose in their sockets as wildly they followed my motions; and although her voice remained stilled and the smile stayed on her face, I could see the dawning of maddening terror deep in her pupils. A little more administration of my playthings and she would turn into a shrieking, writhing, mindless bundle of agony.

"I picked up the keenest of my flaying knives, determined finally on the soft flesh of her abdomen. I inserted the point. A thin semi-circle of blood appeared on her white skin. The blade of the knife slid under the skin, working it slowly away from the flesh.

"A strange, inhuman moaning came to my ears. I looked up at her face and saw that her mouth was opening slowly, as if on a rusty hinge. Then the scream started to gush out, ear-splitting. Not the scream of a woman, but of nerves agonized beyond. . . ."

THE sentence broke off in the middle. In a stupor I stared at the writing until the match I held burned my finger. One thing was clear and saved me from going utterly to pieces: in the three or

four hours since I had fallen asleep it would have been physically impossible for me to have gone all the way to Wistfield, tortured Alice, returned to this spot and have written in my notebook.

Alice must be as yet unharmed. Dear God, she had to be!

There should be more to the manuscript. This description of torture should end, as had the other two, with the death of the victim. Yet there was no more in the book.

Suddenly the sweat which covered my body turned icy as it struck me that perhaps my thoughts written out while in some sort of trance were transferred to the mind of a second person who put them into effect. No, as a student of the mind I did not believe in mental telepathy or thought communication. And yet if something like that were possible, had actually happened, Alice was now going through the hellish torments depicted in my notebook.

I leaped to my feet and started running. After a few minutes I had to slow down to a walk; I was still weak and had at least six miles to go.

The period that followed is hazy in my mind. Several times I had to rest, I remember, but always I jumped up after a few minutes and forced myself to stumble on.

At last I was among the darkened houses of Wistfield. Time and again I fled to cover as men with rifles and shotguns under their arms passed me. The search for me was still on; the state police must have sent out a far-reaching alarm for me, while villagers patrolled the streets to protect their loved ones in fear that I might return.

Many windows in Alice's house were lit, but not the windows of her room. Was she asleep? I had to know. As I slunk along the side of the house, I heard her father's voice.

"Alice hasn't come home yet," Richard

Vale was saying. "She left the house at about seven this evening and nobody has seen her since. My God, suppose she had arranged a meeting place with that monster, Gilles Bodin!"

I slid along the hedges which bordered the house. Standing on the steps of the porch were Richard Vale and Jim Warren.

"I bet she went right into his clutches," Jim said bitterly. "That poor deluded girl!"

I slipped away. Dear God, let me be in time! The fact that the third manuscript had stopped before its completion might be a portent that it was not yet too late.

Avoiding the street, I made my way to Hermine Bauer's house. No lights were on. Having known her and her family for so many years, I had a thorough knowledge of the house. I clambered up a drainpipe to the window of her room on the second story.

By moonlight I saw Hermine's sleeping form in bed. Noiselessly I swung my feet over the sill. I clamped my hand over her mouth and sat down on the bed.

Her eyes shot open, and such terror appeared in them as I had never seen before. She must have thought that I had come to torture her. Her torso arched up from the bed; her fingers clawed at my face; her teeth strove to bite into my palm. I threw my weight down on her.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Hermine," I whispered. "I came to you for help. Alice is in terrible danger and only you can save her."

She dropped back on the pillow, every muscle in her face crawling with fear. Her mouth worked against my palm.

"Listen, Hermine," I said. "I'm innocent. Whoever murdered Louise and Marie has Alice in his power, and you know what he's doing to her. Listen. Louise and Marie and Alice were your close friends. Who is the man who has recently

been in love with each of them and was turned down by them? Is there such a man? The girls would have taken you into their confidence."

She lay very still now and I saw doubt cross her face.

"I'm going to take my hand away now," I told her. "If you scream, Alice is doomed and so am I. I'm willing to take that risk for Alice."

Her mouth opened when I removed my hand, but she did not scream. She drew in a deep breath and pulled the cover up to her throat.

"You can't mean that he's the one?" she murmured in bewilderment.

"So there is somebody who loved all three girls?"

"Yes," she said.

Some minutes later I slid down the drainpipe.

CHAPTER FIVE

Horror's Disciple

WHEN my feet touched the ground, I had to lean against the house to keep myself from collapsing from fatigue. Knowing the identity of the sadistic killer wasn't enough to save Alice. It would be a waste of time to look for him at his home.

Exerting my will, I tried to force my weary brain into logical channels. Louise Grafton and Marie Dexter he had taken or lured to the wooded sections at the outskirts of the village where he had been able to torture them without interruption. Tonight, with many of the villagers searching for me, that would be too dangerous. But where else—

And then I had it. My cottage, of course, where he could leave her mangled body to irrevocably pin the crime on me. He would be certain that I would not dare return tonight.

I stumbled forward, praying that I had

reasoned correctly, that I would not be too late, that if Alice still lived her beauty would not have been forever destroyed.

As I approached my cottage, I saw that the window shades in the library were drawn. They had been up when I had left with the sheriff that morning.

I made for the back door, and as I passed the library window I heard a trickle of sound like somebody humming far back in his throat. There was a sharp crack and the humming took on deeper vibrancy.

I maintained sufficient self-possession to enter the cottage soundlessly. I went through the kitchen and living room and pushed the library door open a few inches. And what I saw through the crack momentarily froze me.

Alice hung suspended by her thumbs from two hooks screwed into a wooden ceiling beam. The light of the reading lamp on the desk—the only illumination in the room—sent a mellow glow over her taut body; revealing nerves and muscles twitching and throbbing under the stretched skin which was marred by cruel welts along which globules of blood sparkled like scarlet jewels. A strip of cloth was tied about her mouth to keep her from crying out.

Standing with his face to me, a man was swinging a short whip. Alice's bulging eyes were fixed on the whip as a bird watches a snake. The whip swung back in his hand, then snapped forward, biting into her soft flesh. Her body jumped in midair, tearing at her thumbs, and her scream pushed through the gag in the form of that hideous humming.

Save for the setting, it might have been a scene from the torture chamber of the Inquisition five hundred years ago—the scene I had described in my notebook.

I think that I shrieked as I shoved in the door and plunged into the library. "I'm going to kill you, Chester!" I sobbed, and threw myself at him.

Chester Engles whirled. His whip smashed across my face. Pain and blood blinded me. He became a misty blob for which I groped. He danced out of my reach, and again I felt the burning pain of the whip, this time on the back of my neck. Then he closed in and sank a fist in my face. I went down.

Ordinarily I could have broken his thin frame in half with my two hands. But I had gone through too much during that day to have the strength of a kitten left. And when he realized that, he laughed crazily. There were not many men he could master with his bare hands. He got down beside me on his knees and pumped both his fists into my face.

Several times during that beating I slid in and out of unconsciousness. At last the punishing impact of his fists stopped and I lay inert and battered, feeling as if

my face were swollen to ten times its size, and feeling nothing at all in the rest of my body.

I HEARD Chester laugh as no man has a right to laugh and remain at liberty among normal people, and I heard also that hideous humming of Alice through her gag.

"I was sure you wouldn't come, Gil," Chester Engles said, his bloodless, bitter mouth in a slack smile. "But now that you're here, so much the better. I'm not fond of witnesses, but you're in a different category. See how well I carry out your descriptions of torture. Of course I read what you wrote about Louise and Marie, and so I had only to follow out your instructions. Where Alice is concerned, I suffer under certain handicaps. I don't know if you wrote anything about what



the medieval Gilles Bodin did to a girl named Alice, but I'm doing the best I can."

Maggots of horror crawled in my mind. In my pocket was the notebook in which earlier that evening I had written how a girl named Alice Vitry had been hung up by her thumbs and then whipped. Chester couldn't possibly have read it, yet here he was doing the same thing to Alice Vale. There were no iron boots on her feet because they would be unobtainable, but knives were available. God, was I really the instigator of his madness? Had my latent, sub-conscious thoughts been transferred directly to his conscious, demented mind?

I attempted to get up to my feet, but he simply kicked me in the head and I fell back. Any other man would have tied me up or killed me then and there, but he was gloating over his new-found physical power over me and his ego couldn't resist leaving me where he could beat me down again if I offered any opposition.

"And now for the knife," he whispered madly.

It lay on the desk, a thin razor-edged blade. He picked it up and stepped toward Alice, his feverish eyes blazing from the depth of their bony sockets.

It would be futile to reason with him or plead with him. The veneer of civilization had been stripped from his mind, and it was now the mind of a savage, of an Inquisitor. Indeed, even in youth it had not been like the minds of other boys. There had been something ugly and brooding in it, and bitter.

In spite of the agony any movement shot through her body from her thumbs, Alice's torso jerked. I knew where that blade would bite. I had written about that, too.

And it did. The point of the knife trailed a thin line of blood on her abdomen. Her body was writhing now and her

face was contorted with agony. The blade went under the skin. Soon, in a matter of seconds, the skin would be stripped from her living flesh.

I was not aware of movement on my part until I had almost reached him. Confident that he had battered me into helplessness, he did not realize that there is a reservoir of strength in the human body which only desperation can tap. And he was too engrossed in what he was doing to pay any attention to me.

I managed to push myself up to my knees and fell against him. One shoulder, with the weight of my dropping body behind it, struck his legs. He fell on top of me.

Even so I would have had no chance against him if he hadn't dropped the knife. It fell near my hand. I snatched it up. His hands were jabbing into my stomach as he tried to push himself up. I swung the knife into his side.

He grunted and his chin hit my legs. I jabbed the knife into him again and again. . . .

It took minutes before I found the energy to roll him off me. I crawled to the wall, pulled myself up, staggered over to where Alice hung and cut her down. She dropped down on me and we both lay in a tangled heap on the floor.

It was another almost insurmountable task to crawl to the desk and reach for the telephone. Through swollen lips I mumbled words I do not remember to the operator. . . .

SHERIFF MOYER, accompanied by a number of grim-faced men, found us there on the floor, Alice moaning and myself lying at her side and feebly trying to staunch with bits of her clothing the blood which flowed from the wound in her abdomen. Gentle hands lifted us up. . . .

Late the following afternoon I had recovered sufficiently to be able to sit up

in bed. A private nurse attended me. My face looked like a shapeless lump of clay from the punishment it had received from Chester Engle's fists. Alice, I learned from Dr. Cross, was resting easily. Within a few weeks she would be perfectly healed.

My first visitors, aside from the doctor, were Sheriff Moyer and a captain of the state police.

"Think you can talk?" the sheriff asked. "From the few things you mumbled last night when we carried you upstairs and from what Hermine Bauer told us, the picture is beginning to straighten out. A pretty ugly picture, if you ask me. Let's get your angle."

I said painfully through puffy lips: "Alice was the first to figure it out as soon as she heard that Marie Dexter had been the second victim. Possibly others beside Alice knew that Chester Engles had been in love, at various times, with Louise, Marie and herself, and everybody knew that he had always been a peculiar kind of fellow; but Alice was the only one who didn't blandly assume that I was the killer, so she could think it through. It wasn't until midnight of last night that I also began thinking about who, if not myself, the fiend could be; and I concluded that only a certain type of mentality with a certain background could fit into the pattern. Chester had the mentality, all right, but I wasn't sure of the background until I spoke to Hermine Bauer.

"Chester Engles had always been a morbid, super-sensitive fellow, more or less unattractive to girls. Because Marie was kinder to him than most of the other girls, he misunderstood his feeling and tried to make love to her. She simply laughed at him. Next he fell for Alice, but couldn't reach first base. The first response he ever got was from Louise Grafton. Perhaps it was his brooding intensity that attracted her, or, more likely,

she was simply bored with her husband whom she'd never loved. Anyway, she led Chester on, never quite giving in to him, tantalizing him, until his moody desire for her turned to hatred—not only against her, but also against the two other girls who had scorned him."

I PAUSED to give my weary jaws a rest. Then I went on: "Three nights ago, some time after midnight, he must have passed my cottage. I had left the library light on; Hermine told me that she remembers having switched it off when she and the others had come in the next morning. Thinking that I was still up, Chester entered, and on the desk he saw the manuscript I had just written. When he read of the torture of a girl named Louise, the violent madness which was latent in him overwhelmed his rational mind.

"I can't tell you where Louis had been between the time she had left her friend's house at eleven that night and the hour or two which must have passed before Chester read the manuscript. Perhaps she had gone to bed unobserved and Chester, on some pretext, had called her out to him through the window. There is even a possibility that she came here to my cottage because— Well, the reason isn't important, but Chester might have met her here. Anyway, you know what he did to her.

"Having once crossed the borderline of sanity, he was no longer quite human. He hoped for a repetition of the pattern, for a similar document from my pen to again whet his appetite, and he came here the following night and found it. So Marie Dexter was his second victim. When Alice announced publicly yesterday morning that she suspected who the murderer was, although she had not as yet any proof, he decided to kill her."

Wearily I leaned back on my pillow. The police captain coughed loudly.

Moyer shook his head. "But what about those manuscripts of yours? The similarity of names? The fact that the two girls you wrote about were also the two girls he'd loved in his own devilish way?"

I stared at the ceiling. "I don't know," I said. "Call it coincidence. Or possibly his brooding hatred of the girls trickled into my own mind so that sub-consciously I expressed his fiendish desire on paper."

The explanation didn't satisfy them, of course, but they had to let it ride because there was no proof that I had been in any way involved, and Chester Engles certainly had been. In addition, I had almost given my life to save Alice.

What would have been their reaction if they had known that there had been a third manuscript written by me which had described the torture by whip and knife of a golden-haired girl named Alice?

All day I tried to think of an explana-

tion which would completely clear me in my own mind; and even now, months later, I spend troubled hours trying to hit upon the answer. I have said that I don't believe in thought communication, but how far can coincidence go?

And why, in the first place, did I write those manuscripts? Can it be that, like Chester Engles, I have a latent streak of fiendishness in me?

Appalling thought! Because Alice is now my wife, and we are supremely happy in the little red-brick house on the edge of the campus of the university where I teach. Sometimes, when we prepare for bed and the breathless beauty of Alice is revealed to me as she drops off her clothing, I find myself wondering if ever a bestial, other-being lurking within me will break through to the surface.

Is it strange, then, that often I spend sleepless nights in terror of myself?

THE END