

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 29 CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1937 Number 4

Cover Design Virgil Finlay
Illustrating a scene in "Symphony of the Damned"

Symphony of the Damned John R. Speer 386
Blasting through a thousand radios, the Black Song crashed into the souls of its listeners—a story of gripping power and mounting horror

The Witch Walks in Her Garden Lea Bodine Drake 412
Verse

Fessenden's Worlds Edmond Hamilton 413
An amazing weird-scientific story about a man who created a cosmos in miniature

The Execution of Lucarno Julius Long 422
A story of stark, staring fear and yawning, abysmal gulfs of horror

The Shuttered House August W. Derleth 432
Ghastly and uncanny was the atmosphere of the old house with the French shutters

The Mannikin Robert Bloch 441
What was the thing that moved and writhed on Simon Maglore's back?

The Death Mask Earl Peirce, Jr. 453
This new tale by the author of "The Last Archer" will fascinate you even while it horrifies

Fangs of Vengeance Nathan Hindin 470
A circus story of ravening leopards and a weird black panther that chose its time for vengeance

So Very Strange! Arthur William Bernal 482
What happened on that slippery city street? An odd little story

Black Gold Thorp McClusky 484
The tale of an atrocity on a slave-ship that came to a shocking discovery

We Are the Dead Henry Kuttner 488
A poignant, brief tale of a weird experience in Arlington Cemetery

Weird Story Reprint:
 The Dead-Wagon Greye La Spina 491
A tale of the London Plague, reprinted from WEIRD TALES of ten years ago

The Eyrie 506
Our readers express their views about the magazine

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Execution of Lucarno

By JULIUS LONG

*A story of fear—stark, staring fear—and yawning,
abysmal gulfs of horror*

HE WAS a very ordinary-looking young man of less than thirty. He might have been an office supply salesman or perhaps a bright young lobbyist come to bother the Governor with some sly request. He did not tell me his name but simply handed me his card.

I read: "Paul Barrett, M. D. Drexel Building."

"What can I do for you, Doctor Bar-

rett?" I asked, tossing the card onto my table. It landed beside Dan Moultrie's feet cocked there.

"I wish to see Governor Mitchell."

"Have you an appointment?"

Being Governor Mitchell's secretary, I knew he hadn't.

"No."

"In that case, I'm afraid it's impossible for you to see him today. What did you want to see him about?"

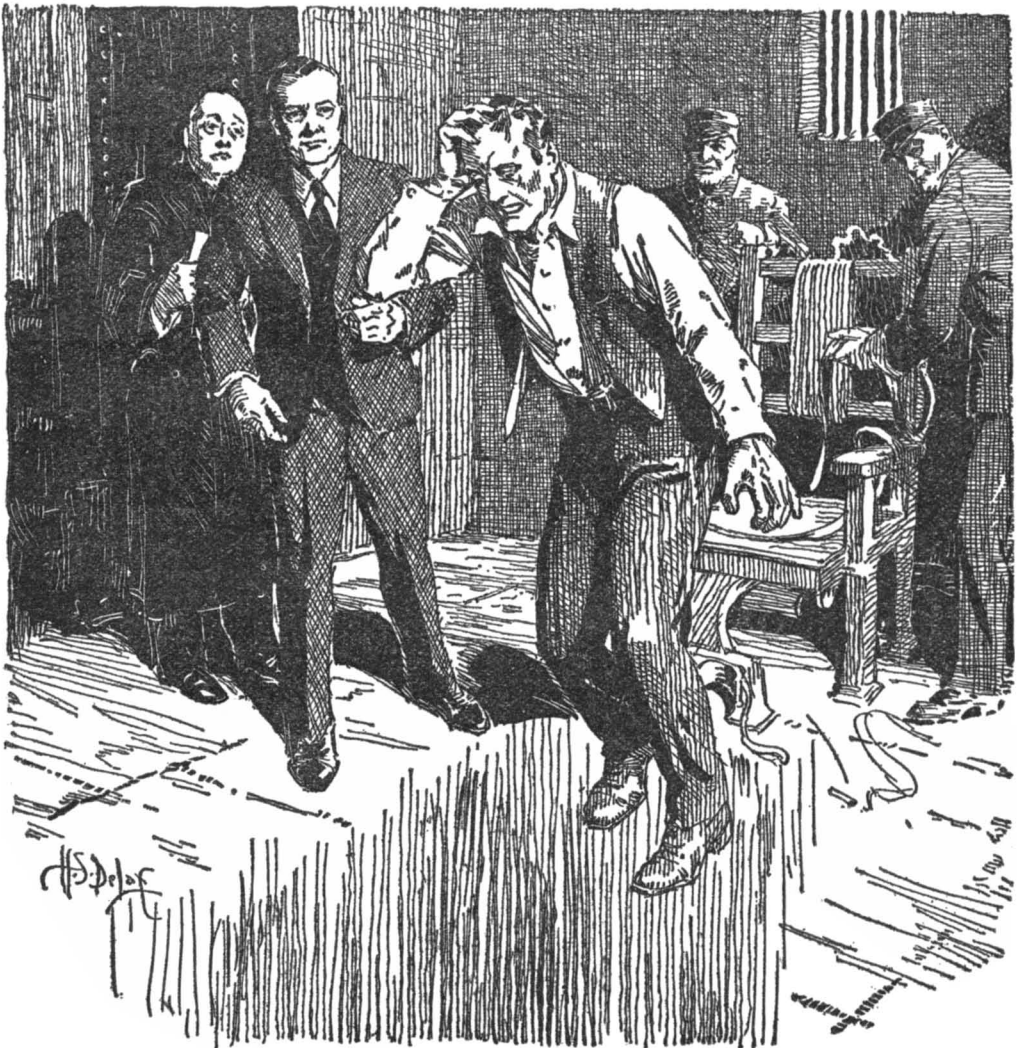
"I want to see him about Hugo Lucarno."

I heard the creak of a chair and saw that Dan Moultrie was straightening up and eyeing the caller with interest. Moultrie was Lucarno's attorney and the best criminal lawyer in the state. He had a thin fox-like face and quick little eyes. He once told me that he'd always wanted to be a corporation lawyer but he didn't have any chance with a face like his. He'd been haunting the Governor's office

for days trying to get a reprieve for Lucarno. Lucarno was the first client he'd ever had to be sentenced to the chair, and he was moving heaven and earth to keep his record clean.

"Why do you want to see the Governor about Lucarno?" I asked. "I hope you aren't one of those people who had a dream that convinced them he was innocent. Or maybe you want to pull the switch that electrocutes him tonight?"

"Yeah," said Moultrie, adjusting his



"A figure of terror, he tottered as on the brink of an abyss."

tie. "What have you got to say about Lucarno? I'm his lawyer. If you've got anything I want to know what it is."

Doctor Barrett eyed us both coldly.

"I am not concerned with the guilt or innocence of Lucarno. I am concerned only with a scientific experiment. If Governor Mitchell will permit me to make that experiment with Lucarno, I believe I can demonstrate the most startling discovery in the history of the science of psychology."

I exchanged glances with Moultrie, who didn't bat an eye.

"What have you got?" he asked. "Some kind of a new lie detector?"

Doctor Barrett eyed him scornfully.

"No. As for the nature of my experiment, I can discuss that only with Governor Mitchell."

"I'm afraid you can't," I said. "The Governor happens to be a very busy man. I can't let you see him until I know whether he'd want to listen to what you've got to say."

Doctor Barrett looked at me with tilted brows and made a grimace with one side of his face.

"Very well. But I must speak with you privately."

"Listen," said Moultrie, "if you've got anything to say that concerns Lucarno, I'm in on it, see?"

"You can speak freely before Mr. Moultrie," I said quickly. "I'm sure that in any event Governor Mitchell wouldn't want to act without first advising Lucarno's attorney."

DOCTOR BARRETT eyed Moultrie doubtfully, made another one-sided face and began to unfold his strange request.

"For a period of years," he said, "I have made a study of the psychology of fear. Of all the emotions, it is the most powerful. Its power, I believe, has never

been more than superficially explored. In my study of it, I have been principally concerned with the fear of falling, which is beyond question the most primitive of all the fears to which the human race is susceptible. This, of course, is because our ancestors were arboreal, and the fear of falling from the limbs of the trees in which they dwelt was the most deeply rooted fear in their minds. It is significant that human infants react to only two fear stimuli, loud noises and the loss of support. Both stimuli induce a fear of falling, the former because the loud noise is associated with the cracking of breaking limbs."

I shot a quick glance at Moultrie. He was all ears. I decided that if he could give the doctor his attention, so could I.

"Perhaps," Doctor Barrett continued, eyeing us appraisingly, "you wonder why I have preoccupied myself with this fear of falling. My motive dates back to my first year of medical practise, four years ago. It was then that a strange accident occurred. An employee in the building in which I had my office fell down a freight elevator shaft when the safety device failed and allowed a door to open on the twentieth floor. The elevator car was stopped at the eighteenth floor, and its top was on a level with the nineteenth floor. The workman, then, fell only a single floor. Do you understand?"

I nodded. I might have said that I failed to understand how a workman falling through an elevator shaft could possibly concern Hugo Lucarno.

"The workman was killed," Doctor Barrett went on. "There was nothing intrinsically strange about that. Many men are killed by falls of less distance. The strange thing was that the workman was as badly crushed and mangled as if he had fallen the whole depth of the elevator shaft.

"The skull was crushed, the back was

broken in several places, and there were compound fractures of both arms and legs. The muscles were horribly torn and lacerated, and the body was unrecognizable. I was the first physician called, and I refused to believe that he had fallen but a single story. The testimony of the several witnesses, however, convinced me that I was confronted with a distinct and thought-provoking phenomenon.

"The coroner dismissed the case as an ordinary accidental death. I think he knew there was nothing ordinary about it, but he didn't want to bother. I couldn't get the incident out of my mind. I pondered over it for days. Why, I asked myself time and again, was the body of that workman so horribly crushed?

"The phenomenon could not be explained by the simple reasoning that the effect of a fall depends largely on the angle or place of impact of the body. It is a commonplace, of course, that men may fall five or six stories and live to tell about it. It is also a common occurrence for people to slip on wet pavement and kill themselves. It depends on whether a vital spot takes the jolt. But to believe that a man who fell a single story down an elevator shaft could have been so horribly crushed and mutilated simply because of the manner in which he fell seemed out of the question. I decided that there must be some other explanation to that phenomenon.

"It occurred to me that when the workman fell down that pitch-dark elevator shaft he must have thought he was falling clear to the bottom. I wondered if the state of his mind could have had any causal relation to the effects of his fall. Could it be possible that he had suffered the effects of a twenty-story fall simply because he *feared* he was falling twenty stories down that black hole of the elevator shaft?

"The more I considered such a possibility, the more I became fascinated by it. From idle conjecture it became an obsession. I began to seek a means of proving it.

"At length it occurred to me that interesting results might be obtained if I could create an optical illusion of great altitude. Would this optical illusion, I asked myself, cause a falling animal to suffer injuries entirely out of proportion to the distance it actually fell? Would its fear of the consequences produce the very consequences it feared? Would the psychological effect be so great that the body of the animal would lack its normal resistance to the impact? I resolved to make such an experiment.

"My initial difficulty lay in the creation of the optical illusion. Little is known of the chemistry of the optical nerves. I began a long series of experiments with compounds containing atropin, which affects only the parasympathetic nerves, and nicotine, which influences only the spinal sympathetic system. I experimented with myself, for I could not check the effects of drugs on animals except by external observation. My confidence in my hypothesis was so great that before taking these drugs I strapped myself to a pillar. I was convinced that if I succeeded in obtaining the illusion of great altitude I should become dizzy and fall. I expected no ordinary consequences from such a fall.

"At last I hit upon a formula which perfectly produced the illusion I sought. Strapped to a pillar, I found myself staring thousands of feet downward. The illusion was so perfect that despite my knowledge that I was safely strapped, I received such a fright that I was too weak to work for days. Upon my recovery I began to experiment with animals. The drug affected the guinea-pigs and cats and dogs and monkeys that I administered it

to. I could assure myself of this from the terrified stare they fixed on the ground beneath them. Invariably they became dizzy and toppled over. And quite as invariably they shook themselves and walked away without injury.

"After months of failure, I had almost decided that my hypothesis was merely a wild flight of the imagination. Then it occurred to me that my failures might be ascribed to the kind of subjects I used in my experiments. I reflected that animals do not possess a consciousness at all comparable with that of human beings. It is a consciousness that is more instinctive than rational. Restricted by powerful instincts, it is less imaginative and less suggestible. My mistake lay in trying to explore the consciousness of human beings with the consciousness of animals. I might never hope to demonstrate the power of mind over matter with mind that was inferior to matter. In short, I could not conduct my experiments without human subjects.

"**I**T SEEMED that I had reached a permanent impasse. If my experiment proved successful, the subject would die a horrible death. I had no doubt, of course, that there were plenty of skeptics quite willing to undergo the test. My hypothesis would seem so fantastic that no one would believe that he actually risked his life or even injury in acting as a subject of such an experiment. But I could not ask anyone to take such a risk, regardless of his willingness. I am not one of those cold-blooded scientists who will sacrifice human lives to prove an abstract theory. I am first a human being. Being human, I did not care, of course, to submit myself to the experiment. What then, was I to do?"

"I think I can answer that," said Moultrie. "You figured that Hugo Lucarno was going to die anyway, so it

wouldn't make any difference what happened to him."

Doctor Barrett nodded.

"When I read about Lucarno in the paper this morning, I saw that I had the solution to my problem. Lucarno is a doomed man. He has nothing to lose. If the experiment is a failure, he will go to the chair as scheduled. If it proves a success, Lucarno will merely be paying his debt to society. Do you understand?"

I thought I did. I was face-to-face with a crack-brained scientist who wanted to waste Governor Mitchell's time with a fantastic request.

"There is only one thing the matter with your idea," said Moultrie sourly. "Lucarno isn't going to die in the chair tonight, or any other night. No client of mine has ever died in the chair, and none ever will. You can count on that."

"I'm afraid that stops you," I told Doctor Barrett, glad to be able to pass the responsibility. "Even if the Governor decided to let you try your experiment on Lucarno, he couldn't do such a thing without Lucarno's consent, and that means the consent of his lawyer."

"But," protested Doctor Barrett, "couldn't Governor Mitchell give me the authority anyway? I didn't imagine Lucarno would object. He seems to be a sort of devil-may-care fellow. The paper quoted him as saying that he was going to the chair unassisted, with a cigarette in his mouth and a smile on his lips. I believe that kind of fellow would submit voluntarily, as a sort of a lark. If the Governor would only ask him to do it, he wouldn't be depriving him of his rights."

I shook my head.

"The whole idea's out," I said. "The Governor would probably fire me if I even suggested it. As for his acting regardless of the wishes of Lucarno, he can't do it. Even a condemned murderer

has certain rights. Among them is the right to die in the manner prescribed by law. You probably think that isn't much of a right, but I imagine that if you were in Lucarno's shoes, you'd change your mind."

"Then you won't even let me see the Governor?"

"No."

Doctor Barrett made that funny little one-sided face again, but didn't lose his temper. Aside from his crack-brained idea about falls, he seemed to be a pretty sensible fellow.

"In that case, I won't take any more of your time. Thank you for the time you've given me."

He turned on his heel and walked out. Dan Moultrie watched him go. Then he reached over and picked up the card Doctor Barrett had given me. He read it intently and tossed it aside.

"I wonder," he said musingly, "if that doc's got something."

"Just a crazy idea," I said.

"Maybe. And maybe not."

"I hope," I said, "you don't seriously believe that baloney you gave him about Lucarno's not going to the chair. That boy's going to fry tonight per schedule at eight o'clock, and you know it."

Moultrie breathed a long sigh.

"Yeah, it kinda looks like my shut-out record is ended. It looks like I'm licked. But maybe something will break for me before eight o'clock."

"You talk as if you were going to the chair instead of Lucarno."

"I'd about as soon," Moultrie said in a way that made me believe he meant it. "Maybe you don't know it, but I think I'm serving humanity by keeping murderers out of the chair. Yes, even a rat like Lucarno. Did you ever see a guy fry?"

I shook my head.

"Well, you ought to. Maybe you'd see why I think I'm not doing anything un-

ethical by cheating the chair. Some day the Bar Association will stop denouncing me and unveil a monument to my memory."

"I'd like to see that," I said.

"You will, boy, you will."

Moultrie got out of his chair and moved toward the door.

"I'm not doing any good loafing around here," he said. "I'm going out and try to think. Maybe I'll get an idea."

I WATCHED his frail figure disappear beyond the door. Then a buzzing sound made me move. Governor Mitchell was buzzing for me. He set me on an assignment that kept me busy all day. I didn't think anything more about Lucarno or Moultrie or Doctor Barrett until I bought a stock final at six o'clock. The Lucarno execution was big news. The news story hinted that Lucarno would get a reprieve, but I knew that was not true. The Governor had told me that morning that Lucarno was going to the chair regardless of anything Moultrie would try.

I finished reading the newspaper at the restaurant where I always dined. I was just getting ready to leave when Moultrie came back to my booth. It was seven o'clock then.

He sat down opposite me.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said.

"Well?"

"I'm going out to the state pen tonight," he said. "Lucarno's got to burn. I'm licked. I can't do anything to stop it. Mitchell's put the sign on me, and nothing I can do will change his mind. I've decided that I should be there when Lucarno takes his walk. I owe that much to him."

"Well?"

"I want you to go with me. I want you to see Lucarno when they pull the switch. Maybe you'll change your mind about a few things."

I stared at Moultrie, trying to figure him out. Why should he want to take me out to watch Lucarno die? Certainly he didn't care enough about my opinion to go to all this bother. He began to talk fast. Moultrie, when he wanted to be, was quite a talker. When he'd stopped talking, I'd agreed to go with him.

He drove out to the state prison in his low, fast convertible. It wasn't very far, for the state prison is on the edge of the downtown district. It was twenty minutes to eight when we arrived there. Moultrie had arranged for admittance, and we went right to the death house.

It was filled with newspaper men and officials. They sat on three benches facing the chair. I knew all of them, but felt so out of place in that gray room that it seemed to me I should be introduced all over again. It was fully five minutes before I could bring myself to look directly at the chair. I was surprised that I wasn't shocked by its appearance. It looked merely efficient.

At about ten minutes to eight, Moultrie left my side.

"I'm going to talk with Lucarno," he said. "Maybe I can say something to help."

A guard escorted him through a small door on the right. I sat there waiting, talking to the men around me but paying not the slightest attention to what anybody said. I felt hot inside and hoped I wouldn't get sick.

IT WAS almost eight o'clock when Moultrie came back. He seemed nervous when he sat down beside me.

"It won't be long now," he said.

It wasn't.

The little door at the right opened, and a pair of guards stepped into the room. The warden followed, and then two more guards. Next was Lucarno.

He entered the death house precisely

as he said he would, unassisted, with a cigarette in his mouth and a smile on his lips. It was a fresh cigarette, and had just been lighted. His collar was open at the throat, and he wore an unbuttoned vest. He looked as if he was on his way to answer a telephone that had interrupted a game of pool. Only a priest incongruously followed, along with another pair of guards.

"Hi, boys!" Lucarno said, his lips bobbing the cigarette around as he spoke.

Somebody coughed. Then there was absolute silence as Lucarno walked with a jaunty stride toward the chair. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Moultrie was watching him intently, expectantly.

The guards who had first entered the room now stood on either side of the chair. The warden stepped to its left. With a smirk, Lucarno moved to the chair. He turned around and faced us, whose hearts beat like tom-toms as we watched. He drew a long last puff from his cigarette and flicked it away. The guards moved toward him. Then Lucarno did a strange thing.

Abruptly he clapped his hands to his eyes. He held them there a moment, looked dazedly about him.

"I can't see!" he said, in a strange high-pitched voice. "I'm blind!"

The guards stopped in their tracks and looked questioningly at the warden. Was this some trick? The warden made no movement. He watched the condemned man, who was now staring downward *through* the floor, rather than at it. From a look of puzzled wonder, his expression became one of terror. His features assumed the distortion of a gargoyle, and his eyes receded into his skull as they seemingly stared into an abysmal depth. A figure of terror, he tottered as if on the brink of an abyss. And then, uttering a strangled cry, he fell forward.

His body struck the cement floor of the

death house with a sound I shall never be able to forget. It was the sound of a body disintegrating into pulp. For Lucarno's skull became a flattened, spongy mass, and his body oozed through his ripped clothes.

How long the silence lasted, I do not know. Suddenly there broke out a pandemonium that roared in my ears. Newspaper men, yelling insanely, rushed to the narrow exit, collided there, struggled to press through. Presently, of the spectators, only Moultrie and I were left. I drew my eyes from the pulpy mass that had been Lucarno and looked at Moultrie. Chalk-white, he spoke to me in a low, almost inaudible voice.

"My God! Lucarno's as crushed as if he'd fallen a mile!"

"Did you see the way he stared?" I said. "He *thought* he was falling a mile. And the same thing happened to him that would have happened if he *had* fallen a mile! There's only one answer, Doctor Barrett."

Moultrie slowly nodded.

"I never dreamed," he mused more to himself than to me, "that such a thing could happen."

"What should we do?" I asked him. "Shouldn't we notify the police? This thing is murder!"

Moultrie's mind seemed to be working rapidly as he hesitated.

"Let's see Barrett first," he said. "We can call the police when we get there."

I stared quizzically into his little fox-like eyes.

"I think I see your point of view," I said. "You want to talk to Barrett before the police get there. You want to take his case. Is that it?"

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't," he replied. "You might as well come along with me. There's nothing but chaos

around this place, anyway, and I doubt if anyone would listen if we told what has happened. Come along. We'll have a talk with Barrett and see what he has to say."

For the second time that evening I let Moultrie persuade me against my better judgment. I accompanied him from the prison and got into his car. He drove rapidly, and in a very few minutes we were at the Drexel Building.

BEFORE Moultrie left his car he drew a medium-sized automatic from the dash compartment and dropped it into his pocket.

"I may need this," he said.

I made no comment. But I failed to understand why Moultrie would need a gun if he intended to defend Barrett.

"Maybe Barrett won't be in his office," I said, as we entered the foyer of the building.

"He will be."

Moultrie seemed to know exactly what he was doing. He went directly to a phone booth and called police headquarters. I listened outside while he told them to send a squad at once to Barrett's office. While he made the call I tried to figure out just what his game was. I couldn't do it. But I knew he was playing some kind of lone hand.

In the elevator I asked him a question which had been in my mind since the thing had happened to Lucarno.

"How do you suppose Barrett managed to give Lucarno the drug? I can't see how such a thing could be possible."

"You'll soon know all about that," Moultrie said.

We left the elevator at the twentieth floor, where Barrett's office was located. There was a light shining through the frosted glass door of his reception room. Moultrie grasped the knob and pushed

the door inward. We entered. Instantly an inner door opened, and Barrett stood there, eyeing us eagerly, expectantly.

"Well," he said excitedly to Moultrie, "what happened? Was the experiment successful?"

"Yes," said Moultrie. "The experiment was successful. Lucarno was mashed to a pulp because he thought he was falling a mile from the sky."

"I knew it!" Barrett exclaimed jubilantly. "I knew it! At last the power of fear has been demonstrated! It is the greatest discovery in the science of psychology. I wonder what these mechanistic psychologists will have to say about this!"

"I want to talk to you," Moultrie said, moving toward the inner door.

Barrett stepped aside. I followed. Moultrie closed the door behind him when he had entered Barrett's private office. I went directly to a water-cooler in one corner and drank two glasses of water. I felt better.

"Have a cigarette," said Moultrie, extending an opened case. "It will steady your nerves."

I took one and lighted it. When I had finished lighting it I saw that Doctor Barrett was staring quizzically at me. Then he turned and opened his mouth to question Moultrie. The words did not come, and as I followed the direction of his gaze, I saw why. Moultrie had the automatic in his hand, and he was aiming it directly at Barrett. Even as I saw the gun, Moultrie squeezed the trigger twice.

Barrett looked a little bewildered, then settled down on the floor. He coughed once or twice and lay still.

I stood there watching, puffing madly on my cigarette. Then I fairly shrieked at Moultrie.

"Why in the name of God did you do that?"

Moultrie removed his eyes from the motionless body. He lifted them slowly to my own.

"I had to," he said. "You see, I have a strong instinct of self-preservation. If Barrett had lived long enough to be arrested, he would have told the police that it was I who gave Lucarno a drugged cigarette before he walked to the chair and made the experiment possible."

"You!"

"Yes. It was my last card. I had to play it in a desperate effort to get the execution stayed. I went to Barrett after I left your office this morning and told him I would give Lucarno the drug. I told him that if Lucarno was killed, I could get him acquitted. Of course, I would be an accomplice in case Lucarno was killed, but I never dreamed he would be. I thought the drug would just make him dizzy and fall over. I hoped he'd break an arm or injure himself some other way so badly that the execution would have to be stayed. You're probably familiar with the state law that a man cannot be executed unless he is sound physically—permanent disabilities not counting, of course. I intended to invoke this law if anything happened to Lucarno. I could get the execution stayed, and that would give me more time to have the sentence commuted. But it turned out that Barrett's theory about fear was right, and Lucarno was killed. You see what a spot that put me in.

"I knew Barrett wouldn't keep his mouth shut. He'd want everyone to know what a great scientist he is. So I had to kill him. I had to do it sooner than I planned, because he was about to say that I had given you one of the cigarettes he had prepared for Lucarno. You see, I have to get rid of you, too. When the

police come I will tell them that Barrett gave you the cigarette and attacked me when I saw what happened to you. I had to shoot him in self-defense."

Moultrie's little eyes were fixed on the cigarette I held between my lips. In the excitement of Barrett's shooting, I had been puffing it madly. Now, as the truth came to me, I tore it from my mouth and flung it to the floor.

"It's too late," Moultrie said softly. "The drug is already in your system."

"You swine!" I shouted. I started for him, ignoring in my anger the gun in his hand.

Half-way toward him, I halted. Everything in the room faded abruptly into grayness. Then quite as quickly vision returned to me.

But what a vision! The floor of that office had become a wide, boundless plain, and its walls were beyond its horizon! I was suspended thousands of feet above it by some inexplicable means. The incredible part of it was that I actually believed this to be a fact! My terror was complete, overwhelming. It would not permit me to reflect for an instant that all was an optical illusion, that I stood safely on the floor of Doctor Barrett's office. The doctor, Moultrie, the events of the evening, all were blotted out of my consciousness. I was aware only of that horrible altitude at which I remained suspended in the air. My dizziness increased geometrically with my terror. I knew that I must fall. I had to fall. It was useless to try to retain my balance there in the sky. Vertigo was pulling me irresistibly downward. And when I fell . . . I recalled vaguely a shapeless form oozing from exploded garments upon a cement floor. That was the way I would be when I fell down there, thousands of feet below. I tottered now and tried in vain to right myself. I started that inevitable plunge forward.

But something clutched me above my knees, held me there in space. I righted myself, stood erect again. I heard a violent oath and then a blinding flash caused me involuntarily to close my eyes. I held them so tightly closed that they pained me almost unendurably as the support about my legs gave way. The horrible illusion of altitude left me, and I felt my feet firmly planted on the floor again. I must, I realized now, keep my eyes closed, or that illusion would return to me with vision.

Bony fingers were clawing at my face now, and I realized with horror that Moultrie was trying to pull my eyelids open! I struck out and landed a solid blow. I heard a body falling. I groped about blindly and presently felt a door-knob in my grasp. I opened a door, staggered from the room. Somewhere a siren was sounding. I kept on groping, striking the walls, but going blindly on.

I WAS in the corridor when the police officers found me. They held me while I dared to open my eyes. Normal vision had returned to me. I led them to Doctor Barrett's office.

Doctor Barrett lay on the floor of the room. He was not where I had last seen him, and I knew that it had been he who had gripped my legs and thus prevented my falling. A third bullet had ended his life. It was the firing of this bullet by Moultrie that had blinded me and caused my eyes to close.

It was the thing in the corner that drew the attention of the police. The mangled body of Moultrie gave mute testimony that the lawyer had given up his case as hopeless. His death was incomprehensible to the police officers, who failed to grasp the significance of the cigarette which was still clutched in his pulpy hand.