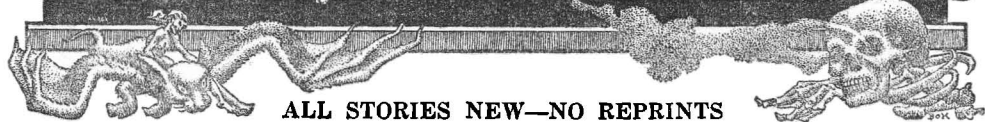


# Weird Tales



MAY, 1942

Cover by Ray Quigley

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use  
 of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.



Another story from the *WITCH'S TALE*—that highly popular broadcast which thrilled you so often over the air. It's specially adapted for your magazine by the famous program's author and director—Alonzo Deen Cole.

# The Gipsy's Hand

BY ALONZO DEEN COLE

*Truly it is said that madness and genius are twins. And when a genius seeks revenge, mad and incredible indeed are the things that come to pass!*

**D**R. NORMAN SHIELDS was a practical man. Training and experience had, long ago, convinced him that human emotions could be allowed no part in the work of a successful surgeon. Yet—when Nurse Murray pushed open the doors of the operating room and announced, "They're bringing the patient"—he felt a great, heart swelling pity.

With a sigh, he turned to his assistant. "Anesthesimeter all set, Dr. Gaunt?"

"All set," replied the other.

"Begin administration of your ether the moment we have Gagino on the table." Then, to the attending nurses, "Be prepared for trouble with this patient."

Miss Murray still lingered at the door. "Trouble is no word for what you're going to have," she ventured. "When I left him just now he was acting like a madman."

"He *is* a madman," the surgeon corrected; and added softly, "I don't wonder, poor devil."

"It's pretty rotten, all right," Gaunt

agreed. "For a great pianist like him to lose a hand—"

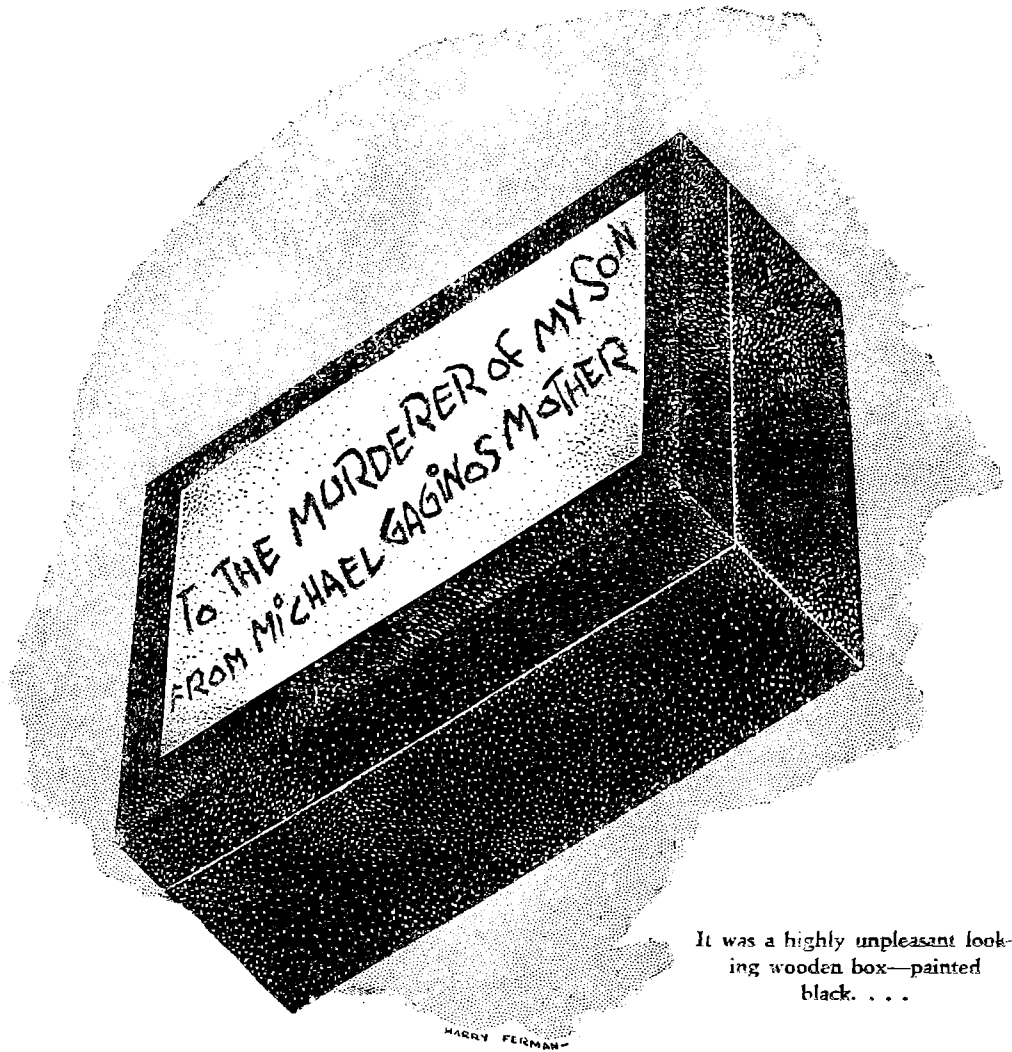
"He says you'll be taking half his soul away," was Nurse Murray's parting contribution as she vanished through the doors.

Shields shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "It's his only chance." If Gagino's left hand isn't amputated now, the purulent infection in it will soon progress beyond control. It's either his hand—he paused—"or his life."

Gaunt abstractedly flicked a speck of non-existent dust from the sinister table at his side. "You told him that, of course?"

"Immediately after the consultation yesterday, and he flatly chose death in preference to amputation. Fortunately, his present unbalanced state of mind makes him legally irresponsible so we are free to operate on the authorization signed by Isaac Myers."

Dr. Gaunt was a highly regarded specialist in his chosen field, but his knowledge of the musical world was very limited. "Who's Myers?" he inquired.



It was a highly unpleasant looking wooden box—painted black. . . .

"The big impresario!" Shields answered, in unconcealed amazement at his colleague's ignorance of contemporary fame. "He's Michael Gagino's foster father—adopted him when he was a boy of twelve and gave him his musical education. Myers had heard him playing an old broken down piano in a Gipsy camp and recognized his talent."

"Gagino's a Gipsy?"

"Yes—full-blooded." Shields paused again. "The poor devil has a mother living, but no one knew where we could find her."

"Probably telling fortunes somewhere."

"Quite likely," the surgeon absently replied. Then, half to himself: "Gagino's twenty-five years old now. To become the artist that he is, he'd gone through thirteen years of slavery to a keyboard—*slavery*. And, in less than fifteen minutes—"

His speech was left unfinished, for outside in the corridor a man screamed—a tremulous, wild, hysterical shriek born of mingled rage and terror. The man who uttered it was quite insane.

A month ago he had been one of the most widely acclaimed musicians in the

world. Then—a month ago, as he emerged hurriedly from the wings of an unfamiliar concert stage to begin a scheduled performance, his left hand grazed a nail point which protruded from the framework.

The immediate result was merely an insignificant scratch. Gagino noted it mentally, rather than physically, and said to himself that he would paint it with iodine when his evening's work was over. But he forgot. The nail was rusty. And now—

The operating room doors swung open to their full extent and a wheeled stretcher bearing the struggling, screaming Gipsy was propelled inside by three panting orderlies. The doors were closed.

Exerting every muscle of his weakened body, Michael Gagino made a vain attempt to break the grasp of those who held him. "The law says you cannot operate without my consent," he cried, "and I forbid you! I *am* in my right mind, no matter what you say! You *cannot* cut off my hand!"

"Lift him to the table." Shields' voice was flat and toneless.

Biting, clawing, cursing: "This is all a plot!" the Gipsy shrieked. "A plot to maim me because you are jealous of my genius!" Then, abruptly, he began to sob. "My life—my soul—is in my hands! I'll die if you cut one off—I'd *rather* die!"

He was on the table now, and clamps were being fastened to his ankles and his wrists.

Staring wild-eyed at the ceiling, he prayed: "My God, don't let them—! Blessed Lord, I'll never be able to play again—I'll have no fingers to bring music from the keys! Oh, don't let them—!"

"The anesthetic, Gaunt." Shields had conquered his pity and was practical once more.

The ether cone appeared above the patient's eyes. Wrenching his head from a nurse's restraining hands, he turned to face the surgeon. The prayer of an instant ago was forgotten, as was the God to whom

he'd prayed—everything was forgotten now except a maniacal hate.

"*You* will do this thing"—he shrieked at Shields—"and *you* will pay! With the curse of my people, I curse you—with the curse of the Tziganes! You are stealing half my life, but I will take the *whole* of yours! I curse you with the curse of Rom!"

Forcibly, his face was turned to meet the descending cone and Gaunt began the flow of oblivion dealing fumes. Faintly, muffled, the frenzied voice repeated: "The curse of the Tziganes—curse of Rom—" There was a silence. Then, indistinctly, Shields heard a word that sounded like "Mother."

"Poor, poor devil," the surgeon murmured, as, from the tray of instruments beside him, he lightly grasped a gleaming scalpel.

THE operation, from a surgical standpoint, was a success. A few weeks later Gagino, who emerged from the ether in a tight-lipped silence which he maintained constantly thereafter with everyone about him, was discharged from the hospital in custody of Isaac Myers. The following morning Myers went to his protégé's room in their jointly occupied apartment and found it empty. All of Gagino's possessions were in their usual place: his clothing, his treasured souvenirs of concert triumphs, his traveling equipment—and left carelessly upon the bureau top was a rather large sum of money. But to a pillow on the bed, which had not been slept in, was pinned a note which stated simply: "We shall not meet again. I have gone to join my Mother. Goodbye."

Myers vaguely remembered Michael's mother as a stern-faced woman who was held in great respect by her wandering tribe.

Unaccountably, Myers had always been a little afraid of her.

It was the custom of Dr. Norman Shields and his wife, Ria, to spend August of each year in Maine. There, half a decade previously, they had bought a spacious log cabin hidden deep in the heart of a pine forest—and in this cabin the successful surgeon found annual surcease from his workaday routine of appendectomies, the importunities of instrument vendors, and the daily visits of idle ladies who regarded illness as a virtue and an operation as a badge of honor. It was a refuge and a sanctuary; for the place contained no telephone which might convey distressful messages, no electricity to remind one of X-ray and fluoroscope—and, as it was three long miles removed from the nearest village, few personal calls were to be expected.

THE end of August was approaching now and his brief vacation time was nearly over, Shields regretted as he guided his coupé over the deeply rutted road that led to the forest home. Ria had sent him into the village on a weekly shopping trip, and the returning car was piled high with bundles.

Through the trees, a third member of the Shields family saw the familiar automobile and barked a vociferous welcome. "Hello, Pepper," greeted the doctor as he applied his brakes and grinned at the wildly leaping fox terrier.

Behind the screen door of the cabin a sweet-faced woman of thirty-five appeared.

"Hey, Ria, quiet this hound, and lend a hand with the groceries!" her husband shouted.

The smiling woman emerged from the house and, at a quiet word from her, the little dog subsided. Dr. Shields was the personage about whom this ménage revolved, but it was Mrs. Shields who managed the revolutions.

"Have you been buying out the village store?" she inquired as he opened the car

door and revealed the mass of purchase within.

"There's only the food you told me to buy—and the mail." He climbed out and presented her with the coupé's lightest contents—a small pasteboard carton of cigar box size and a tight rolled, post-marked newspaper.

Gathering the remainder together, and not bothering to remove the ignition key from its lock or to close the car door, he preceded her into the house, followed closely by Pepper. Inside, he deposited his burden upon the nearest and best chair, hastily removed it as he recollected the proximity of his more careful mate, and turned to find her curiously regarding the wrapper of the newspaper he had brought.

"Who could have sent you this? All our friends know we don't want to be reminded there's a world outside when we're up here."

"Haven't thought about who sent it," he responded. "Open it and find out."

She laid the carton upon a nearby table and tore the paper from its flimsy envelope. He stooped to scratch Pepper's ears. Usually the dog, like all his kind, wriggled with delight at such attention; but now Pepper merely seemed to tolerate it. His thoughts, apparently, were elsewhere; and, though late August in Northern Maine is far from warm, prevailing weather could not account for the shivers that coursed along his little body. Shields began to worry about his unaccustomed actions.

Then Ria gasped: "Norman!!"

"Huh?" he inquired.

"It's Michael Gagino!"

"Gagino?"

"He's dead."

Shields seized the paper from her hands. Rapidly scanning a front-page column which someone had heavily surrounded with black lead pencil markings, he found the information that he sought: "*Cause of death is attributed to complete mental and*

*physical exhaustion brought about by the great pianist's inability to reconcile himself with the recent amputation of—*" He let the paper fall.

"I *had* to do it," he murmured. "It was either that or—" He broke off and stared gloomily into space.

The somber news affected Ria as it did her husband. From the day three months ago, when Shields had first been called in consultation on Gagingo's case until long after they heard of his abrupt departure from the home of Isaac Myers, the musician had been their principal topic of conversation.

Together, they had pitied his initial tragic mishap, sympathized with his resulting insanity and sorrowed over a career which Shields, as the chosen instrument of Fate, had been obliged to end. They had even laughed together, in understanding kindness, at the unreasoning, melodramatic, curse which the poor mad Gipsy had called down upon the surgeon as he strove to save his life. Very softly, mostly to herself, she put in words a picture which an item in the heavy-outlined column had flashed upon her mind: "The paper said he died in a Gipsy wagon—in his Mother's arms."

Their retrospective mood was abruptly broken by the forgotten Pepper who, pointing his small nose in the air, howled long and dismally.

Ria shuddered at the melancholy wail, so in keeping with her thoughts. The man at her side knelt down to stroke the tiny animal.

The dog paid no attention to his caress, but lifted his head and howled again. Then he repeated the performance a third time—and a fourth.

"Norman—! It's that package."

Shields' eyes followed the direction of his wife's. On a table lay the pasteboard carton he had brought from the post office. He turned back to Pepper, and saw the

dog look long and fixedly at it before he bayed once more.

Curiously, he took the offending object in his hands. When it was given to him he had glanced at the return address and found it undecipherable, he recalled. Tearing away the adhesive seals, he drew from the outer covering a wooden box, painted black. Pasted on the lid of this inner receptacle was a card on which had been crudely printed with a heavy lead pencil:

TO THE MURDERER OF MY SON  
FROM MICHAEL GAGINGO'S MOTHER

Both stared stupidly at the legend for a moment. Then, in a half daze that seemed suddenly to numb his faculties, Shields opened the box.

As the lid fell back, there was a sharp intake of breath from Ria and an arm was raised to shield her eyes.

Within the box lay a *hand*—a *man's* hand that had been severed at the wrist. Not severed as a skilled anatomist would have done it, but as though some ghoulish amateur had played at amputation. It was a strong hand—a hand that had obviously been accustomed to long hours of daily exercise. Its pigmentation was dark. It was the hand of Gagingo.

Shields gazed dully at the ghastly cadaver. "I'd know those stubby fingers anywhere," he muttered.

Ria made a futile, repellent gesture at the empty air. "Take it away," she scarcely breathed.

Her husband neither heard nor heeded. "The hand I amputated was destroyed, and it was the left—this is his *right*," he dumbly told himself.

"Take it—" Ria began again, then stopped her plea half uttered.

The dead hand inside the box was *moving!*

The bloodless fingers flexed and straightened slowly, in the manner of a living thing that had been numbed by cold or

had slept too long, inactive. Then—balancing upon its extended thumb, the grisly carcass coiled itself into a half-closed fist.

"Drop it!!" shrieked Ria.

Shields, held enthralled by the horror before him, tightened his grip upon the box.

Like five strong springs, thumb and fingers of the dead hand straightened and the Thing leaped from its coffin. It landed on Shields' breast, clutched and held the fabric of his shirt, and climbed swiftly upward toward his throat.

With a cry, Ria emerged from the trance of frozen horror that had held her powerless and struck. There was a hideous impact of soft warm flesh on hard cold tissue and, with a thud, the strangling hand fell hard upon the floor.

Immediately, it was in motion. Awkwardly, but swiftly—four fingers and a thumb dragging a severed wrist—it scuttled toward the open kitchen door and vanished from their sight.

Ria staggered blindly into her husband's arm and shook with retching sobs.

**N**ORMAN SHIELDS was a practical man. In his unimaginative, material philosophy of natural cause and effect, the ghastly, nightmarish experience of a moment ago could not have happened. And yet it *had* happened, his whirling, strangely benumbed mind assured him. Mechanically, he soothed the hysterical woman in his arms while, slowly, the faculty of sober thought returned.

Thought, with Shields, always demanded action. When his wife regained her self-control, he slipped shells into the breech of a double-barreled shotgun. With his finger ready on the trigger, and followed by Ria and the shivering, whining Pepper; he explored every nook and cranny of the kitchen where the Thing had disappeared. Apparently, it was no longer there; nor did thorough search re-

veal its presence in the other rooms. But a bodiless, armless hand required only a very tiny hiding place—a hiding place so small it might be easily overlooked.

Abruptly Shields announced: "We're leaving here."

Without pausing to gather cherished possessions—as Gagino had not paused when he departed from his home with Isaac Myers—they left the cabin. The sun was setting, and night was very near.

As the door closed behind them, Ria sobbed. "It—it may be waiting for you out here."

Her husband stopped short. Sharply, his eyes searched the tall, rank grass which lined the path they must travel to their car.

There was a perfect place for the Thing to hide. The ivy that climbed high along the house could provide another sure concealment—and, also, the dense foliage of those trees, under whose low-hanging branches he must pass to reach the road. An icy chill of fear swept over him.

Then, suddenly, he was afraid no longer.

Grass, ivy, trees—all were handiworks of *Nature!* *He*, a physician, knew the laws of *Nature!* And *Nature* was all embracing—*everything* was under *Her* control; and natural law did not permit the existence of that impossible Thing from which he had been fleeing.

Oh, the Gipsy's hand had been in that box, all right—and Gagino's mother had sent it to him! But the rest had been either a sensory delusion or a cleverly contrived mechanical trick. The Hand had not—*could not*—have been endowed with the power of independent movement. To believe it possessed such power was to believe in magic and the supernatural! A wave of disgust and shame swept over Shields as he recalled his ready acceptance of such nonsense. In a moment, he told himself, his rapidly clearing brain would

figure the whole thing out in terms of common sense—!

His thoughts were interrupted by Ria's convulsive grasp upon his arm. "Norman"—she stared at their car—"look at our tires!!"

All four tires were flat.

Together, they ran to the coupé with Pepper at their heels. A glance confirmed the fear that again possessed his teeming brain. The rubber casings had been slashed with a knife—a knife from their kitchen, which now lay abandoned upon the earthen roadway. And all the cuts were underneath, close to the ground—where it had been most easy for an armless hand to ply a blade.

Shields no longer thought of figuring things in terms of common sense. Instead, he seized his wife and thrust her, bodily, inside the car. "We'll drive it on the rims!" he shouted, "we've got to get away from here!!"

He reached for the ignition switch, but his gesture ended in mid-air. The ignition key was gone.

An armless hand, by great exertion, could have removed it from the lock.

The man and woman looked, white-faced, at one another. The dog had made no attempt to follow them into the car, as was his usual custom. He cowered, shivering, outside upon the dusty road. The humans heard him whine—a whine of terror; then he buried his head between his paws and lay very still.

From the house they had so lately quitted came another sound—the sound of a rudely struck piano key—on their piano.

A confused jumble of unrelated, cacophonous notes followed; but soon the discords resolved into music—into the somber, eery strains of Gounod's *Funeral March of a Marionette*. And a single hand, the listeners knew, was on the keys.

Shields' taut nerves had been stretched to their elastic limit. He broke into choked,

hysterical sobbing laughter. His wife turned paler than before, then fainted.

The stark fear that gripped them all was more merciful to the little dog than to his masters. Pepper's frantic heart stopped beating.

**R**IA SHIELDS was an impractical woman. But she was neither a weakling nor a coward, as the brief duration of her fainting spell bore witness. And when she regained consciousness to find an hysterical husband at her side, she took command.

The mocking piano was hushed now. Except for the dry, wracking sobs that shook Norman Shields—the call of a distant bullfrog, the chirping of crickets and the sigh of a gentle wind were the only sounds that Ria heard. Natural, normal, explainable sounds. But if they caused her mind to dwell upon the proven consistencies of Nature, she made no attempt to persuade herself, as had her husband, that abnormal and unnatural things had no existence.

Desperately, she soothed the broken man until his sobbing, mirthless laughter ceased. The sun was gone by that time and the sky had changed from blue to gray.

It was three miles to the village, she argued with trembling gray-white lips. If they attempted to walk, darkness would fall before they could possibly arrive—and, in darkness, it would be easy for the ghastly Hand to strike. If they returned to the cabin—warily and watchfully, of course—they would have light, which meant safety; at least comparative safety. They would gather all the lamps together in a single room—a room whose every corner they would search beforehand to insure they'd be alone. Then they'd lock themselves inside and wait for daylight. After awhile, he agreed that such a course was best.

They cautiously left the car and Shields



called Pepper. He did not move and his master, stooping down, found the little dog was dead.

Miserably, fearsomely, the man and woman looked at one another; and the unvoiced thought that passed between them was: "Perhaps he's only the first of three."

**T**WO hours ago they had re-entered the house which they had once regarded as a refuge from all care. Now it was a place of dread.

The rustic cabin, like most dwellings of its kind, was designed for occupancy of but a single floor. Ria, however, had caused an extra chamber to be built under the sloping roof which, on occasion, could be utilized as a spare bedroom. It was reached by a narrow staircase; and, since the chimney from the great fireplace in the living room rose along its outer side, she had directed that an extra flue be installed there and a tiny open grate. In this room, because it was small and sparsely furnished—which made it easy for them to determine that the Hand was not lurking there—they had barricaded themselves. A dozen coal-oil lamps aided the smouldering grate fire to illuminate the chamber; and its single door and window was securely bolted from inside. Shields sat tensely upon the edge of a chair—the shotgun across his knees. His wife lay, open-eyed, upon the bed. Both were waiting—for what they didn't know.

They had been waiting two hours now, a clock upon the mantelpiece informed them: one hundred and twenty dragging minutes, each of which had seemed to pass more slowly than the last; each of which had increased their dread and worn away their hope. The intelligence, whatever it was, directing the movements of Gagino's severed hand, knew human nature—and its hate was great.

At last the vigil ended. There was a discordant crash on the piano strings be-

low. Shields sprang to his feet and Ria sat bolt upright on the bed.

The clock ticked perhaps a dozen times before another sound was heard. And then the piano spoke again—a single hand upon its keys. It sang, as before, *The Funeral March of a Marionette*.

Shields grasped the shotgun and started madly for the door. "That Thing," he shrieked, "won't pull the strings to send *me* dancing to my coffin!"

Before he could draw the latch, Ria had her arms about him. "Don't! *That's* what it wants—to get you out of this room!"

The surgeon sank again into the chair, and pressed quivering hands against his throbbing head.

Below, the mocking dirge continued. Over and over it was played — jerkily, haltingly, in queerly broken tempo; but each note was sure and true as four masterly fingers and a thumb pressed themselves upon the keys. Then, with an angry crash, the music ended as it had begun.

The two who waited scarcely breathed as the ensuing silence seemed to stretch into infinity. Actually not more than thirty seconds passed; and then a new sound replaced the taunting mockery of Gounod's macabre strains: a dull, measured, frightful sound—the sound of groping bloodless fingers pulling dead hard flesh from step to step of the stairs that led directly to this room.

Ria stifled the involuntary scream that struggled for release. Her husband sat rigid, tense and—helpless.

Laboriously, purposefully, the Thing finally reached the tiny balcony outside their door. They heard it scuttle rapidly across the bare pine flooring there—obviously, it hoped to find a space between door and sill that would admit its narrow bulk. But door and sill met closely.

Presently, they heard it retreat, as it had come, down the stairs. Only now it cast itself in little leaps from step to step, with

hard dull thuds to indicate the manner of its progress. When it reached the rug-covered floor of the living room below, the ticking clock again provided the only sound that reached their ears.

"God—," muttered Norman, "God—!" And he meant it as a prayer.

Ria stood beside him, thinking—desperately recalling ancient stories of black magic she had read; hoping their recollection would provide some clue as to how this monstrous evil might be circumvented. Creatures of Hell could not cross running water, she remembered—but that barrier to witchcraft was non-existent here; no stream divided them from Gagino's vengeful hand. Silver bullets, it was said, could destroy both ghost and demon—but the only weapon they possessed was charged with useless lead. Still—while locked inside this room, they were protected: the Hand's motivating force was supernatural, but the Hand itself was physical and subject to physical laws. It could not pass through solid doors and walls, and she was sure they had closed every opening to the chamber by which it might find entrance.

The next moment her surety was blasted.

From above, they heard the now familiar flopping, scratching sound of the moving Hand. The Thing *had* found a means of entrance—one she had never considered. It was coming down the chimney.

Stark terror gripped both man and woman. In Shields' trembling hands, the shotgun wavered like a willow branch before the wind. Ria could only stare in awful fascination at the opening of the fireplace where the Thing would soon appear.

But the Hand did not appear. It's descent became slower, more cautious, and finally it stopped. The spellbound watchers heard nothing at all for a long drawn minute except the monotonous ticking of the clock. Then, inside the chimney, progress was resumed—but now the sound re-

treated. The Thing was climbing up—away from them.

For the first time since they had abandoned their useless car, Shields felt he might have cause for hope. The Thing had just proven itself stupid, for it had disclosed its only means of entrance to the room and then, foolishly, failed to take advantage of it.

"Ria—," he shouted, joining action with his words, "—fetch blankets from the bed, so I can stuff them up this flue! I'll trample out the fire so I can work!"

"No—!" her voice was high-pitched, hysterical, "—keep away from that fire! Don't touch it!"

Frantically, she pulled him away from the feeble blaze that rose from slowly dying embers. "Pile on more fuel!" she screamed. "More fuel!"

"You're crazy!" the man yelled as, before he could prevent, she seized a double handful of well-dried kindling and threw it on the coals.

"Keep away from that fire!" she repeated, adding more wood to the mounting flames.

Roughly, he pulled her away. A brimming pitcher of water stood on the old-fashioned bureau; his hand reached out to grasp it and dash it on the blaze. But his action was not completed.

Upon the window pane a finger tapped. Both whirled to face the sound—and saw, against the glass, the severed hand.

It was clinging to the ivy which, at this end of the cabin, rose from earth to roof-tree—and, by means of which it had descended from above so quickly. The Thing seemed to know it had attracted the attention of its victims, for the tapping ceased while it wriggled its disengaged fingers in repulsive mockery. Then all its members clutched the loose, down hanging strand of vine to which it had attached itself and, with a writhing effort, swung hard against

the glass. It rebounded and struck the pane again, harder than before—and the ivy rope swung further outward for a third return of greater force. The intent was plain—it meant to batter in the glass.

The practical surgeon reached for the gun he knew was useless—his impractical wife seized a billet of wood and hurled it at the window.

The missile struck squarely. The frail barrier that had kept the Thing outside was shattered into fragments; and, with clumsy, eager speed, it leaped inside the room.

Shields pressed the triggers of his weapon and both barrels roared. His aim was good, for the floor was splintered all about the loathesome Hand. It halted for an instant and, upon its grisly flesh, the man saw gaping wounds. Then, in a second indescribable gesture of mockery, the dead fingers bent and twisted—and the Gipsy's Hand advanced.

With an accusing glance at Ria, the surgeon groaned: "Oh, why—?" and backed away.

She screamed crazily: "I let it in to *end* it—so it can be destroyed!"

Her husband, in his backward flight, could not see the chair behind him. With a shriek of terror, he fell across it to the floor.

The Hand stopped short in its grim advance, as though surprised at the mishap which would make its triumph all too easy. Then, with a cat-like bound, it was upon the prone man's breast.

With a savage, well directed blow, Ria sent it spinning to a corner of the room. But, as it landed, the bloodless fingers were

in motion for another fierce attack. Then the impractical woman seized a lighted coal oil lamp and hurled it in its path.

There was a crash of glass, an explosion, and a burst of flame. Covered and surrounded by blazing oil, the Gipsy's Hand writhed convulsive, twitching fingers; struggled in awful, frantic effort to escape; then, itself, became fuel for the leaping tongues of fire.

Shields had regained his feet and, unlocking the door, he thrust Ria from the burning room. Down the stairs they raced, then out into the cold night air.

As they left the doomed house, "How did you know what to do?" he sobbed.

Her reply was quiet. "It was afraid to come down the chimney when it felt the heat below. I remembered then that—unnatural things—can only be destroyed as witches were put to death . . . by living fire."

Her endurance was at an end. The impractical woman collapsed in the arms of her practical mate.

ON THE next day, evening newspapers carried a brief item which informed their readers that, in a squalid camp near Philadelphia, an old Gipsy woman had been found dead under mysterious circumstances.

Death had, undoubtedly been caused by fire, for the body was charred beyond recognition. Yet there was no sign of conflagration about the tent in which they found her. Foul play was suspected.

The victim was never positively identified, but it was believed she was the mother of Michael Gagino.

