

# SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

November, 1937

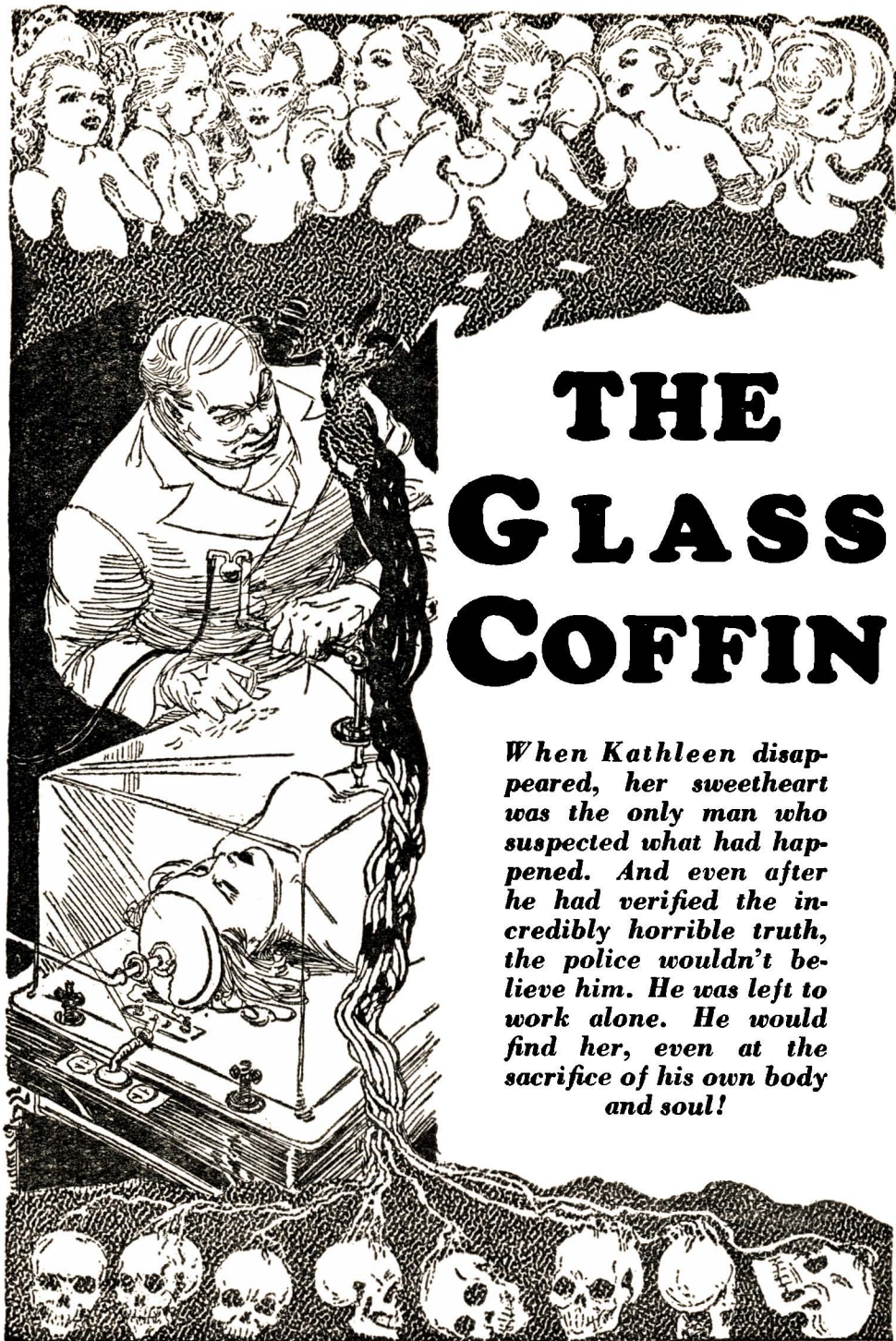
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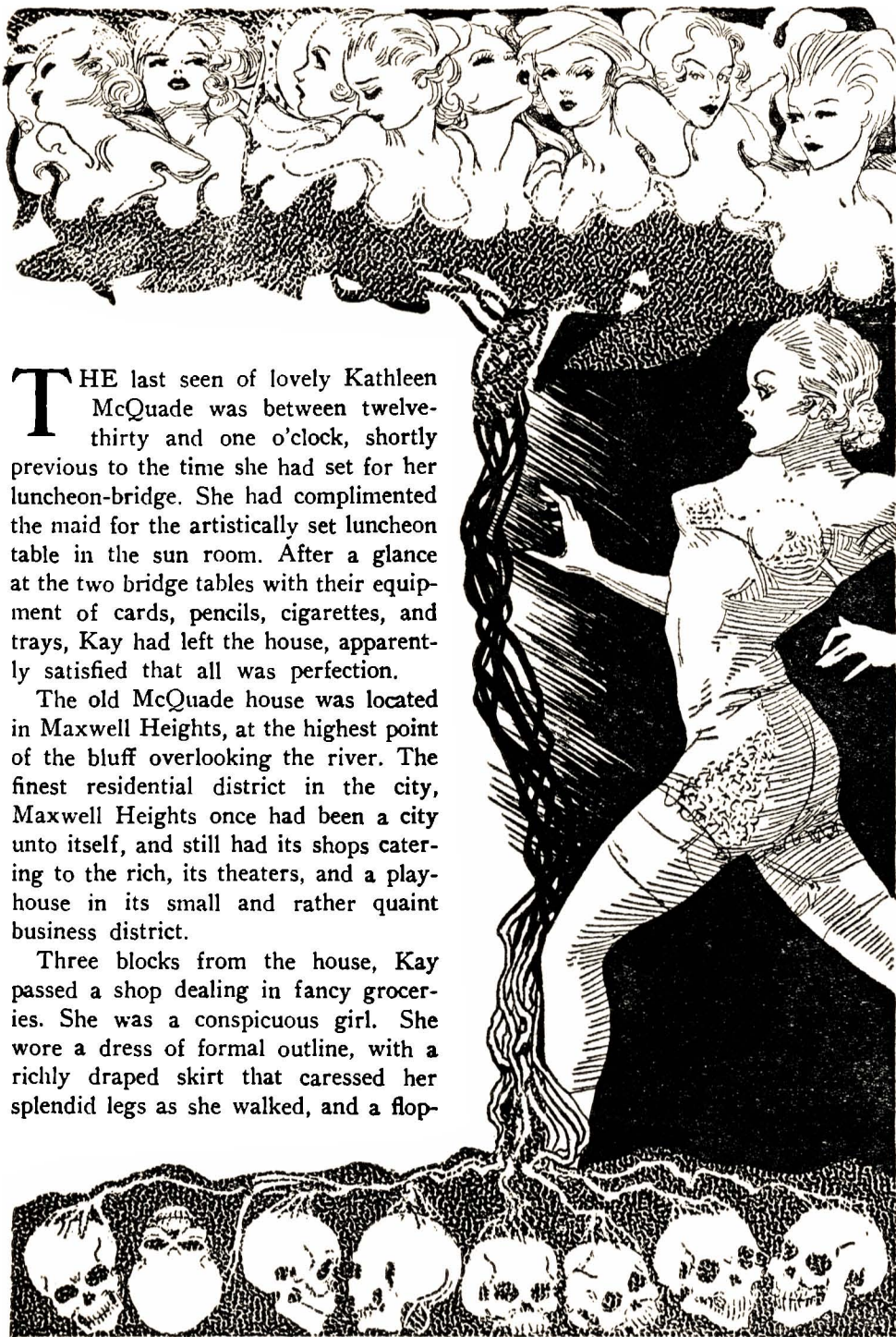


# THE GLASS COFFIN

*When Kathleen disappeared, her sweetheart was the only man who suspected what had happened. And even after he had verified the incredibly horrible truth, the police wouldn't believe him. He was left to work alone. He would find her, even at the sacrifice of his own body and soul!*

Zuchet worked with a terrible, quick efficiency, like a surgeon with only flying seconds at his disposal. He forced the needle between her ribs, in, in. . . .





**T**HE last seen of lovely Kathleen McQuade was between twelve-thirty and one o'clock, shortly previous to the time she had set for her luncheon-bridge. She had complimented the maid for the artistically set luncheon table in the sun room. After a glance at the two bridge tables with their equipment of cards, pencils, cigarettes, and trays, Kay had left the house, apparently satisfied that all was perfection.

The old McQuade house was located in Maxwell Heights, at the highest point of the bluff overlooking the river. The finest residential district in the city, Maxwell Heights once had been a city unto itself, and still had its shops catering to the rich, its theaters, and a play-house in its small and rather quaint business district.

Three blocks from the house, Kay passed a shop dealing in fancy groceries. She was a conspicuous girl. She wore a dress of formal outline, with a richly draped skirt that caressed her splendid legs as she walked, and a flop-

**By ROBERT A. GARRON**

py straw hat that made her look like an animated poppy. She had a gorgeous figure. Under clinging silk her exceptional bosom was a secret more than half revealed, and no man, possibly not many women, who saw her so could think of anything but girls, girls, girls.

The point was, she was as lovely as all that, the embodiment of all feminine allure, and she drew the eye as only beauty can. Yet, after the white-aproned grocer greeted her ingratiatingly, and she in response gave him free of charge a smile that made him forget his garden-variety wife and two children, to dream of the impossible for a time, Kay swung around the corner and vanished into the unknown.

Not immediately. For the grocer strolled casually past his luscious display of vegetables to the corner, looking after the doomed girl, and dwelling on the perturbing motion of her hips and the arousing shapeliness of her legs as she walked. It was in his mind that she was on the way to Zuchet's, the florist's, and he could have kept her in sight all the way to Zuchet's on the lower bluff. But a limousine pulled in to the curb in front of the grocery store—one of the snooty old hens of the district who shopped personally because she distrusted her cook or butler—and the grocer had to descend from the pearly clouds to the sordid reality of ringing up sales on the cash register. So he didn't see Kay McQuade reach the end of the block.

AT THE house, Kay's maid waited until a quarter of two, when luncheon wouldn't keep any longer. Some of the hors d'oeuvres, especially the pâté on little toast rafts, were beginning to look deadly.

At three-thirty Kay had still not re-

turned, so her brother Arnold fourthed at one of the bridge tables for her after shaking up a couple of batches of cocktails. For the moment, as far as Arnold McQuade was concerned, his sister's absence was a bit of good luck. Of the seven girls on hand, his, Jeanne de Winter, was far and away the most beautiful, and McQuade couldn't get enough of her. He thought she was more beautiful than his own sister, and wasn't far off in his belief that she was one of the most rapid methods ever devised by nature for raising a man's temperature.

Jeanne had a closely-molded glory of dark, silken hair; wide, alert black eyes; and incomparable red lips that seemed always at the point of smiling but seldom smiled save for Arnold McQuade. The real beauty of her soft lips was the most important thing about her; her slim body, her athletic torso with the suave hips, and the firm, twin thrills of her bosom, all of her splendid youth and gay personality was summarized in her velvet lips, inexpressibly delicate lips that always looked kissed. They had a sincere, thorough understanding, Jeanne and Arnold. When they got around to it, they might marry, but there was no hurry, both being young.

The other girls at the bridge party knew about the affair and envied Jeanne more or less openly because Arnold was regarded as a "catch." First of all, of course, was the McQuade money and position in society. A close second was his physique, combined with which were intelligence and talent. He kept tanned the year around, and if his slate-gray eyes had been set less deep, the gleam in them would have been mischievous. At twenty-three, he acted like thirty or better, and could be regarded as a more than promising young painter.

Most of his work went into portraits, because human beings fascinated him





**He leaped at her with the velocity of a tiger, and she whirled to receive a solid, savage blow under the jaw.**

in their infinite variety. When he did a landscape it was unusual, and his nudes were startling. He showed only the nudes posed for by professional models, because in spite of his close, brilliant technical method with its hint of surreality, his subjects were easily recognizable. Jeanne had fought with him to persuade him to offer a flamboyant nude of herself for the annual City Museum show, and he had refused point-blank.

"The idea of a gang of foul-minded yokels ogling your body, even if it's only a canvas," Arnold had said, "would gag me. Sure it's art! That canvas probably would take the first



award, but the honor doesn't mean a damned thing to me; the canvas is not for sale, and the amount of the prize wouldn't begin to pay for what the scandal clubs would do to your reputation. Nix!"

"Why, Arnold," Jeanne had mocked in her lazy, golden voice, "you don't thing people would whisper, do you? How old-fashioned!"

"You know damned well they would!" She had laughed. "If you want to keep me a secret, you oughtn't to leave the canvas so well displayed upstairs in the studio. You know, your dear sister has shown a number of her friends through the studio when you've been out, several times. Everyone in our set at least knows you've done that canvas, and knows what a really swell job it is. If you don't exhibit it, tongues will start wagging about us anyhow. Darling, don't you see?"

"Damn that sister of mine anyhow!"

But the exclamation had been scarcely more than rueful. He was genuinely fond of Kathleen, as was Jeanne.

**B**EFORE the first rubber of bridge had been completed this afternoon, the same dismaying thought occurred to him and Jeanne simultaneously, and their eyes met in a brief glance that was electric with apprehension. Within two years, more than a dozen girls had been reported missing, and none had been found. Perhaps the monster had struck again, and Kathleen was gone from the world. Something had happened to her; she would not stand up her guests like this for any reason whatsoever. As the afternoon waned, the very sunlight became tawny and thick with something sinister and forlorn. After the bridge game broke up, the usual conversation and laughter turned false with an un-

dertone of anger and hysteria as the girls overcompensated for fear.

Fear of the unknown strikes in high places also. Of the missing girls, all but one had resided in Maxwell Heights. A terror was at large, close by. It operated even in the blaze of noon, even though the Heights had become as closely and efficiently policed as any district in the world. Notorious for their abhorrence of secrets and the supernatural, the police expected to capture sooner or later a sex-mad murderer. If such a man existed, his cunning was such that no trace of crime could be detected in any of the disappearances. None of the girls had any reason for dropping out of sight. But if they wanted to vanish utterly, their right to do so was undeniable, while it certainly remained a matter of hotter and hotter police inquiry.

**F**ROM the maid, Arnold had received the belief that Kay had gone to the florist's for a corsage of orchids. Before reporting to the police, Arnold made a thorough investigation of his own by telephone. He talked with Emil Zuchet, the florist, who informed him that Kay had not visited his shop. He could state this positively, because during the noon hour, when his two clerks were at lunch, he, Zuchet himself, took care of trade in the showroom. His two clerks said she had not been in before twelve, nor from one to five.

Arnold talked with the grocer, made numerous other phone calls, and at the end remained baffled by the fact that Kay had disappeared somewhere between the grocer's and the florist's. He reported Kay missing to an old friend of the family, Lieutenant Furness, who admitted reluctantly that the missing girls on the blotter numbered fourteen. Now fifteen.



Jeanne had remained for supper, after which he adjourned with her to the enormous studio upstairs. On the easel was another full length canvas of her, just begun, which he had intended to work on most of the evening if Jeanne didn't tire.

While he got his paints ready, Jeanne proceeded to the adjoining room and began to disrobe. She was wearing a buttoned-down-the-front dress of uncrushable linen, which came off to reveal her sheathed in a whispering taffeta slip. She pulled the slip off over her head and laid it across the foot of a lounge with the dress, neatly, thoughtfully. Her step-ins were the merest trifle of lace, and, still in her high-heeled shoes and sheer hose, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Call it a million dollars or so worth of curves.

Arnold hardly noticed her when she returned to the studio ready to pose. As she stood there a moment in the doorway, she could tell by the look in his eyes he was thinking of his sister, was still distraut. She looked at him pensively for a moment, and a thought flashed through her mind. Gaily, she called to him, "Darling, look at me! I have a surprise!"

He stared at her wonderingly, jolted out of his own trend of thought for the moment. His eyes widened as Jeanne suddenly flung out her arms, whirled into an exotic oriental dance. She had studied under good teachers and could dance well, but this dance was something she hadn't learned in any school.

Burlesquing, she danced with wild abandon; a dance that had in it all the provocative allure of the ages, the sinuousness of the Indian snake dance, the writhing insinuations of the Hawaiian hula. Her lovely body was like a living white flame, weaving, leaping, twisting, in a passionate effort to drive the ugly

worry from his mind by the only means she knew of. Still wondering, but beginning to perceive her purpose, he thought that if she were trying to distract him, she was doing a first-class job of it. But even this—the sheer beauty of her, the lovely rhythm of her movements—could not make him entirely forget about his sister.

"It's no use, Salome." He tried to make his voice laconic. "Better stop now and let the painting get under way."

Jeanne shrugged and quit, saying, "You can't blame a girl for trying, can you?"

"You know something's happened to Kay as well as I do. What's the use of trying to kid ourselves? We'd better do something!"

Jeanne indicated the dais on which she was to pose. "Let's you and me do a lot of work, shall we? Kay's all right. And even if she has been kidnaped or something, do you think you could compete with Lieutenant Furness and all the detectives down at headquarters? I'll pose, darling, and you go ahead with the canvas. There's no point in worrying until we're sure something's wrong."

Arnold flung down the brush with which he was making the figure drawing on the big canvas. "How are we going to be sure? Just wait? And guess? Not a trace of the other girls was ever found. Something horrible has happened to Kay, and I'll be damned if I can do any work tonight." He scraped the big smear of sienna, which he was going to use for brushing in outlines, off the palette again, put it back in his "junk jar" and clapped the lid on. With all the McQuade money, it was a funny, trick of his to be economical with his pigments.

"Well, what are you going to do?" she asked. When he didn't answer immediately, she idled over to the chenille

lounge and flung herself on it, her white body relaxed gratefully, her arms over her head.

"In the game of 'Murder'," Arnold mused startingly, wiping his hands on a soft cloth, "which is played in the dark, all the players must tell the ab-

The tendrils had stolen upon him from behind, and now . . . !



solute truth in the mock court which is held following the crime; all the players save the man secretly designated by lot as the 'murderer'. He may lie."

"What do you mean?" Jeanne asked slowly.

"What do you think of Emil Zuchet?"

Jeanne went rigid, relaxed with a sigh. "Don't be silly, darling. That harmless little man? A florist?"

Arnold crossed to the lounge and sat on the edge beside her. Jeanne's use of the word "harmless" indicated that she too thought Zuchet was a peculiar man, the sort that a healthy young be-



ing like herself instinctively disliked but did not fear.

Zuchet was not taller than five and a half feet, but he was broad and perhaps weighed more than Arnold's hundred and sixty pounds. Zuchet's features were almost pleasant, but not quite. There was a shade too much color in his lips, which could almost be called

sensual. Any sensitive person would have called his eyes evil. They were round black eyes with a liquid jet glint, and usually he kept them on the



floor as though tired, or as though he could hear better than he could see when waiting on customers.

He dressed very well and was clean, with his nails always neatly scraped. Mixed in with the fragrance of flowers in his shop, was the elusive, cloying scent of an expensive, exotic perfume he wore. The chief thing Arnold remembered about Zuchet was the incident when he accompanied Kathleen to the florist's to order flowers for their mother's funeral. Arnold had happened to be in a position for observing Zuchet unawares, and Zuchet's eyes had crawled over his sister like a pair of spiders.

More than the man's eyes, Arnold didn't like Zuchet's slow, caressing voice with its indefinable accent. It was an insidious voice, with a suggestive leer in it that conveyed to Arnold, now that he thought of it, insinuations of a diseased mind. A fat, lolling voice—disturbing, almost menacing.

“ONCE before,” Arnold remembered, addressing Jeanne earnestly, “Zuchet was questioned about one of the missing girls. He admitted she had bought flowers there, but said he was not in the habit of molesting or following girls, and didn't know which way she had turned after leaving his establishment.”

“Yes, I know.” Jeanne looked at him under the satin curve of an arm bent over her face, shielding her eyes from the light. “That was Elaine Betts. Her poor mother was sure that little Mr. Zuchet was an ogre who had attacked and murdered her daughter, and buried the body in a flower bed. The police trampled through his gardens and greenhouses, ransacked his house from attic to cellar and didn't find anything. Zuchet started suit against the city for

damages, but dropped the suit. I know that story.”

Arnold rested his hand on Jeanne's rounded knee. Leaning over her, he unconsciously dug his fingers almost painfully into her flesh, giving emphasis to his words. “Here's the point: in these two cases at least, don't you see that we have only Zuchet's word? He says he knows that Elaine Betts left the store with her flowers *because he was alone and waited on her himself*. When I called him before supper, he told me he was positive that Kay had not been in the store during the noon hour, *because he alone was taking care of customers in the store, and he would have waited on her if she had come in*. I think Zuchet is lying.”

“But darling,” Jeanne said softly, breathing faster, “a man can't murder fifteen girls and not get caught. You're letting your imagination run away with you.”

He had taken her hands in his and caressed her fingers absently, much as a man might his wife's, but he dropped them now and said abruptly, “I'm going down to Zuchet's.”

“I'm going with you. When you see how wrong you are, you're going to feel pretty silly.”

“You stay right here and wait for me.”

Jeanne sat up and wrapped her white arms around him. He felt the eager, quivering resilience of her bosom against him, and her cool, wet lips parted against his. He yielded for a moment, thinking that her breath was a soft, perfumed rapture, stood up suddenly and headed for the door.

“Arnold!” she exclaimed commandingly, and he halted, turned. “You're being foolish. Give me time to get ready and I'll go with you. You won't find out anything alone. Let me go in



to buy orchids all by myself; if you want to set a trap, that's the only way to do it. You know it. Only girls have disappeared."

"You're not going to disappear!" Arnold snapped.

"Don't be crazy!" she protested; she leaped up and ran to a closet door. She was so beautiful as she ran on her high heels, with her proud young breasts dancing, that Arnold waited, attentive and moody.

She offered a good argument. In the closet hung about a dozen of her dresses, two of them formal for evening wear. Kathleen had probably opened that door at some time or other and smiled, knowing that her brother had chosen the loveliest girl in the city. Jeanne chose a dress which had yards of rippling satin in the skirt, but which was extremely economical in the way it sculptured her hips, waist, breasts; in this creation most of her back was bare, and she had a perfect, delicately tanned back.

When she went into Zuchet's, the florist would think that she was on her way to a dance in one of the downtown hotels and had stopped to pick up a corsage. In these crazy days, girls might drop in alone to buy flowers and there was no breach in etiquette. Etiquette is personal. Very. Zuchet's wide mouth might smile, and secretly his gleaming, spidery eyes might crawl. Against his will, Arnold was convinced that Jeanne was right, that as a decoy she would have far more chance for success than himself.

**T**HE Zuchet Gardens covered most of the ground on the lower bluff. Aside from the rich terraces, there were the greenhouses with their acres of glass spattered with whitewash, built out in three directions from the house. Connecting directly with the greenhouses,

the front room of the house was used as a place of business. There were tall glass cases filled with fresh, dewy, cut flowers, and tables freighted with potted plants.

On either side of the house, the greenhouses extended away and were lost in the humid night. Only the "store" was lighted. Jeanne saw no one in the place through the plate glass windows, but when she opened the door a spring-switch in the jam either rang a bell or turned on a light that brought Zuchet from somewhere in the house.

"Good evening," he purred. His words were a little too slow, as though he were dwelling on some secret pleasure.

"Good evening," Jeanne responded, smiling engagingly. Even though it was such a short walk down here from the McQuade house, Arnold had taken out the roadster and was waiting in it, with the lights out, in the alley a half block up. He was going to wait exactly twenty minutes, time enough for Zuchet to give himself away if he were going to.

Jeanne could not have worn a dress which displayed her figure to better advantage. What little there was of the bodice modeled her torso in detail. Her mother had called the dress indecent; under the gleaming satin was only a skin-tight, abbreviated chemise because fashion wouldn't allow step-ins or a brassière to show. Jeanne knew how delectably shaped she was and thought she was lucky to be able to wear a dress like this.

Slim ivory allurements, she stood unaffectedly with her shoulders presenting the firm, girlish perfection of her bosom under the satin. When she inquired about orchids, Zuchet mourned, "I have none cut. Would you care to make a selection from what I have? But

no, you might soil such a lovely dress walking through my greenhouses."

"You grow your own orchids, Mr. Zuchet?"

"But yes; I am a florist." Zuchet gurgled with slow laughter. "Would you accept any variety, miss, or would you like to see all the beauties. I would not like to cut one you do not like,"—ingratiatingly—"because it would not live long and Zuchet must run his business at a profit."

"Good heavens!" Jeanne thought, "my twenty minutes will be gone like nothing if he keeps talking as slowly as this." Through her head flashed another thought, "'Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.' No, he doesn't really care whether I see his orchids or not. But what ugly eyes he has!"

**T**HIS was a matter of the briefest hesitation before she decided, aloud to Zuchet, "Perhaps you had better let me make my choice. I think I can be careful enough not to soil my skirt."

"Certainly. I will show you the way, please." He turned unhurriedly, and she followed him from the store into a corridor which branched into the greenhouses. Hesitating, he suggested, "We can take the long way around through the gardens, but it is shorter to go through the basement corridor to where they are. You will not get soiled that way."

"All right," she agreed, thinking, "Hurry up! Hurry up! Before Arnold comes boiling in and makes a fool of himself!"

Zuchet opened a door in the corridor, turned a switch that jumped the basement into view with bright yellow light. As she gathered up the extravagance of satin at one side of the dress and prepared to descend the wooden stairs after

him, he was out of sight for a moment. She heard another click as though another switch had been worked, then a trembling vibration of short duration, as though the unit of an electric refrigerator had run briefly. Her high heels tapped the wooden steps briskly as she went down.

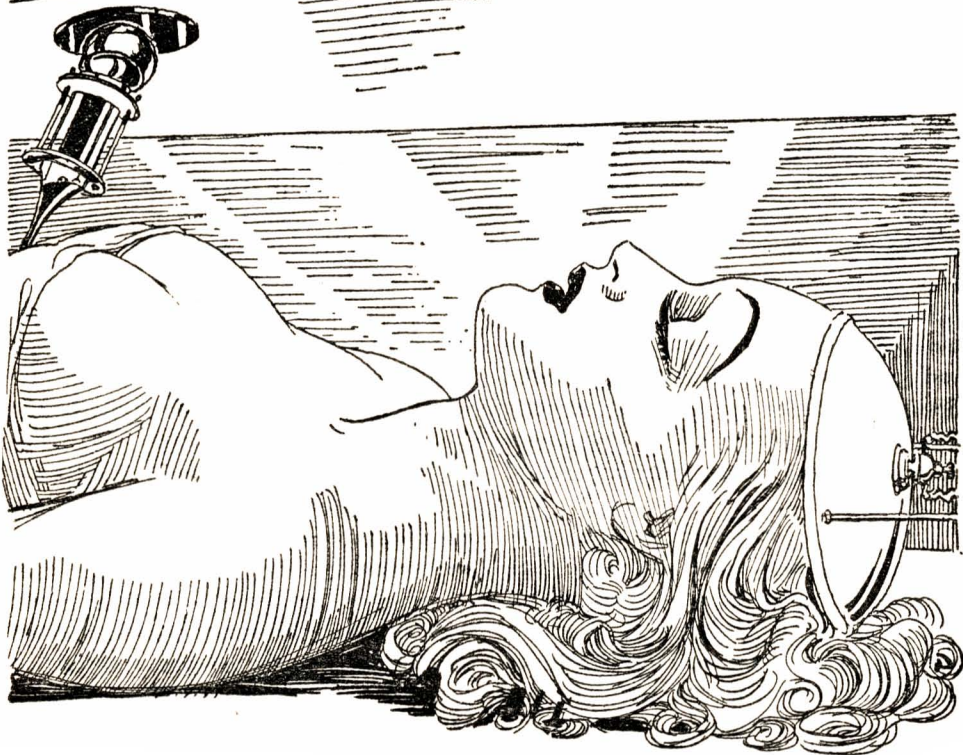
Halfway across the basement, Zuchet turned his head to smile at her, then proceeded into what seemed to be the entrance to a dark corridor. Jeanne glanced around swiftly at stacks of flower pots and garden equipment as Zuchet turned lights on beyond the entrance and waited for her.

On the threshold, she stopped with an exclamation of rapture at what she saw beyond him. Smiling, Zuchet stood aside to let her run forward to a bed where grew stupendous blooms of unimaginable beauty. Watching her with eyes slitted, Zuchet flipped up a tumbleswitch in the wall; he leaped on her with the velocity of a tiger as, with a heavy trembling, a section of solid masonry rose from the floor at the entrance to seal them in the subterranean chamber. She whirled to receive a solid, savage blow under the jaw that felled her, senseless, before she could utter a cry. The cry would have gone unheard.

The door to Dr. Zuchet's underground laboratory was cleverly concealed. What looked like parallel pipes half-embedded in the cellar foundation, were two of the vertical tracks in which the false section of foundation was operated by concealed power machinery. Nature had furnished the laboratory with another exit, which was also well concealed.

**Z**UCHET'S slowness of manner was pretense. In the chamber scented overpoweringly by the orchids, he worked with terrible, quick efficiency,





Gloating over her loveliness, he murmured, "You'll be immortal, too!"

like a surgeon with only flying seconds at his disposal. He was a genius. A florist by trade, he had been trained in foreign universities in physics and chemistry, and had earned his several degrees as a scientific wizard. In America he had made a richly paying business out of his hobby, horticulture, to which his scientific genius was wed in a most peculiar and horrible manner.

The rectangular orchid bed stood in the center of the chamber, whose floor was original, somewhat uneven, bed-rock. Against the wall on the left stood an operating table, with a mass of scientific equipment near it. Anyone giving the equipment a casual glance would have thought, because of queerly-shaped vacuum tubes in a cluster, that Zuchet might be experimenting with radio or television. Over the table, equipped with wing-nuts so that it could be screwed fast to the table, was suspended a glass canopy about the size and shape of a coffin.

Doubly insuring the success of his job, Zuchet gave the girl a hypodermic injection in the arm, stripped her down to the sheer knee-length hose, undies, and slippers, and laid the few articles of clothing aside to be destroyed.

Gloating over the loveliness in his arms he murmured, "Sixteen. You'll be immortal, too, the loveliest of them all." His lips caressed the thrilling, creamy hollows of her throat; he kissed her fiercely, making a low growling sound in his throat. . . .

Laying her limp body on the table, he arranged her arms and legs, and turned on the power in his apparatus. The vacuum tubes glowed, and a low whine filled the room. The last thing he did before lowering the glass canopy was take down a length of tubing which was connected through the metal framing the rim of the glass box. The tub-

ing terminated in a hollow, fine chromium needle. Zuchet pricked her with the needle under the bosom, forced the needle into her flesh, slowly and carefully, between her ribs, in, in. . . .

**J**EANNE opened her eyes. The drug she had been given kept her body numb and powerless to move. With parted, trembling lips and eyes wide with horror, she watched the canopy descend, heard Zuchet swiftly turn the wing-nuts that sealed her in.

He glanced at a stoppered glass flask into which her rich red blood pumped in regular spurts from the other end of the tube, nodded and hurriedly left the laboratory. The whole business of conditioning Jeanne de Winter for immortality had been executed with so little waste motion, that scarcely twenty minutes had elapsed since she entered the store.

A bell rang as he closed the basement door, warning him that someone had entered the shop. He opened the door communicating with the shop, and recognized grim young Arnold McQuade, whose sister he had coveted for so long and disposed of so recently. The harvest of two girls in one day made him smile pleasantly, as he asked, "Yes, Mr. McQuade?"

**"WHERE** is she?" Arnold demanded.

"Who?" Zuchet inquired innocently. Simultaneously, Arnold acted with maniacal speed and fury. Both his fists were solidly reinforced with bone, and he hung one on Zuchet's teeth even before the very capable Zuchet realized how insanely angry he was, that he had a quick temper, and could move with explosive speed. Ten seconds later, consciousness returned to Emil Zuchet. He sat up with bleeding lips, his mouth full

of broken teeth. Arnold towered over him with a bloody handkerchief whipped around his right hand; his knuckles were slashed open to the bone.

"Where is she?" Arnold roared.

Zuchet spat out broken incisors and blood and sneered quietly, "Young man, you are going to regret having done this all your life."

Arnold whined with blind rage. Powerfully he snatched the squat Zuchet to his feet by the throat, and smashed the side of his head with the bandaged fist. He flung the body of the florist, unconscious again, back to the floor and called police headquarters from the desk-phone sitting on the counter behind Zuchet.

Besides squad cars, headquarters sent cars of detectives and one of the police emergency trucks out to Maxwell Heights. The truck was equipped with two floodlight units: powerful, portable lights whose generators were driven by compact gasoline motors, good for twenty-eight hours to the three-gallon tank; the floodlights were set up in the gardens. Police and detectives, among them the police chief and Lieutenant Furness, who was no mean criminologist, scoured the gardens, stampeded through the hothouses and prowled through Zuchet's residence from gables to the cellar bedrock. They found nothing, and most of them thought McQuade had gone off halfcocked.

Zuchet was a wealthy and respected citizen, a man who donated generously to the church to which he belonged. The fact that girls had disappeared near the Zuchet Gardens did not mean that those girls had disappeared in the angry florist's shop.

Zuchet was going to sue the city, and this time he meant business. Some time before the police had arrived, while Arnold was storming through the house in

search of Jeanne, Zuchet had set a little stage in the front room.

He had rung up a sale for two orchids on the cash register, taken from his wallet enough scented money to cover the sale, and placed it in the drawers. He removed cut flowers from a crystal vase and put them with flowers in another vase, leaned a price-card reading "\$3.00 ea." against the empty crystal vase in the showcase. Having worked himself up into a mood of righteous wrath, and convinced that police are stupid, he presented his little stage-setting to the police department with his compliments.

Jeanne de Winter, he lisped through his broken teeth, had visited his shop and he had persuaded her to buy his last two orchids because they wouldn't last until morning. The sale was registered, and the perfumed money was in the cash register with a little change. He indicated the empty vase and the price card in the glass case; he didn't mention that he prepared his orchids for wearing with the stems sealed in glass capsules filled with water, so that the fragile blooms would last longer, and the impatient detectives didn't know any more about orchids than they could talk in archaic Persian.

They had to believe Zuchet. It had just happened that Jeanne had left the store without McQuade's seeing her from the alley where he was waiting. Zuchet swore she had told him that she was going to a dance in a certain downtown hotel with "a new man." It looked to headquarters as though McQuade had been stood up, and that was all there was to it, and they weren't very pleasant about it. Not only was the battered Zuchet going to sue the city; he was going to sue McQuade for first-degree assault, and he was going to sue

*(Continued on page 105)*



# THE GLASS COFFIN

[Continued from page 41]

him plenty. Zuchet was outraged.

Lieutenant Furness hunted for McQuade through the Zuchet Gardens, but couldn't find him. At about the time Furness gave up and returned to his car to go back to headquarters, McQuade was making his way along the river at the water's edge, stepping deep into black muck. He remembered something.

**A**S HE floundered along, jerking his feet free from the ooze with sounds like a line of wolves smacking their jaws, he remembered exploring both banks of this river as a boy. Somewhere along here was a tunnel at the water's edge, a tunnel in which ran an underground stream about five-eighths of a mile long, spring-fed. Near Zuchet's

house, almost squarely under the south hothouse, there was a shaft opening into the ceiling of the tunnel.

A rusty iron ladder six inches from the shaft into the tunnel. The short shaftway connected with a spacious natural cave, scoured out by the spring in the dawn of time before it escaped into the river directly. The previous owner of Zuchet's house had filled the cave with beds of rich soil for growing mushrooms.

As the boy-explorer, Arnold had wandered through the mushroom cave, awed, found a door, found himself in what was obviously the basement of the house up the river and departed forthwith. His father, being told of the adventure, had told him that the house



around the wick and snapped the wheel. He snapped it a half dozen times before it came to life with a tiny bud of blue flame. Enough to see by.

That other time, he had paddled a canoe in here and been able to reach the

**He screamed and  
struggled to free  
himself**

was very, very old indeed, that the pioneer who built it had extended his cellar and tapped the tunnel in order to be provided with a possible avenue of escape in case of attack by Indians.

What had suddenly occurred to Arnold, after having searched Zuchet's house for Jeanne just now, was that the basement was considerably smaller than his boyhood memory of it. Part of the basement had been walled off.

He heard his name called in a shout made thin and eerie by the height of the bluff and distance. As he ignored it, he plunged up to his chest in icy, crystal water. Whooping with the shock, he headed into the tunnel under the bluff, thrashing against the slow, frigid current.

Before advancing very far, he pulled out his cigarette lighter, blew off water

ladder easily. This time he had to spring from the clay bed of the stream with every ounce of strength in him, and snare the bottom wrought-iron bar one-handed. He made it, the lighter going out. The ladder shuddered with his sudden weight, and sand sifted down on him with fleckes of rust. With the dead lighter in his teeth he went up, trembling, and with his breath whistling from exertion. His knuckles were split open again, but his hand was too cold to bleed readily.

THE stagnant air of the cave hit him with its full weight of mustiness and corruption. The cave was still being used for cultivating mushrooms. In the pale, thin radiance of the lighter they bulged from their beds of fertile mold like spheres of leprous flesh, like blind eyeballs. The cave was being used for something else, too.

On one side were fifteen long mounds in a row, some of them swarming monstrously with mushrooms, which was why there was no use dragging the river for missing girls. Here their lovely bodies slept in a subterranean burial-ground. The fifteenth grave was fresh, Kathleen McQuade's, and against the wall near it leaned a damp spade.

Arnold raced down the rotten board walk that extended the length of the cave from the door. It was an ordinary wooden door with three panels, and it was locked from the inside. Arnold had never been one to waste his strength in trial efforts. He backed off, held a good breath, and smashed into the door shoulderwise with everything he had, ramming into the portal just above the level of the latchbolt. Wood split and the door burst wide open, still on its hinges, with a crash that filled the cave like low thunder.

If the air in the cave was hard to breathe, the air in the orchid chamber was stupefying with the drugging strength of perfume distilled by the flowers. The perfume was sickeningly sweet, lodging in the throat like the taste of fine, poisoned candy. Already half-stunned, Arnold got up from his knees with the relighted flame and spent a preliminary glance on the bed of flowers. Fourteen of the specimens, one of them a vine, were in flower. The fifteenth was a naked bulb, freshly planted, with its upper part exposed and releasing a fat tongue of violet-flecked green.

Across the room, the vacuum tubes in the apparatus emitted a glow of soft red and there was a whine in the air. Reflected light on the glass case momentarily prevented him from seeing what lay inside. He could discover, despairing, no exit from this weird chamber into Zuchet's basement.

On a stool near the orchids a flask full of red liquid caught his eye. Glass tubing connected the flask with the box of soil in which the orchids grew, a box supported on heavy legs. The tubing, full of the ruby fluid, ran completely around the box. There were twenty-four stopcocks and connections, with auxiliary tubes running from fifteen of the connections through the sides of the box, one feeding tube for each orchid.

The orchid nearest him, a fantastic beauty of extraordinary size, with crumpled chiffon petals weeping with golden tendrils, suddenly leaned toward him on its tall, curiously fluted stem. For a moment he stood rooted, while gooseflesh washed his whole body with icy hands, fascinatedly watching the great, fragile flower move on its flexible stem as though searching for him.

He stretched out his hand and touched the gorgeous thing. Instantaneously, the



tendrils twined around his hand and fingers, tightly, as the petals caressed his palm. His fingers were touching the stem, which was intricately veined like flesh, and the stem was pulsing. Arnold drew his hand free nervelessly and the golden tendrils reluctantly let go.

Sickened, he held his hand to his throat, and his fingers encountered leaves. All the tendrils of the vine had stolen upon him from behind, unfelt because the leaves and tendrils were of the same temperature as his own body. The leaves had the peculiar, porous softness of human skin. Involuntarily he struck at the thing with a cry of disgust.

The vine flinched free of him as he sprang back; it shrank into a compact mass of coils and foliage, visibly quivering with hurt from the blow he had dealt. These beautiful, foul things were alive with a horrible, sentient life.

**I**N HIS present position, as he looked about wildly, he saw the outrage of Jeanne de Winter's white body in the glass box. His face convulsed and he reached her with a scream of horror. He didn't see how the box was fastened down, and the glass was too heavy for him to smash.

"Jeanne!" he shrieked.

He was too late. She recognized him with the ghost of a smile on her lips, but her eyes were closing in death. The needle stuck into her heart just below the perfect breast, had drained most of the blood from her body. The flush of life was almost gone from her and her nymphaean form had become a dreadful white ivory. On her jaw was the stain of a bruise, where Zuchet had struck her. Her beautiful breasts trembled together, then ceased their slow rise and fall with her breathing. She relaxed into a reclining sculpture lovelier than anything man ever cut from marble.

Her head rested on a plate of peculiar grayish metal which was wired somehow to the electrical apparatus near by. Suspended above the case over the plate was a glass bulb shaped like a cathode tube, also wired. Like a glass gun it was directed upon an egg-shaped flower bulb, which was immersed in some perfectly transparent liquid in a crystal jar. On a shelf were several such jars containing bulbs of slightly different shapes and sizes.

At the instant of Jeanne's death, a beam of visible light shot from the plate under her head to the cathode tube suspended above it, where the beam was condensed, and brightened and fired at the orchid bulb in the jar in a needle of light. Emil Zuchet had discovered how to capture and make use of that form of energy which is called "intelligence" or "the soul" in a living human being. The average weight of energy constituting the human "soul", as other scientists before Zuchet had discovered, was one quarter of an ounce, which is lost at "death" and according to archaic Indian mysticism returns to its source, the envelope of the universe which is fumblingly worshiped or scorned as "God."

A SECTION of the chamber wall slid down in its shaft with a dull rumble. Overhead lights flashed on; Arnold whirled as Zuchet flipped the switch that sent the ponderous slab of masonry rumbling back up into place. There was a revolver in Zuchet's fist.

"You found your way in here, did you? When the door to the muhsroom cave is opened, it rings an alarm in the house."

"Does it?" Arnold asked in a queer, flat voice.

"The police are gone now. And you and I," Zuchet sniggered insanely,



"have business together, haven't we?" There was something about his lisp, caused by his broken teeth, that made him seem all the more deadly.

"Yes, we have business together," Arnold whispered, easing toward Zuchet imperceptibly. He was poised with the cold, merciless calm of a man who has gone insane with a fixed idea, the driving necessity of murdering the unspeakable Zuchet with his bare hands.

"How do you like my place, eh?" Zuchet crowed. "Before I kill you I am going to tell you a secret. The orchids I am growing here, they are not like other orchids. Oh, no! They are human beings, like you and me! They think; they feel; you can make them twist with agony. You know what I do with all those girls who disappeared?" His wide mouth slobbered. "All those lovely girls with their white bodies? I imprison their souls in those orchids, those splendid flowers. Their souls, man! Would you ever think of that?"

"Yes, I thought of that." With a guttural laugh of complete insanity Arnold charged.

Zuchet shot him through the stomach.

Arnold was beyond feeling shock and advanced steadily, though he was a dead man. Zuchet shot him twice more, once through the shoulder, once through the chest; Arnold coughed blood and staggered, but kept coming. Zuchet backed away frantically, gobbling with fear, and emptied the remaining bullets into his body. Only transcendent hate kept Arnold on his feet. He reached Zuchet's jaw with a clumsy blow of his fist as the last bullet tore through his heart.

The blow was enough to sprawl Zuchet on the stone floor, where he sat gasping, swallowing with relief as he looked at the dead man. A pleasant

stupor overcame him so swiftly that he was unable to get to his feet.

Perspiration beaded his face; he wiped it off drowsily, wondering what was the matter with him. His ears began to ring, and a sweet weakness weighed him down. "Zuchet, Zuchet," he muttered. "What is happening to you?"

The overpowering fragrance of the orchids drugged his brain. His eyes closed with a dream of fair white bodies, of slender torsoes with firm young bosoms, of shapely legs with the creamy thighs so soft. At last the agony in his throat and wrists reached his brain, and he jerked his eyes open.

The flowering vine had stealthily snared his wrists and throat, his cheeks, all the exposed area of his skin. The tendrils of the vine were equipped with suckers, and the vine was getting fat with his blood; he was dying.

He screamed for help and struggled to free himself. But the chamber was soundproof, and the tendrils of that gorgeously flowering leech, fattening insatiably, or revengefully, enmeshed him even more securely with the tensile strength of flexible steel thongs. He gibbered feebly, and with all the power left in his barrel chest produced a scream that had no more volume than the drawn-out chirp of a cricket. A squat, helpless and dying cricket.

His round head struck the stone floor meatily as he fell back. With tremendous effort he blinked his glazing eyes, the prey of the verdant horror of his own invention.