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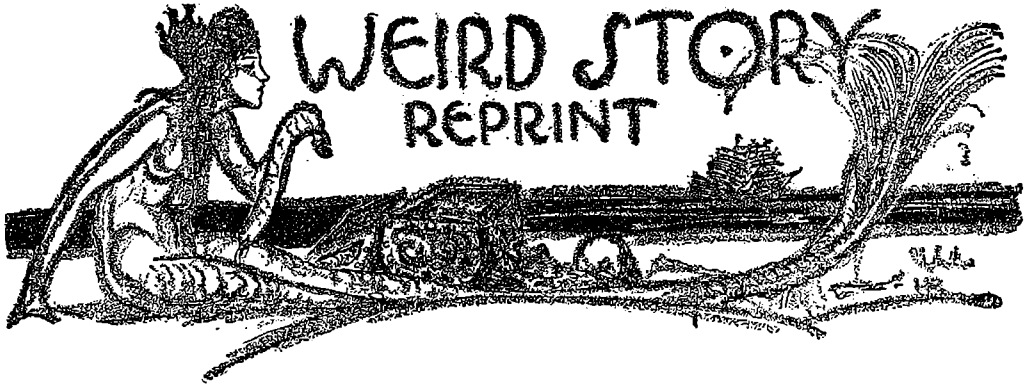
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



The Last Horror

By ELI COLTER

YOU wonder what happened to Bleeker? And to Remington? They *aren't* the same men any more, are they?

Bleeker: who once stood straight-limbed, straight-backed and full-fleshed, walked with high-carried head, clear-glowing eyes and ruddy blond skin; Bleeker, who now walks with a bent shuffle, whose cuticle is so tightly drawn over his emaciated features that it looks like dirty white rubber stretched over a skull; Bleeker, whose eyes have gone blank and sunken in their sockets, whose mouth is tightened in the middle and loose at the corners, whose nose is pinched, whose hands tremble when he isn't taking care to hold himself in. I could tell you, something terrible happened to Bleeker.

And Remington: tall and compactly built, extremely fine-looking in rugged, chiseled fashion; Remington with the gift of tongues, with his ready capacity for eloquent speech that might have made of him a top-notch orator; Remington, whose dark skin is now pasty, whose black eyes brood over some in-

ner thing he must see eternally, but does not wish to; Remington, whose black hair is turning gray, whose magnificent tongue is frozen into stark silence. Something terrible happened to Remington, too. Remington saw a man's soul, dragged it out to light and made that man himself look at it. And it is something none of us may ever forget.

I don't know what you think of me. I don't care. Bleeker and Remington and I are bound by a tie that won't allow of our being away from each other long. We all saw something too hideous to believe. But I'd like to have you understand—if you can. Then perhaps you won't fret me any more by asking that harassing question, "What happened to Bleeker and Remington?"

It started in the most prosaic manner. The two of them came up to my cabin, built in the edge of the foothills to give me privacy for my work, and told me I was going on a fishing trip with them back in the mountains. They didn't *ask* me to accompany them, just told me I was going and wouldn't take no for an answer. I didn't demur too much. I'd been applying myself

* From WEIRD TALES for January, 1927.

pretty steadily and was rather glad of an opportunity to lay off work and rest. So I said sure, I'd go. We didn't take any guns. I suggested it and Remington laughed at me.

"What do we want of guns, Crickett?" he asked. "None of us cares much about hunting, and there aren't any dangerous animals back in these mountains—nothing bigger than a few lone deer. Besides, the guns would be too much trouble to pack. We're off for a rest. Let's get going."

Strange, perhaps. But even then, in broad daylight, as I followed them out of my cabin with a pack of grub rolled up in a blanket and strung over my shoulder, I felt an uncanny sense of premonition. I didn't speak of it. Remington would have laughed. Overhead the pine-trees gibbered in the wind.

A few feet away the creek chattered insolently at the white moon wheeling across the sky behind the sun. All around us rose the casual everyday sounds that continually kept me company as I worked in my cabin. Yet I felt the prescience of that unnamable thing of mystery which is always just around the corner in the most ordinary surroundings. I shrugged it off and swung into step with Bleeker and Remington as they struck off for the mountains beyond.

We lazed along, casting our flies in the creeks, taking our time for four or five days, before we at last found our ideal camping place. We had got into a distant, very isolated region, but we had come upon a made-to-order spot. It was a good-sized bench on the side of a mountain, well up toward the summit, on the bank of a fine cold creek. We pitched our tent, built a fire and got a hearty meal, congratulating ourselves on such a bully find, settling down to

have a high old time fishing and doing nothing.

ALONG about midnight I was awakened by something yowling and screeching hideously up the mountain above us. I sat erect on my blanket and listened.

"What in thunder is that?" Bleeker asked from across the tent.

"Aw, it's a cougar strayed down from somewhere. When he sees our fire he'll give us a wide berth. Maybe you'd better get up and pile another log on the coals." Remington's voice was sleepy and half scoffing, and Bleeker answered him with the sharpness of suddenly rasped nerves.

"Cougar! No such thing! You know better—and so do I. That ghastly howl was *human*."

Neither of us answered him. We knew he was right. Remington lay still, rolled up in his blanket, and I knew he was listening, even as I. The yowl came again once or twice, like the scream of a man in torment. Then it choked off with a queer gurgle and we didn't hear it any more.

We didn't any of us sleep well that night, and in the morning the first thing after breakfast Remington suggested that we take a stroll up the mountain and see if we couldn't locate that cougar. Bleeker and I assented without hesitation—as a matter of fact he'd only beaten us to it by a breath with his idea. We were curious as the very devil over the awful racket we'd heard the night before. So we all set off to investigate it.

Noon came before we reached the summit, and a funny-looking summit it was. Instead of going up to a peak, the mountain chopped off into a kind of table-land or plateau containing perhaps five square acres. The table-land,

at some remote time, had been slashed off, and was now covered only by a thin stand of small second-growth trees, fallen logs and stumps, save for one spot off to the extreme left. There lay a dense copse of first-stand trees occupying at least an acre, so covered with some vining stuff that the whole looked like an immense green block set on the very edge of the plateau, so perilously close to the edge that it seemed the lightest touch would send it toppling down the mountainside.

"There," Remington pointed to the odd acre-thicket, "there's where that infernal screeching came from. Let's give it the once over."

He swung off at a rapid stride, Bleeker and I at his heels. At the edge of the thicket we paused to inspect it closely. The trees themselves were anywhere from eighty to a hundred and fifty feet in height. The vining stuff was plain English ivy. Nothing so terribly suspicious in that, was there? But there was something menacing, ugly, in the air.

We had the devil's own time getting through, but we persisted and finally came out into a cleared space occupying about a quarter-acre in the center of the thicket. Remington stopped short, whistling in amazement, and Bleeker and I stared.

Right in the middle of the cleared space was a low brick building, square as a box, all on one floor, flat-topped like those old adobe houses in the South. The small strip of yard surrounding it was absolutely bare—not a shrub, bush or sapling; hardly any grass. There was an iron fence around the yard at least ten feet high and a row of sharp spikes ran along the top. At the rear of the building a short chimney stuck up, and from it rose a thin thread of smoke.

But the queerest thing about that brick box was the utter absence of any windows. A huge steel door broke the blank face of the wall next us, and there was a big iron gate in the fence directly opposite the door. We stood there speculating on what the place could be, and Bleeker suggested that it might serve as some weird kind of vault. I pointed to the smoke rising from the chimney and shook my head. Driven on by overwhelming curiosity I stepped to the gate and tried it. To my surprise it wasn't even latched, but swung right open.

Remington strode eagerly into the yard and we after him. We walked all around the building, but there wasn't a sign of a window and not another door appeared. I decided I'd had enough of it. Evil shrouded it. I told Remington I was ready to go any time he was. He looked at me in astonishment and said he was going to see what was inside if he could open that door, said he hadn't followed that ghastly yell up there merely to turn around and go back without learning a solitary thing about it. So he went around to the door and tried it. It wasn't locked, either, but swung in as easily as had the gate. We all walked through, leaving it standing wide-open behind us.

Before we were eight feet beyond it, the steel door swung shut almost noiselessly. I leaped and grabbed it, tugging with all my might. I might as well have tried to move a tank. It wouldn't budge. I turned to Remington with an involuntary shiver. Something alien and sinister caused me to strain my ears for the least sound. In plain English, I was scared stiff.

"We're trapped!" I ejaculated in consternation.

"Ah, it's just stuck or something." Remington had paused to look back as

I leaped for the door, and I saw something in his eyes that was uneasy, apprehensive, as he answered me; something that belied the lightness of his words. "Come on, let's see what's in here."

I nodded, walked on to join him and Bleeker, and tried to throw off that sense of premonition.

THE interior of the brick building encompassed but one huge room, lighted by four enormous gasoline lamps suspended from the ceiling, one in each corner. They gave out a clear white glow that made the room bright as day. Against the far wall stood a great cage built of close-set steel bars. The floor was cement. On one side of the cage enclosure was a sunken tank almost full of water. Across from the tank an open tunnel led into the mountain at a steep angle. There was no detectable opening into the cage, and so far as we could see, it lacked an occupant. Otherwise the cement-floored room was empty.

We walked up to the cage and looked through the bars. We brought up short, stared, glanced at each other aghast, and stared again. There, scattered all over the floor inside, was a litter of bones. Human bones! Human skulls scattered among them! Most of them were old and dry; but some, enough to accommodate one body, were still green, with small particles of flesh adhering to them and marrow showing where they had been cracked and chewed in two. Remington went white and sprang back, grabbing my arm and letting out a startled curse.

"For the love of Christ, what kind of a place is this?"

Bleeker and I were too shocked and nauseated to move. But we knew we'd found the source of that ghastly wowl.

For a full minute we three stood there staring at that mess, revolted at the sight and the foul stench that rose from it. Then we wheeled with one accord and started for the steel door. But the start was as far as we got. We made that, and there we stopped.

A man (I guess you would call it a man—God knows) stood between us and that door. He was of huge stature—six feet and seven inches, we found out later. He towered above us like a mighty Adonis. Were looks to serve, he was no ogre. He wore a dark gray business suit of excellent material, and ordinary English walking shoes. Around his throat was draped a thick silk muffler of dull blue. His hands were encased in kid gloves. On his head he wore a tight-fitting skull cap, silk also, that reached almost down to his brows and completely covered his ears. His features were finely formed, symmetrical, really handsome to a striking degree. And his face was as black as the ace of spades.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" he greeted us, showing perfectly matched teeth in a flashing smile. "I'm very glad to see you. Callers drop in here all too seldom."

I shivered involuntarily. In spite of his really splendid appearance something emanated from him that was sinister, foul, unholy. Bleeker glared at him and fell back a step, but Remington eyed him up and down and asked coolly, "Where in thunder did *you* come from?"

"I was here when you entered," the black informed us quietly. "Down in my private apartment. The entrance is rather unnoticeable. Come along. I'll show you."

He turned back toward the door, swung to his left and walked to the wall, pausing before a small white but-

ton set into the brick. The cement floor was laid off in squares about treble the size of those in a concrete sidewalk. The black pushed the button and the square nearest the wall raised noiselessly; a cleverly concealed and operated trap-door that lifted to reveal a flight of stone steps descending through a tunnel into the mountain. Glad to get away from that grisly pile of stinking bones, we had followed him part-way to the wall. As the trap-door rose and came to rest against the brick, Remington stepped forward a pace or two and glanced down into the tunnel.

"You see," the big black explained, "the trap makes no sound. I heard you come in, and when you passed up to inspect the boneyard I came out, dropped the trap behind me and approached you. That's all there is to it. If you gentlemen will be so kind as to come down into my apartment I should like to talk business to you."

Well, what could *we* do? I ask you! Bleeker and I glanced at Remington, instinctively waiting for him to make the first move. Remington is that kind of man. He glanced back at the steel door, then at Bleeker and me, and I knew he was thinking of the fact that we were completely unarmed. The black smiled and went on with mild persuasiveness.

"You might as well come peaceably, gentlemen. You can't possibly get out, you know. No more than you could have got in if I hadn't wanted you to, and set the levers to loosen both gate and door. And if you don't come without objection I shall be forced to have you carried down."

He shoved back his coat suggestively, and we saw that he carried a heavy-bore automatic strapped around his waist. "I shouldn't want to use the gun, you understand. Nor should I

need to. I could manage all three of you single-handed." Which was no lie!

Remington shrugged, gestured toward the trap with a flick of his fingers, beckoned with his head and started down the stairway. We weren't far behind him.

As we descended we examined the tunnel minutely. Gasoline lamps were strung along the roof at short intervals and the cement walls had been painted and frescoed artistically. Bleeker and I looked at Remington's straight back, and at each other. Obviously we were to find ourselves compelled to rely on our wits in getting us out of that place.

At the foot of the stairs, which proceeded for some fifty feet or more, we came to another huge steel door. Remington reached out and shoved it lightly. It opened into a cavernous underground chamber hewn out of the solid rock. Animal skins, velvet and silk scarfs and brilliant cushions were strewn about over the numerous pieces of modern furniture dotting the thick carpet. Gas lamps of intricate design were hung from the vaulted roof. In one corner stood a phonograph, and a finely carved upright piano stood in another. Curtains of exquisite fabric covered what I judged to be two openings into the room. On the smoothly chiseled and finely decorated walls hung two great paintings of genuine beauty. A large coal-burner at one side answered for the warmth and dryness of the underground chamber, and also for the smoke rising from the chimney in the brick building upstairs.

It really looked bright, cheerful and inviting down there. But something ghastly and horrible hung over the place: something hideous and sinister breathed a foul breath into every cranny and spoiled the sumptuous appearance of luxurious elegance.

WE THREE paused just inside the door and scrutinized the room, waiting to see what was coming next. The black walked on to a broad oak table littered with books of the most meticulous choice, stopped, turned and faced us.

"Gentlemen," he said courteously, "as I told you upstairs, I am glad to see you. And I am very glad you were so wise as to make no resistance when I proposed your coming down to my apartment. Only I can let you out of here. Whether or not you *ever* go depends solely upon yourselves. At the least I must ask you to remain for some time. I have a proposition to make you, and if you see my position coolly and sanely, accede to my request reasonably, and give me your word to forget what takes place here, in a few weeks I shall send you on your way with a hearty Godspeed. If you allow yourselves to be swayed by any prejudice and silly sentimentality, I fear you will have to pay the price of the small-souled. But be seated. Make yourselves comfortable, and I will outline my history and elucidate what it is I have to ask."

Bleeker and I looked at each other again, struck by the black's excellent use of English. Remington promptly seated himself in a comfortable leather chair. We took seats not too far from him. With a smile of gratified approval, the black stepped to a big brass gong suspended from the wall near the piano, picked up a wooden mallet lying by it on a small tabouret, and again turned to face us.

"First I shall introduce you to my household. I have eight men down here with me. No women. Women talk."

He raised the mallet and struck four quick blows on the gong. It reverber-

ated, a deep, hollow tone that seemed to fill the room and creep down into the earth. Before it had died away the curtains beyond the piano opened and seven huge Negroes entered and bowed respectfully to the man with the gloves. Not one of them was under six feet two inches. The black pointed at us, nodding to his men.

"Boys, these gentlemen have just dropped in via the box upstairs. I fancy we are about to see the end of our experiment. May I ask your names, gentlemen?"

"Remington," Remington said succinctly, nodding at us in turn; "Bleeker, Crickett."

"Thank you, Mr. Remington. Boys, Mr. Remington, Mr. Bleeker, Mr. Crickett. Gentlemen, these boys are my friends and co-workers. Their names will not interest you. Their stature, their strength and their loyalty to me—will. You may go, boys. But hurry dinner along, will you? Thanks."

The seven herculean blacks turned and disappeared, and the man with the gloves struck the gong again, once. The curtains at the other entrance swayed apart, and a small white man entered the room, pausing at sight of us, and the black master introduced him with an air that held something of pride: "Mr. Remington, Mr. Bleeker and Mr. Crickett—I should like you to know Dr. Straub."

Bleeker and I gasped simultaneously, and Remington sat up in his chair to stare sharply at the man who had just appeared before us. Dr. Straub! We all knew him, by name. Straub, the crack surgeon who had disappeared shortly after the war and was never heard of again. Well, there he was! I remembered his face from a number of pictures exploited by the press at the time he dropped out of sight. He had

undergone a radical change. He still wore his pointed gray beard and close-cropped grizzled mustache, and he peered at us through thick glasses as he came forward, taking us in swiftly.

At the time of his disappearance his pictures had shown him to be a man still young, vigorous and in his prime. Now he was old, stooped, thin and haggard, and he looked as though he had seen seventeen different kinds of hell. But he came forward, poised and at ease, spoke our names precisely, tabulating our faces in his mind, and shook hands as casually as though we stood in the king's ballroom. He didn't, however, say he was glad to see us, and the expression of his sharp gray eyes seemed to declare that nothing mattered much so far as he was concerned.

"Sit down and join the company, doctor," the black invited, leaving the gong, approaching us and sinking into a chair with arresting grace for so huge a man. "I am about to make clear to these gentlemen what I wish of them."

Straub shrugged, sighed slightly, and sat down half facing us, his weary eyes playing alertly among us three. He did not look at the black, and not again did he speak.

"Well, we may as well begin at the beginning. But first, let's be comfortable. Will you smoke, gentlemen?"

The black leaned over to get a box of cigars from the table, opened it and offered it to us. Bleeker and I refused, I couldn't say why, but Remington chose a cigar, lit it from the same match with the black, and leaned back in his chair with the air of a man perfectly at home. I envied him his nerve!

THE black looked at each of us, slowly, then went on. "My name is Richard Ballymair—Rick for short. And this is the beginning."

Holding his cigar firmly in one corner of his mouth, he raised his hands, stripped off his gloves, tossed them to the table, and held both hands extended toward us, fingers slightly spread, watching us intently as he did so. He had a love of the dramatic, that devil! Remington never turned a hair, but Bleeker and I sat up in astonishment and caught our breaths. *His hands were as white as ours!*

"Yes," he answered our dumfounded stare, taking his cigar in his well-formed fingers, "from the neck down I am white. From the neck up—well, you see how it is. I must be so quick as not to weary you with any tedious explanation. By a strange freak of pre-natal influence, a fright visited upon my mother, I was born with white hands. I dare say you have never heard of a parallel case. Neither have I, but that is what happened to me. As I grew up it was both a curse and an incentive to me. The curse of being born black, and the incentive to become white.

"I realized early that I was favored with a high intelligence—an intelligence that placed me far above the level of my people. I determined to make the most of it and do something worthwhile with my life. I studied hard, and came off with top grades both in public and high school. My teachers predicted that I would go far. I determined not to fail their belief in my capacity. I decided that I would become a genuinely great man, one who should give something of value to the world.

"But by the time I was twenty-one I realized how insurmountable a barrier lay between me and the fulfilment of my dreams. I was a Negro. No matter what respect I might command from white men because of my intelligence and abilities, no matter to what heights

I might rise, the wall of race reared between. It drove me frantic. I wanted to meet other great men on a common level, to be one of them. And I could not.

"Then came the war. I enlisted and went overseas as orderly to a white captain who was one of the finest men I have ever known. Overseas I had the privilege of being given opportunity to save his life. He was grateful for my act. When the armistice was signed and we were transported home, he insisted on rewarding me. He owned forty acres of land in Oklahoma's best oil section. He gave me ten acres of that land, had it duly deeded and the deed executed. The day we went to the courthouse to have the deed recorded, we came out to the street and ran into Dr. Straub, here.

"The captain and the doctor were the best of friends, they'd been through the thick of it together over there. They shook hands, as I stepped back respectfully, and began cursing the awful restlessness that was the aftermath of the war.

"'By God, I've got to get away somewhere for a while and push it out of my mind,' the captain told Dr. Straub. 'Let's go down to Papua and shoot a lion.'

"'Ass!' the doctor retorted with rather a wan grin, 'there are no lions in Papua. Nothing bigger than pigs and crocodiles. If you want to shoot a lion you'd better go to the Congo Basin. Yes, I'll go with you. When?'

"'All right, we'll go to the Congo and shoot a lion,' the captain agreed cheerfully. 'Then we'll go to Papua and catch a wild pig. We start next week. Want to come along, Rick? I could use you on a trip like that.'

"Of course, I went. Over there in the forests of the Congo I was im-

pressed with the idea that had taken root in my brain years before. I compared myself to those negroids over there. Cannibals! Living in crude rectangular houses, tattooed in weird designs with scars, carrying bows with cane strings and packing wooden shields, wearing bark-cloth—or nothing—believing in their fetishism and witchcraft, chipping their teeth and letting the women do all the work. Was I like them? Was I of that race? Only in color! Outside I was black, but inside I was as purely Caucasian as either the captain or Dr. Straub. I lived, talked, thought and dreamed like the white men in my own land. I cursed all the gods who had wished a black hide on me and raved because I couldn't be white. Inwardly, of course. The doctor and the captain never knew of that.

"Then the captain shot his lion, but didn't kill it. Again I was privileged to save his life, killed the beast and got pretty badly torn up. One of my legs was ripped to shreds. Dr. Straub fixed me in pretty good shape, but said he'd have to graft some skin on that mauled leg. With all the Negro people around us, there was no place we could beg, buy or steal a patch of black skin. The captain came forward like a prince, said he'd give me a piece himself, jollied me and suggested that I shouldn't mind a patch on my thigh to match my hands.

"I *didn't* mind, of course. That at least, I told him, would be out of sight. And I jollied back, and told the doctor it would soon turn dark to match the rest of me.

"Soberly, he assured me it wouldn't. I stared, and he went on to explain in detail that the skin is composed of two main layers, the scarf skin or *epidermis*, and under that the true skin, technically the *dermis* or *corium*. The *epidermis* or outer skin consists of five layers: i.e.

—the *stratum corneum*, made up of layers of scale-like cells—the *stratum lucidum*, another layer of scale-like cells—the *stratum granulosum*, containing granules and less flattened cells—the *stratum mucosum* or *stratum Malpighii*, with polygonal cells connected by fine prickle-like processes—and the *stratum germinativum* which lies next to the second, or true, skin.

“Now: he went on to impress me with the fact that it is deep in the cells of the *stratum Malpighii*, the fourth layer of the *epidermis*, that the pigment is found which makes the color of the Negro’s skin. Under that stratum I was like all other human beings. In other words, *I was black only from the second skin out!*

“From then on I could think of nothing but the blinding fact that the doctor had told me. I would sit and stare at that patch of white on my healing thigh, and think wild thoughts. Those wild thoughts focused down, ultimately, to one inevitable conclusion. *If I could be skinned, literally, bit by bit, and the removed pieces replaced by white skin, I should become a white man!* Unable to contain myself, I approached the doctor with the idea, cautiously, making a half-jest of it. Always deeply interested in the progress attained by experimentation, like all skilled, advanced and highly scientific men, he took me seriously and talked it over at length. He said he had no doubt it could be done, and he fancied it might be accomplished in six or seven years—if one could procure the white skin.

“**WE** CAME back to America shortly after that, and I, still half-stunned by the monumental possibilities within my grasp, set to work formulating ways and means. I was determined to become a white man before I should

pass my thirty-fifth birthday. I had ten years in which to accomplish it.

“I went straight to Oklahoma and looked over that ten acres of land the captain had given me. All around it were spouting wells, pouring out liquid gold for other men. I needed gold. I went to another part of the state, hunted up a lawyer of the type to suit my purpose, and told him what I wanted.

“I proposed leasing my land to an oil syndicate for drilling purposes. I wanted it done through this lawyer, and I did not want the syndicate to know I was a colored man. I guaranteed the lawyer half of the cash bonus I would receive from the syndicate and ten cents on every barrel of oil taken from the ground. I would go away, and communicate with him twice a year. His duty was to keep my identity a secret, receive my income and pile it up in the bank at four percent interest, keep his mouth shut and ask no questions. He agreed readily, and I knew he would keep his word, for I know men. The syndicate paid me a cash bonus of twenty thousand. I divided it with my lawyer and set out to find a suitable place to work out my plan in seclusion.

“Well, we struck a gusher right off the bat. A big one. Out of flush production in the first three months I netted around a half-million and the lawyer was fifty thousand to the good. (I might add that that was six years ago. I had a few more wells drilled, and now have something like eight million dollars piled up waiting for me. My lawyer, including a bonus I give him every year for honest service, has two million. Pretty good price for keeping his mouth shut, isn’t it?)

“But that’s aside from the point. I found up here in this mountain an old abandoned mine. It had never amounted

to much; the pay streak pinched out and it was closed years ago. But it suited my purpose perfectly. Quietly, through my lawyer, I purchased twenty acres covering the site of the old mine, timbered up all the entrances to the tunnels and filled them in with earth. Then I cut a new tunnel down from the summit to connect with the stopes inside the mountain. This is an old stope in which we now sit, gentlemen. Over the opening to my new tunnel I built that brick building, which we call the box.

"Of course, before I set to work I accrued a company of men, selected from my own race, selected for their physical strength, loyalty and reliability. I gave my word to be fair to them, considerate, and pay well for good work. I kept my word. Money will do much, you understand. Inside of a year I had finished this place, and made certain that it was done so expertly, so secretly, that none outside even dreamed of its existence.

"Then I kidnapped Dr. Straub. I brought him here and explained that he was to stay till he had made me a white man. At first he was furious with what he was pleased to term my impertinence. But after much talking and arguing over the matter, he became impressed with my understanding of what could be done, my insatiable ambition and my determination to succeed. Also, he himself was avidly curious, from the scientist's angle, to see how the experiment would mature. Then again, I promised him a quiet, orderly life of considerate treatment and a cool million when the thing was done. It is astonishing what money can accomplish, isn't it?

"Of course, I *did* show Dr. Straub the fierce young puma I keep penned in an adjoining stope with the freedom of that cage you saw. I figured I might

need some powerful persuasion to aid me as I went along. And of course, the doctor knew he could never leave this place unless he acceded to my request. But I give him the credit to suppose that such things had nothing to do with his decision. He agreed to give me the benefit of his utmost skill. The next thing was to find the white skin we needed.

"We watched events closely—outside events. One of my men, at my instructions, had a daily paper mailed to an isolated rural box—a year's subscription paid in advance. He went to the box three times a week and got the papers. One man killed another and, as we saw by the press, hid out in the hills near here. My men trailed him, captured him and brought him here. He was a good type—tall, very blond, with fine yellow hair and pink-white skin. We explained to him what was wanted. We gave him the choice of exchanging his skin with me, patch by patch, or being turned over to the authorities and electrocuted for murder. He concluded he had rather go back to the world a few years hence wearing a good disguise than not to go at all.

"Dr. Straub first transferred his fine blond scalp and ears to my head. You see, gentlemen?"

Ballymair raised his hand and whipped off the skull cap. Under it, thick blond hair, straight and sleek, and well-formed white ears stood out grotesquely from his black face. Bleeker and I could only stare, but Remington whistled, and Dr. Straub sat back in his chair eyeing us with a peculiarly jaded disinterest. Ballymair went on evenly.

"Then we started to work upon the body. Bit by bit the doctor transferred white skin to me and my black skin to the murderer. But he was much smaller than I, and of course there wasn't half

enough skin available, since there were only certain portions we could use. By that time I was mad over the sureness of our ultimate success, and Dr. Straub was wild with excited interest. We knew we had to find more white skin.

"I sent my men out to capture and kidnap unattached men from the lower walks of life. I counseled them to choose wasters, ne'er-do-wells, derelicts who were in good condition and still youthful, and yet who would not be missed by other men. I had little trouble in persuading them to be reasonable. Most men, even the least intelligent, would rather live with a few black patches on their bodies, serving me here, than be fed to a panther. By that time I was so certain of my ultimate success that nothing could have stopped me. What were the lives of a few derelicts in the face of a monumental plan like mine? One's intelligence is insulted by refusal to recognize the relativity of values.

"Well, let us finish quickly. Six years have passed, as I said before. And again as I have said before, I am white from the neck down. I left my face to the last purposely. I haven't looked in a mirror for six years. When I do look again I shall look into the face of a white man. I have lain awake nights dreaming of that thing. To look into my own face again, and know I am white. See how little I lack!"

Ballymair pulled from his throat the blue silk muffler. From ears and hair-line down, his neck was white. Only the face from the ears outward, from the blond hair down, was black. He looked weirdly like a white man wearing a black mask. He smiled at the expressions he saw on our features.

"So now we come to the end. The five fellows I picked up haven't been too amenable to persuasion. Two of them

died of fever. One killed himself. The others I had to put out of the way for my own safety. But they were of different status from you three. I know I shall have no argument with either of you gentlemen. I fancy you won't mind a few black stripes down your legs? After we have finished our task I shall blow this place to kingdom come. I have three hundred pounds of dynamite cached at a safe distance for the purpose. Right now the question is: which one of you gentlemen shall I find most suitable for my purpose? I am anxious to be done and out of here. Hmmm—which one of you, now?"

"By God, none of us!" Remington exploded, and Bleeker and I gripped ourselves rigid in our chairs. "Of all the damned fiendishness! We'll get out of here in some way, and I'll turn you over to——"

"Pardon," Ballymair interrupted mildly. "You cannot possibly get out of here. If you ever hope to go at all, I warn you for the last time to make no resistance. You are a pretty healthy-looking specimen, Mr. Remington, but you are much too dark. Mr. Crickett is too old. But I quite fancy Mr. Bleeker's fine blond skin. He will not suffer at all, and neither of you other two will have anything to do but sit around and wait till the job is finished. You may as well grant my request gracefully, since you will have to submit anyhow."

BLEEKER went ghastly white, and I clenched my teeth, but Remington had got hold of himself again, and he never moved a muscle. He turned his head and looked Bleeker straight in the eye.

"Bleeker, we're caught fair. We've got to rely on our wits. We'll have to submit to what this Ballymair de-

mands—but only so long as we fail to find any way of retaliation or escape. And now it's I warning you, Ballymair"—he turned to face the black and half rose in his chair—"that we shall not rest one moment in striving to find some way of besting you. We have as much intelligence as you, and there is a way, don't forget that fact. There's always a way."

"Not in this case. I will not be thwarted at the eleventh hour." Ballymair rose, shaking his head and smiling deprecatingly. "I signaled the boys when they stood right here before you, to destroy utterly the levers and buttons working the steel door and gate above—to destroy even the small electric plant that drove the levers and buttons. I don't need it any more. None of us can possibly get out that way now, not even I. There is but one passage of exit, an underground passage, and only four of us know where it is—two of my most trusted men, Dr. Straub, and myself. There is no way out, and no way for you to escape or frustrate me. Mr. Bleeker, will you come this way, please?"

"No! Damned if I will! None of my skin is going on your hell-begotten face!" Bleeker spat out defiantly, leaping to his feet and seizing a heavy straight-backed chair. Remington and I sprang to abet him, but the black only smiled, drew his gun and backed to the gong. Straub did not move. Ballymair struck the gong three times, and five of the big Negroes rushed into the room.

"Kindly take Mr. Bleeker to the surgery, boys." Ballymair waved a hand at Bleeker. "Leave the other two gentlemen here, and see that they stay. I am sorry you saw fit to make trouble for yourselves, gentlemen."

The blacks crossed the room in a

wild rush, and though we fought with all our strength to protect Bleeker, we might as well have tried to stop a steam train. In ten seconds they had collared all of us. Three of them picked up Bleeker, and carried him, kicking, squirming and cursing, toward the curtained entrance, while the other two held Remington and me with our hands gripped cross-wristed behind us.

"Come, doctor." Ballymair beckoned to Straub, and the surgeon rose without a backward glance to follow him out behind the three blacks carrying Bleeker. We saw then that another steel door stood behind the curtains, for Ballymair paused, waited till Straub had passed, then went on, closing the door after himself.

"You may as well take it easy." The black who had been holding Remington released him and stepped away, motioning the other to release me. "It'll be a lot better for all concerned if you don't pull any more of this stuff. Come on, Brace, let's go see to the eats."

The two of them hurried out through the doorway through which Straub had entered, and before the curtains had stopped swaying behind them Remington and I made a rush for the opening. There was no door behind the curtains at this entrance, and we went on through into a long, wide hall. But at the other end of the hall there was a steel door, and it clanged to as we appeared, and the laugh of the Negro Brace came back to us. We hurried down and tried the door, foolishly, since we knew before we touched it that we would find it locked.

We turned back and examined the hall. Two doors opening from it led into a large, well-appointed bathroom and into a bedroom containing two full-sized beds. There was no other opening off the hall, and no other rooms.

Remington and I looked at each other, shook our heads in resignation and returned to the room to which Ballymair had first taken us, sat down, and tried to think sanely.

"It's no use fighting, Crickett." Remington's voice was cool and level. He leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

"We've got to keep quiet and use our heads. We can't save Bleeker, but we *can* get out of here. I tell you, man, there's always a way out. Always a way out of everything, if we just stand pat long enough and give our brains time to work."

I didn't answer. So far as coherent thought was concerned, I was down and out, for the time being at least. In my mind's eye I could see poor old Bleeker strapped to a table, the skin being sliced from his thighs to mold that Negro's face.

I hadn't the least idea how skin-grafting was done, didn't know how long it might take, or to what extent Bleeker would suffer. But the very thought of it gave me a grisly nausea.

Remington and I sat there in helpless silence, striving furiously to think, and, like everybody else, finding ourselves powerless to think when we most needed to do so, when the black named Brace returned bearing a tray that held an appetizing dinner. Remington and I hardly touched it, and Brace started to carry it away again. Just as he reached the door Remington called to him.

"Say, Brace: what are those men doing out there?"

"They are operating," Brace answered shortly, slipping quickly through the smallest opening he dared allow himself with the tray and slamming the self-locking door behind him.

THERE'S absolutely no good going over the hell of the next six weeks. After the first few days of horror we two began to feel somewhat resigned and strove to accustom ourselves to the business of waiting. Pinned up in that room, with access to the bath and beds, of course, but never even allowed to go upstairs again to the box (not that we wanted to!), we thought and talked till we were dizzy, trying to formulate some possible method of escape. But in spite of Remington's doggedly reiterated assertion that there was always a way, we failed to find one. We saw nothing of Bleeker, Ballymair or Straub again in all that time. We saw no one but Brace, who came in every day to bring us our meals and to furnish us with clean linen, or to attend to our personal wants. Remington tried to draw the Negro into conversation once or twice, but Brace refused to talk and advised us to mind our own business. We nearly went insane with the awful suspense of knowing nothing. Worse still, no sound of any kind came to us from the rooms outside of the ones where we were imprisoned.

Then, at the end of the six weeks, Ballymair walked into the room and bowed to us with pompous courtesy. Remington and I stared at him incredulously. His face was white and smooth, save for the odd patchwork of thin, rapidly fading scars. The transformation was startling. He made a magnificent figure with that white skin molded over his finely chiseled features.

"Good God!" Remington said under his breath. "That damned Straub's a wonder! I've got to admit it."

"Yes, indeed," Ballymair agreed pleasantly. "Mr. Bleeker and the doctor will be in presently, and we shall come to a settlement of this little affair. I have some important work to do im-

mediately, but we will talk afterward. Ah—Dr. Straub! Come in, Mr. Bleeker.”

I sprang to my feet and gripped my hands behind me at sight of Bleeker, but Remington sat coolly in his chair, his black eyes straining toward the face of the man forcefully separated from us six weeks before. As Bleeker stepped into the room Remington cursed sharply, but I was tongue-tied. It was the Bleeker you see now that came slowly across the room toward us. White as an animated ghost he was, his eyes blank with the horror of what he had undergone, heard and seen, his once straight body bent, his swinging walk turned into a shuffle. He came toward us without a pause, then stopped within two feet of Remington.

“See what those devils did,” he said roughly, throwing back the lounging robe that covered his nude body. “You’ve got to get ’em some way. You’ve got to! I can’t. I’m done.”

Up and down his thighs ran ugly patches of black skin, and raw red scars widened where the insufficient covering from the black’s face had not yet grown together with the white. I shivered and dropped back into my chair, sick to the spine. Remington turned his head.

“Cover it up,” he said curtly. “Cover it up and sit down here. I’m going to get him.” He made no attempt to lower his voice, and Ballymair glanced at Straub, smiled and shrugged his massive shoulders.

“Well, we’ll excuse a little excitement, gentlemen. Naturally you feel a bit upset. Now the doctor and I must attend to some important business, and I will leave you for the present. Come, doctor.”

“The fiends!” Bleeker sat down on the edge of a chair and a spark of wild anger blazed in his blank, horror-ridden

eyes as the door clanged after Ballymair and Straub. Bleeker lowered his voice and went on in a mad rush of words, leaning toward Remington and me. “The hell-begotten fiends! You know what their important business is, Remington? No, of course you don’t know. You can’t hear a thing out here. But I know. I’ve heard enough to send me mad, for that surgery is right under the stope where they have that panther penned.”

“Yes? What do you mean?” Remington’s black eyes narrowed.

“One by one Ballymair’s been feeding the blacks to it. He poisoned them through their food. They’d just get sick and take cramps and kick out. Then the others got suspicious and he did for ’em all at once. Brace was the last to go. He didn’t associate much with the others and had no way of knowing they were all gone. He kicked in this morning just after he brought your breakfast—about an hour ago. Their important business is to throw him into the den. God—I’ve heard that damned brute growling and chewing and cracking bones——”

“Pull up!” Remington cut in sharply. “Cut it! I’ve told you I was going to get him, and I am—or I never read a man in my life!”

His declaration was so confident, so positive in its assurance of achievement, that Bleeker and I turned our heads to scrutinize him in amazement. I’d long ago given up hope of any kind.

I guess I hadn’t realized the kind of man Remington was. And when he said that, I remembered that of all the fellows in our set nobody was so accurate a judge of other men as Remington. He could read a fellow like a book, take him to pieces, tell you just what he’d do in a given situation and call the turn every time.

I felt a sudden returning surge of crazy hope, and asked eagerly. "What are you going to do?"

"Get him." Remington's eyes traveled over Bleeker, and they went hard as black flint. "I've been thinking night and day for six weeks, Bleeker, and I've found the one way to hit him where he lives. I've got one weapon he can't stand up to: one weapon he doesn't know exists: one sure shot he can't escape. You two keep still and watch. I'll get him, as surely as God made little apples."

HE HAD hardly ceased speaking when the door opened and Straub and Ballymair strode in briskly. For the first time Straub gave some evidence of an interest in life. Ballymair waved him to a chair, dropped into one himself, and faced us, fairly shining in exultation.

"Well, gentlemen, the deed is done. I come to talk business. I am so delighted with the excellent work Dr. Straub has done that I have decided to give him a bonus of another million. That leaves me six, and thousands pouring out of my wells every day. Now, the doctor and I have arranged that charge of dynamite so nicely set that it will blow this place to atoms and leave nothing to tell the tale. Three hundred pounds is a whaling charge. It will shave off the whole side of the mountain. If you three men had considered my proposition sanely and reasonably, I should be glad to take you out with us. But you were so foolish as to fight and make a nuisance of yourselves, and I dare not trust you. The doctor and I will go out and leave you locked in here. We have arranged a very long fuse, one that will give us at least twenty minutes to attain a safe distance. I shall be sorry to leave you gen-

tlemen to such an untimely demise, but I cannot endanger my future out of any silly sentimentality."

He paused, waiting for a comeback evidently, but none of us spoke. We were so numbed that nothing could jar us further; not even the pleasant prospect of being blown to pieces. If Ballymair sensed the status of our feelings, he gave no sign, but went on speaking rapidly, too much on fire with the exultance of his triumph to remain calm.

"I have spent a great deal of money and effort. I have suffered almost continually for six years: suffered a hundred horrors, horrors of suspense and delay. The last horror would have been to fail. I have gone to extreme lengths, but the magnificent end justified the means. Think of what it means to me, and you may not blame me utterly. Think!" Ballymair leaned toward us, and his eyes flamed under his smooth blond hair. "How would you like it if you were doomed to walk among other men, set aside and held at arm's length because you were black—black from the second skin out?"

"White the rest of the way in. White in brain, white in heart, white in ideals, ambitions, loves and desires. I tell you the skin doesn't matter one little bit. It's what's inside a man. Trite truism, yes. And yet the world judges by the veneer. Well, I changed my veneer!"

"I'm going out into the world, take my place as a respected white man in a respected community, and live a full life, with wealth to back me and intelligence to carry me forward. I'm going to show the world how little the veneer counts. I've fulfilled my life's dream. Success! Success! Think of it! I'm thirty-one years old, I have six million dollars, and I'm *white!*"

"*Where?*" Remington's voice cut into the heat of his exultation as cold

as the North Pole and as sharp as a two-edged sword.

Ballymair quivered, caught himself and shrank back in his chair as though Remington had struck him in the face. And Remington's voice went on, as cool, as steady, as merciless as destiny.

"White? *Where?* You may change your skin, Ballymair, but you can't change your heart. You're quite right. The skin does not matter. One of the best friends I have is a Negro—a man with a clear brain and a fine soul, satisfied to hold his place in the world. Look at your hands, Ballymair."

"My *hands?*" Ballymair's eyes leaped to them involuntarily, and he frowned, mystified by Remington's tone. "My hands were always white."

"Exactly!" Remington's voice rose, full, resonant, flowing out like the tones of an organ. "Why didn't you keep them that way? What a fine symbol that would have been, Ballymair, to go on through life forever with your hands white! What an incentive to your boasted intellect! But now they're red, and you can't ever wash them clean again.

And your heart's black, and you can't ever change it at all. It's a foul, black, stinking hole, filled with rotten memories and dead men's bones. Use your vaunted intelligence, Ballymair, and your white skin will be dust and ashes in your mouth."

Ballymair stared at him like a man hypnotized. And then I knew what Remington meant by his one weapon. He meant his tongue. He was using his mighty gift of speech, shooting straight at the intelligent brain that really lay within Ballymair's skull. He did not raise a finger or move in his chair. He was straight and immobile, his face set and stern, his black eyes intent on Ballymair's face, and his mar-

velous voice rolled out like the tones of a denouncing god.

"So—to fail would be the last horror for you, Ballymair? Well, look your last horror in the face. You have failed. You sit there and tell me the skin doesn't matter one single bit, you sneer at the world for considering the veneer, and you are a living example of a man who has existed solely to prove that nothing mattered to him *but* the veneer. The lives of twelve men have gone to perfect your fiendish plan. It doesn't matter who or what they were: derelicts, down-and-outers, they were still human and they had a right to their lives. Even a dog has a right to his life—unless he goes mad. You went mad, Ballymair. You became a monomaniac. One-pointed as any insane inmate of a madhouse. You thought of nothing on earth but acquiring that white veneer.

"There's something else to reckon with. You wanted to become great, to give something of value to the world. You had a mighty opportunity to do just that. Think what a man of your intelligence, power and personality could have done for his race. Look, Ballymair! Look!"

Remington rose to his feet like a released spring, leaned toward Ballymair and pointed to the smooth expanse of the wall. Ballymair rose, half crouching, and stared where Remington pointed. All our eyes followed, riveted on the wall—but the wall did not remain blank. In the compelling flow of Remington's words things and people grew, stood and walked before our eyes.

"Look! There's a silver sheet! The big movie of life is on it. The life of a race. The Negro! Look! There's Harlem. Sixty million dollars worth of property owned by the Negro there today. A Negro capital, man,

just so surely as you stand there. Some day it will be a center where culture, intelligence and high achievement will gather and spread an influence over the earth. There's proof for you of how the Negro has risen in the last twenty-five years. On every hand he is rising to better things, attaining a higher stature of manhood. He is giving something to the world, lifting his race to the place where men shall some day see that, regardless of the outer superficialities, real men are brothers under the skin—that the veneer is not!

"Yesterday we saw the Negro performer much in the same light as we saw the trick dancing bear. Even at his best we accorded him only the recognition of a flash-in-the-pan risen to freak eminence, incapable of sustained effort, unequal to the intelligent creative ability which produces group coherence. But he refused to remain one with a race of standardized dummies. He exhibited a determined passion for individual expression, he found his own art, his own music, he reached an eminence of achievement that has commanded the admiration of the whole white world.

"Look, Ballymair, look! There stands Roland Hayes. Do you realize that he is the greatest American lyric tenor? Do you realize that he has bound the whole world with the spell of his silver voice? There stands Charles Gilpin. Do you realize he reached a pinnacle of artistic ability, when he brought to life with rare histrionic skill the tragic figure of the Emperor Jones? There stands Countee Cullen. Do you realize his poetry is real, fine, drawn from his heartstrings—as he has drawn tears from mine? Do you realize that these men are *great*? And that there are a dozen more like them?

"Not too many, perhaps. One in a million, maybe. But do you realize that they are the splendid vanguard blazing the way for the dark race into high places? Do you realize that they have razed racial obstacles and don't propose to be told where they shall stop?

"Do you realize that they haven't even scratched the surface of their incalculable potentialities?

"And look—look now! There stands Abraham Lincoln! The man who made all this possible for you and your race. He's staring straight at you!

"And what does he see? You, who could have been one of that glorious vanguard! You, who could have been one in a million! You, who could have carried your race a step farther! You, who lost sight of something truly great in the lure of a treacherous mirage!

"You perverted that fine intelligence of yours, you lost your stride, you wasted the opportunity of a hundred years!

"Lincoln! Lincoln, whom your race reveres. See in his face the loathing, the horror, the real sorrow. For you! You, who could have been a man. You, who are nothing. An anomaly. You're not white, fool! You may be white from the second skin out, but your blood runs true to form. Whatever pigment lies in the cells of that first skin to make the Negro black still flows in your veins! Go ahead and marry! Find out how white you are. Look—there you are! A white man, having taken his place in the world, wealthy; perhaps respected for his brain and his polish, in social intercourse with his seeming kind—with black children around his knees. There you stand, the broken victim of your

own folly, of ostracism, suspicion and disgrace! Look!"

REMYINGTON swayed toward Ballymair, his face white, exalted in the flow of his thundering thoughts made vocal, his eyes blazing like twin comets. Ballymair drooped, backing from the picture Remington had brought to terrible life, shrinking, his gaze wide and stark, swinging to meet Remington's eyes. Remington half raised his hands, clenched into fists, and he stood tense and rigid as his rolling voice flamed on:

"Go ahead! Go on out into the world! Anomaly! Neither black nor white. Once you were an honest black, and at least you could have been a man, an example of high incentive to all your race. Why didn't you go on and *prove* to the world that the color of the skin doesn't matter? You can't now! You're only a sham white man with black blood in your veins. You'll have to live in celibate bachelorhood to save your face. And even that won't do it. You're riding to a fall, Ballymair! God pity you, you're riding to an awful fall!

"Lincoln! See—he has covered his face! He knows what a terrible mess you've stirred up for yourself. He knows you've got to pay. You've exacted the lives of a dozen men—your hands are dripping red. You'll never be able to forget it. It will be with you night and day. And you'll never be able to forget what you accomplished, hideous and warped as it was. You'll grow proud of it! You'll tell! Your brain can't carry the load! You'll tell! And they'll put you in a madhouse—for no man would believe such a thing had he not seen. In a madhouse!

"And then what kind of an example will you be for your race? *They'll* believe! *They'll* be afraid not to. *They'll*

be ashamed of you. They'll disown you. No race will own you at all. Neither black nor white. And the whole world that was beginning to recognize and honor your race will shun them and be afraid to trust them for fear another fiend might rise like you! For when you come face to face with a real *white* man, Ballymair, white dominance will show! A black man, honest and clean of heart, could shake hands with a white brother. But you've got to bow your head and sink into oblivion. Pervert, fiend, fool, sham! White? *Where?"*

Remington's voice filled the great rocky chamber and held us in a trance of stupefied wonder. Ballymair slumped before him like a beaten dog carved in stone. The weapon had gone home. Remington had read him true, shot true, and hit him in his one vulnerable spot—his undeniable super-intellect. As the magnificent voice died away in the last stark, one-worded question, a stillness settled over the room that turned me cold and pinched the breath from my lungs.

For a long time no one moved a muscle, and Remington stood straight and rigid, his head high, his black eyes piercing to Ballymair's naked soul. Then slowly the huge man raised his head, straightened his shoulders and drew himself to his enormous height. He looked levelly into Remington's eyes, and Remington never flinched, though I hope to God I never again see the look on any man's face that was written on Ballymair's. He was looking his last horror in the eye. He was looking into hell. He had followed Remington every foot of the way. He had been stunned by the revelation Remington had spread in a blinding light before his sight. Then for the first time something fine emanated from

him, and settled over his features. With it there settled a calm dignity and the man stood like a statue.

"White!" Remington repeated, his voice like a harp under a fathom of water. "Where?"

With a movement quick as light Ballymair whipped out his automatic and raised it, pointing straight at Remington. Bleeker and I caught our breaths as his long forefinger curved over the trigger. But Remington never turned a hair, and his black eyes held the other's in an unwinking stare.

"*White!*" Ballymair said, gently, and he turned to the wall, half turned, his eyes swerving from Remington's face. We all knew, instinctively, that he was seeing clearly the tall, gaunt form of Abraham Lincoln, ghostly in his sight, staring at him. Then he spoke again, raising his left hand in a stiff military salute and his voice was clear—proud.

"*White—through!*" With the words he whipped the gun around, turned it squarely to his own heart and jerked the trigger. For a moment he swayed, his head high, as we others crouched motionless in our seats; then he fell forward on his face.

"By God—I don't know! He was white somewhere!" Remington dropped into his chair like a wet rag and covered his face with his hands.

GOD knows how long we all sat tense and still, yet under the spell of Remington's rolling voice, stunned by the reaction it had worked upon Ballymair—knowing that was exactly what Remington had planned. Then Straub rose slowly to his feet, meticulously keeping his eyes from the dead Ballymair, and spoke in a queerly hushed tone:

"My God, man, but you can talk!

Come on, let's get out of here! Let's make time, light the fuse and get away as fast as God'll let us!" He turned toward the steel door, took a key from his pocket and opened it, and we three rose and forced our legs to follow him. In the hall beyond he took some candles from a box in a cupboard and handed one to each of us. "Here, light these. It's dark as a pocket in these tunnels."

Stumbling, because our muscles were not yet co-ordinated to our wills, we walked at his heels, down a long labyrinth of tunnels, and swerved off sharply at last in one that turned to the right. It ended at last in a big slab of stone laid against a queer-looking lever. The doctor seized the lever, thrust a key in a lock at the base of it, turned the key and jerked the lever down. The slab swung aside and we all stepped out into the clean air, and the sunshine of broad day.

"Now I'll light the fuse, and we'll hustle." Straub walked off a few feet to where the black length of a thick fuse protruded from under a rock. "It runs through another old tunnel, a narrow one. I had to crawl on my belly to pull it through. Ballymair couldn't get in at all. Well, here goes."

He knelt and applied his candle flame to the fuse. It caught, sputtered and hissed like a snake.

As one man we turned and began a rapid trot down and across the mountainside.

Fifty feet away Straub gave a yell and leaped back toward the tunnel through which we had emerged.

"My check! That check for two million! He's got it in his pocket with a letter waiving identification! You three go ahead. I know the way perfectly. I can beat that fuse before it reaches the dynamite. We can't get to it to cut it. I'll be right out!"

"Come back here!" Remington yelled after him. "It's too late! Come back here!"

But Straub ignored him, mad with the thought of the check in Ballymair's pocket. He sped across the intervening space and darted into the mouth of the hole in the mountainside.

"Come on," Remington commanded. "He'll have to take care of himself. He was nearly as bad as Ballymair, anyway. Shall I give you a lift, Bleeker?"

Bleeker shook his head and broke into a shambling run. Now and then we glanced back to see if Straub was coming, but he didn't again appear. Then suddenly the mountain seemed to shake and heave beneath our feet, and the whole side of it broke off and slithered down. The earth pitched and boiled, and the huge green block of trees and ivy surrounding the "box" pitched in and disappeared, like a head of cabbage swirling to the bottom in a kettle of boiling water. The concussion threw us all flat, earth and rocks falling around in a dusty shower, and when we again struggled to our feet there was left only a great raw wound in the mountain, and the trees about us stood straight to the sky as though nothing had happened beyond the orderly course of every day.

And you wonder why Remington and Bleeker and I are "queer!" You wonder why we always stick together, and why we've grown so silent. Well, I could show you a big scar on a mountainside that looks more like the remains of a landslide than anything else. And Remington could show you where to dig to find a pile of human bones. And Bleeker could show you some patches of black skin on his thighs. And we could tell you the whole thing over and over again—but you wouldn't believe. So we don't say anything.