

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 28

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

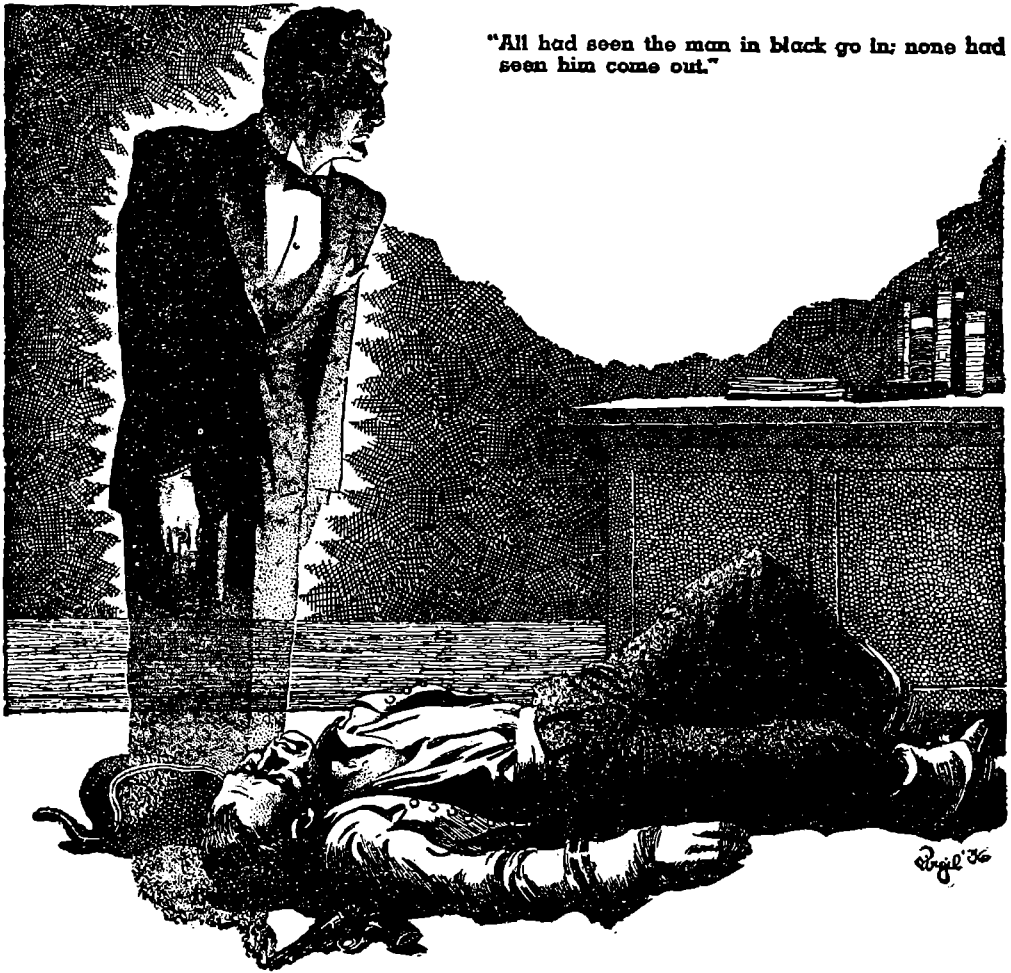
NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"All had seen the man in black go in; none had seen him come out."

# The Man in Black

By PAUL ERNST

*A vivid weird tale about a masquerade ball, and a grim figure clad in formal black, who mingled with the dancers but did not dance*

**T**HERE is a feeling of anonymity about a masquerade ball that leads to license. Your face is covered. No one knows who you are. You feel that you can do as you please because

your identity is hidden away. The fact that unmasking time is always just a short period ahead is forgotten.

This feeling, plus the fact that the friends of Rex Carr were men and wo-

men who weren't too prudish anyhow, was turning the masquerade party at Carr's recently acquired home into something approaching an orgy.

An air of feverish gayety prevailed. Men in colorful costumes, with masks making their faces unrecognizable, were a little drunk and more than a little indiscreet. Women in costumes designed to enhance the perfection of their bodies laughed shrilly at advances they might normally have repulsed. Cheeks were stained with hectic red, and talk was loud and incessant.

But near the French doors leading out onto the terrace there were two, a man and a girl, whose faces were pale and whose voices were low and strained.

The girl was tall, slender but mature in figure. She was dressed in a pirate's costume whose slashed breeches and torn silk blouse resulted in ivory revelations. She might as well not have been masked. Her hair, the color of bright new copper, was the kind not one woman in a hundred thousand possesses. It labeled her at once as Ruth Dana, daughter of Ralph Dana, an independent coal mine owner,

The man with her was in a tramp's tatters that could not destroy an impression of innate immaculateness. He was a head taller than Ruth Dana, though she was a tall girl; and had the rangy, wiry lines of a thoroughbred animal—which he was. For this was Mattson Danforth, whose family had been well bred and wealthy when Indians still roamed in Massachusetts.

Ruth Dana shivered suddenly, though the breeze coming in the French doors was warm.

"I've got the horrors, Matt," she said. Her voice was low, throaty, musical.

"I'd imagine you would have," nodded the man.

The black mask over his eyes and the high bridge of his nose accentuated the

pallor of his face. He was plainly under a terrific strain.

"If I were a girl, and were here in Rex Carr's house in the circumstances under which you're here, I'd have the horrors too," he said.

"It's not altogether that," Ruth replied. "I'm trying not to think of that any more than I can help. It's something else. There's something dreadful about this house, Matt."

"There's something obscene about giving a masquerade ball in it so soon," snapped Mattson Danforth. "Rex Carr is a murderer, dancing on Hugh Cunningham's grave."

With fingers that shook a little, Ruth put lipstick on lips that were all too pallid.

"Everybody knows Carr got this house, and all Cunningham's other possessions, through a business swindle that was as crooked as it was legal. Carr double-crossed Cunningham, who trusted him implicitly. He stripped Cunningham to his shirt, and laughed as he did it. Then Hugh killed himself, blew his brains out. And I hear Carr laughed again when he heard that, and said that a man as trusting as Cunningham ought not to run around loose anyhow. And now Carr has the brass to give a drunken party in Hugh's house less than a month after Hugh's death."

"He'll hear you," said Ruth, biting her lip.

"I hope he does. But he wouldn't be hearing anything new. He knows how I feel about the affair. And he certainly must know how I feel—about him and you."

FOR an instant the iron self-restraint Danforth was imposing on himself almost cracked.

"It's almost impossible to believe the situation," he said. "It's the kind of

thing you see on the stage or read in the old novels—never the kind of thing you expect to happen. A man with the soul of a pirate, having grabbed everything else he wanted by sheer force, now sets out to grab a wife. He sees you, maneuvers your father into a position of business dependence before he ever meets you—then says you'll marry him or see your father ruined as Hugh Cunningham was ruined. It's fantastic."

"But it seems to be true," said Ruth, gazing out at the terrace.

"Yes," said Danforth, "it—seems to be—true."

Sweat was beading his forehead above the mask, but his lips smiled as generations of breeding clamped down on his suffering.

"You haven't changed your mind about my killing him?" he said, lighting a cigarette with thin, steely fingers that did not shake.

Ruth shook her head, hand at her throat. "For God's sake——"

"I won't, I guess," said Danforth. "We talked it over pretty thoroughly, and it wouldn't be a practical solution. I'd only drag us all through the papers, and get myself electrocuted or put behind bars for life, and you'd be even worse off than you'll be as Carr's wife—if that's possible——"

He stopped, and stared. Ruth's gaze followed his. He was looking at a man in a plain black suit whose only concession to the spirit of the masquerade was the standard mask worn over the upper half of his face. The lower part of his countenance was bluish, as though he were on the edge of needing a shave.

"Who's that?" said Danforth. "I've been watching him all evening. He seems to be alone, though Carr never invites any but couples, and as far as I can see he hasn't said a word to a soul in the hour he has been here."

Ruth shook her bright-copper head. "I haven't the faintest idea. We can find out at twelve when we all unmask. Shall we dance?"

"Join Carr in dancing on Hugh Cunningham's grave?" said Danforth. "I'd rather not. Come out to the terrace with me, darling. There's much to say and not much time to say it in. For I'll never dare to see you after you're—married to Carr. If I did, they'd be holding the electrocution party after all."

The mask hid the drops that welled from Ruth's eyes and spilled over her long lashes as she walked out onto the terrace with him.

AT THE entrance between reception hall and library, Rex Carr, host of the party, stood. He was watching a silent, tall figure dressed in a plain black business suit. He frowned a little, and beckoned arrogantly to his butler, who was hurrying toward the library with a great tray of drinks.

The man came up to him, obedience in his stooped body, hate in his faded blue eyes.

"Parke," said Carr, nodding toward the black-clad figure, "who the devil is that?"

"I don't know, sir," said the butler.

"Oh, you don't!" Carr's voice was loud enough for several people near by to hear. "Well, what do you think you're paid for—to let strangers crash my parties?"

"You looked over the invitations yourself as they were presented at the door, sir," said the butler expressionlessly.

"But I can't be out watching the garden hedge, or the front gate, can I?" rasped Carr. "I don't like people here I can't recognize."

"But there must be many here you can't recognize with masks on, sir," the man pointed out the obvious.

Carr's muddy brown eyes glared redly through the eye-holes of his mask.

"When I want your ideas I'll ask for them, Parke! I've a damn good notion to fire you."

He stopped, and slowly a smile spread over his face. It was not a pleasant smile.

"But you'd like to be fired, wouldn't you, Parke?"

"Yes, sir," said Parke.

"You hate me, and hate working for me, don't you?"

The man's knuckles whitened over the edge of the tray he was holding.

"Yes, sir," he said expressionlessly.

"But you wouldn't care to quit or give me poor service, would you, Parke?" Carr said almost affably. "Not as long as I hold the mortgage on the little apartment building that was to support you and your wife in your old age—and as long as you are four payments behind!"

Carr clasped his hands behind his back. It was an incongruous position. He was clad in pirate's rig, too. But the posture was hardly that of a pirate, nor was his pudgy body.

"You get the best service out of people whose throat you can cut at any time," he said genially. "It's a lesson I learned early. If you want something, get the whip hand over the man who owns it or something else he holds equally valuable. Then squeeze. The results are excellent. . . ."

His mock geniality faded.

"You find out who the hell that man in black is," he ordered. "He looks like an undertaker. Then tell Miss Dana I want to speak to her."

"Here, sir?" said the butler.

"No, in the small den."

Carr walked across the hall from the library, and toward the rear of the house. A door was there, closed. Carr took out a key and unlocked it. He walked into the ten-by-ten, book-lined den in which

Hugh Cunningham had spent much of his leisure time; in which, indeed, he had shot himself when he realized that every dollar he owned was now Carr's.

But Carr didn't mind that. He was not a nervous man. He wanted a room in which to talk to Ruth Dana alone.

He closed the door behind him, and strode to the mantel above the tiny fireplace. There was a picture there, a picture of Cunningham.

Carr stared at it with narrowed eyes. The picture was that of a man of forty or so, with a kindly, not very rugged face. The artist might have made the face look stronger; but he had obviously been commissioned to paint Cunningham as he was and not as he ought to be. There was even a mole the size of a dime on the jaw of the pictured face, just as there had been a mole on Cunningham's face in life.

"I'll have to take you down, old man," Carr muttered, with a careless shrug. "You don't belong here any more—"

He turned quickly as he heard the door open. Then he smiled as ingratiatingly as he could.

Ruth Dana stood on the threshold, bright-copper hair like a banner in the comparative dimness of the den.

"You wanted to see me?" she said, in a dead, dull voice.

"Yes," said Carr briskly. "Come in. Come in. Close the door behind you. Tightly. That's it. It locks when it's closed tightly. And we don't want anyone interrupting us, do we?"

Ruth did not reply. Carr hurried over the implications of her silence.

"You look charming in that pirate's costume, my dear. I asked you to wear it to match my own costume, as you can see. Mr. and Mrs. Pirate!" He laughed breezily. "But what I called you—asked you, I mean—here to talk about was that

very thing. I'd like to announce our marriage date tonight, if I may."

"You'd announce it whether you may or not, wouldn't you?" said Ruth.

"Now, now, I'm not as impulsive as all that."

"Announce it tonight, or any other time," Ruth shrugged. "We might as well get it over with quickly."

"That's not a very nice tone of voice to use," said Carr plaintively.

"It's the only tone you'll ever hear from me," Ruth said quietly. "You're making me marry you to save my father. You're to give me as a wedding present the lien that you own on his mine. Business, Mr. Carr. Business. I'm sure business men don't care about such things as tones of voice."

"By God," Carr said thickly, "I've a notion to squeeze your father till you sing another tune. But I won't. I'll take you, my dear, on your own terms. But—I'll take you! Use any tone of voice you please—now. You'll learn a different one later. . . ."

CARR'S voice trailed off to silence. He stared over Ruth's shoulder, toward the doorway. So intent was his stare that she turned too, involuntarily, to see what he was looking at.

There was a man in the open doorway. He was tall, dressed in black. His hand on the edge of the opened door was made to seem waxen, white, by a large black seal ring he wore on the middle finger.

"Who . . . who are you?" stammered Carr, so enraged he could not talk straight. "And what the devil are you doing in here?"

The man on the threshold said nothing. He stared at Carr. At least his face was turned that way; the light was so dim in the den that his eyes could not be seen. The eyeholes of his mask seemed to be blank, black pockets.

"Answer me!" snapped Carr. "Who are you? And how did you get in here? That door was locked."

The man walked slowly toward Carr. Ruth shuddered, for what reason she knew not. The figure in the black suit stopped beside Carr at the mantel.

His left hand, with the black ring on it, went out. His forefinger touched a raised spot in the scrollwork of the mantel.

Carr's right hand was raised to clutch the man by the shoulder. But his hand never descended. He gasped, and stared with bulging eyes at the mantel.

At the touch of the man's finger, a concealed drawer had slid out. In the drawer was a gun—a .38 automatic. The man picked up the gun.

"For God's sake," babbled Carr, "who are you? Are you going to shoot—"

The man acted as though he had not heard. He walked from the fireplace to the flat-topped desk near by, and laid the automatic on the desk blotter. Then he walked from the room.

It was as he turned that Carr's face, pale with fright, really went white. For as he turned, the dim light of the small den showed a disfiguration on the left side of his jaw: a mole the size of a dime.

"Do you . . . do you know who he was?" Carr gasped.

Ruth stared deep into his eyes. Her own eyes were wide with a fear that went beyond hysteria.

"I—don't—know," she whispered. "That ring! I—"

She stopped. Carr grasped her bare shoulder.

"Well? Well? What about the ring?"

"I've seen only one ring like that in my life—a big, black seal ring made of jet. It belonged to—Hugh Cunningham."

Carr's breath escaped explosively from his lungs.

"Well, that means some relative of Cunningham's must have sneaked in here tonight—somebody who knows this house well enough to work that secret compartment, and to whom Cunningham left his personal effects——"

"Hugh had no near relatives," said Ruth, her voice strained and brittle. "As for the ring—he was buried with it on his hand."

Carr's fingers left prints in Ruth's white shoulder.

"Good God! Do you know what you're saying? You're intimating that that man in black was——"

He swallowed convulsively, and ran to the door. It was locked, and he had to get out his key to open it. He jerked it open with trembling hands. Parke was near the door, in the hall. A dozen feet away was the man in black, walking toward the front of the house.

"Parke," Carr called. "That man not in costume—in the black suit—get him!"

"Yes, sir," said Parke. "And then what, sir?"

"Put him out!" rasped Carr, his voice shaking. "No . . . wait! First take his mask off."

"Very good, sir," said Parke.

He started toward the man in black, now at the library entrance with his back turned to the two.

"*Wait!*" shrilled Carr.

Parke turned.

"I——" faltered Carr. "I'm not enough interested in him to care who he is. Don't take his mask off. I don't want to see his face. Just show him out."

"Yes, sir," said Parke.

But when he turned back down the hall, the man in black was gone.

Carr went back into the small den. First he stared at the gun the man in black had wordlessly left on the desk; then he gazed at the portrait of the man

who had blown his brains out here before this fireplace. He gazed longest at the mole, the size of a dime, on the pictured jaw. Then, with a defiant half-sneer, he poured himself a large drink.

"I'm getting soft-headed," he muttered. "To think even for a minute——"

He poured another drink and downed that, too.

AT THE French doors Danforth started out to the terrace, then stepped aside just in time to avoid being bumped into by a man running in.

"What the deuce, Gray!" Danforth said. "You're in quite a hurry——"

He broke off as he saw the pallor on Gray's face. Gray, a stout man with a color that was normally high, stared at him out of an ashy countenance.

"My God, I've just had a start!" he panted. "A man in a black suit—out there in the garden——"

"What about him?" said Danforth.

"The way he was acting! I was out near the hedge, just strolling. I saw this figure ahead of me. A man in dark clothes. At first I thought he was a trespasser, because he isn't in costume. Then I saw the mask, and started to go up to him. But I stopped when I saw the strange way he was acting. Or, rather, the *familiar* way he was acting! He was walking up to trees and sort of patting them, and staring around with his hands in his pockets, and once I saw him stoop and pick up a bit of paper that was littering the lawn."

"Well?" Danforth said.

"Well—he was acting as if he owned this place. Or as if he *had* owned it at one time."

"I don't get you," said Danforth.

Gray looked at him with eyes that protruded slightly from his chubby face.

"Matt, he was acting as I've seen Hugh Cunningham act a hundred times around

*here!* You have, too. You've seen Hugh walk up to a tree and pat it as if it was a live thing that he loved. You've seen him stare around with his hands in his pockets, and take deep breaths, as if he couldn't get enough of the air of the place he owned. You've seen how fussy he was about cigar butts or bits of paper on his lawn."

Danforth shook his head a little.

"Watch your drinks, Gray. You're taking too much aboard. The dead don't walk."

"I . . . of course not." Gray mopped at his forehead. "But it gave me a jolt for a minute. Who do you suppose the man is?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Danforth. "But it certainly isn't—well, Hugh lies in his grave with the entire upper half of his face blown away."

"Yes, yes, I know," sighed Gray. "But I wish I knew who. . . . In spite of the masks, most of us have an idea who most of the rest are. But I haven't the faintest notion who the man in black——"

Danforth saw Ruth across the floor from him. He left Gray and walked toward her. Her face was even paler than it had been before.

GRAY'S quandary about the man in black was becoming a general one, Danforth discovered as he crossed the floor. He passed three groups who were talking of him.

"I've seen a mole on someone's jaw like the mole on his," he heard a woman say. "I can't quite remember who——"

"Maybe he's a private detective," a man said. "But I wish he wouldn't tip-toe around as he does. He gives me the creeps. At one moment he's nowhere in sight; at the next he's at your elbow, staring around as if he owned the place."

Another, almost as pale as Gray, echoed Gray's sentiments,

"I'd have sworn, if I didn't know he was six feet underground, that that was Hugh Cunningham——"

Danforth got to Ruth. He caught her hand in his, then released it as she stared at him without seeming to see him. There was horror in her eyes. Then they focussed on him.

"Matt," she said in a low tone, "do you believe in ghosts?"

"Don't you start in on the man in black, too," Danforth began. Then he stopped. Her face was frightening in its pallor.

"So others have wondered about him!" she said. "At least I'm not the only one. . . . He came into the small den while Rex and I were in it. The room where—Hugh shot himself. He opened a secret drawer in the mantel and took out a gun. You remember everyone wondered where Hugh had got the gun he shot himself with? Well, now I know. From the concealed drawer. He must have had a pair of them there."

"Ruth, darling, you're overwrought——"

"Matt," Ruth interrupted quietly, "who else on earth but Hugh Cunningham would have known about the secret drawer? And who else would have taken out a gun, staring significantly at Rex Carr all the time, and have laid it on the desk as if bidding him to use it?"

"Did the man in black do that?" exclaimed Danforth.

"He did. Now, I'd like to know—*who is he?*"

Danforth looked at his watch. "We'll know in a few minutes. We're to unmask at twelve. And it's nearly that now. But you'll find that the man in black is merely some acquaintance of Carr's that none of us have met before."

"Rex doesn't know who he is himself!" said Ruth. "He——"

She stopped. The figure of their host



had appeared in the doorway. He swayed uncertainly, a pudgy man in pirate's costume who was very, very drunk.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said thickly, "I have an announcement to make. It concerns a certain charming young lady here tonight, and myself."

The rest turned to face him. Conversation died.

"How did he get so drunk so quickly?" whispered Danforth to Ruth.

She only shook her head and stared wide-eyed at Carr, who went tipsily on:

"But first, before the announcement, there are two things that must happen. The first is—unmasking. In a moment, ladies and gentlemen, all will take off their masks—and you can see who has been making love to who. The second is——" He stared unsteadily around. "There's a man in a black suit in the house somewhere that I want to ask some questions of!" His jaw went out truculently. "He's the second thing that happens before the announcement. The rest of you will unmask in here. The man in black will come into my den with me, and unmask there—before I throw him out of the house. He's been a—nuisance!"

Carr glared at those in the room as if daring them to take exception to anything he had said. Nobody spoke.

"Where's the man in black?" he said loudly.

All glanced at one another. There were no hectically flushed cheeks now. Every man and woman in the house had seen and remarked on the man in black who had talked to no one, seemed to have come with no one, and was a sable mystery. Few had known Hugh Cunningham well enough to know of the black seal ring, but practically all of them knew of the mole on his jaw, and had remarked on the mole on the face of this man whom nobody knew.

"Where is he?" repeated Carr belligerently. "If anyone knows, let him speak up!"

Ruth shivered.

"If that *was* Hugh, in black, and Rex got him into the den and . . . and had him unmask——"

Danforth grinned bleakly. "The mask would just about cover the damage his bullet did to his face," he said. "I imagine it would be far from a nice sight. But of course——"

Carr turned. The doorway he was standing in led to the hall. All in the big front room saw him glare down the hall toward the rear of the house. All heard him bellow: "You, there! You in the black! I want to see you. This is a masquerade party, but that doesn't mean that some practical joker can come here with a black ring on his finger and a fake mole on his jaw and masquerade as—as someone else."

CARR turned and hurried down the hall. The rest went to the door.

All saw the back of the man in black—saw Carr open the door of the small den.

"All right," Carr called back. "Everybody take off his mask. I'll join you as soon as I see who this——"

The door closed behind him. He had entered the small den with the man in black walking in front of him.

For a moment the crowd stood in silence. Then a man let out an explosive sigh.

"I don't blame Carr for getting drunk before he took on a job like that," he said. "Whoever the man in black is, he just came here to get Carr's goat. Of course! What else could it be? And if I was Carr, under the circumstances, he'd have gotten mine. Well, everybody, how about the masks?"

All unmasked. A few had made love

to the wrong people and were confused, exasperated or amused according to temperament. But exclamations were perfunctory. Everyone was too conscious of the two in the den to concentrate on much else.

Carr—and the man in black! The man who at first, because of his plain clothes, had been thought not to be in costume at all; but who now, in the light of the evening's developments, could be seen to have worn the subtlest masquerade of any!

Danforth clutched Ruth's hand.

"Something dreadful is going to happen," she whispered to him. Her hand was icy cold. "I can feel it——"

"It'll happen, all right, if I don't leave here pretty soon," said Danforth, eyes bleak. "I can feel that electrocution party drawing nearer all the time. If only I could scrape another hundred thousand from the Danforth coffers so that we could tell Carr where to go——"

A scream ripped out. As though a man's very soul were escaping in horrified sound from his palsied lips, it rang through the house. And all turned again toward the door of the little room down the hall. For the scream had been Carr's; and it had come from the den.

Again the scream sounded, freezing the nerves. Then the frantic cry: "No, no, for God's sake! Not any more! Put the mask back on——"

Danforth was among the first to reach the door. He battered at it, found it locked.

"Carr! Carr—what's wrong?"

That was Gray shouting. But there was no answer. It was as though the man in the den could not hear—though he must have heard through the comparatively thin door.

"No!" Carr's shriek came again. "I can't stand it! Get back to Hell where you belong——"

Then silence. Black, thick silence, in which the men outside stared at one another with wide, dazed eyes.

"Carr!" Gray called again, in a voice that was hoarse with horror.

And then it came. The sound of a single shot, hideously muffled.

"The man in black—he shot Carr!" babbled Gray. "Get him—hold him for the police——"

They broke the door down.

CARR lay before the mantel with his dead face turned up toward the portrait of Hugh Cunningham. He lay on his back, which was fortunate, because he had put the muzzle of the automatic in his mouth before pulling the trigger. His face was all right, but the back of his head was better hidden.

He was alone in the den.

"The man in black——" faltered Gray, staring around.

The hall door was the only entrance into the room. All had seen the man in black go in. None had seen him come out. But he was not in the room now.

Danforth stared for a long time, first at the portrait of Cunningham, with the mole on its jaw, then at Carr's dead face. Then he left the room of death.

Ruth came to him, trembling, eyes asking a terrified question.

Danforth nodded. "Shot himself. And I'm glad, darling. You hear? Glad!"

"The—the man in black?" whispered Ruth.

Danforth stared back into the den, at the ring of white-faced men around the corpse.

"I think," he said, "we'd better just forget about him when we're questioned by the police, and others. Carr killed himself in a drunken fit of remorse. That's a statement that will be easier to explain."