

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, Editor

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Though the zoo-keeper Cheever was miles away, his enemies complained of deadly snakes in their homes at midnight. The answer lay in the question of whether Cheever was merely a man who looked like a snake—or actually a snake who looked like a man?



# The POISONOUS SOUL

Then he would creep like a bright serpent, till around my neck  
While I was sleeping he would twine:  
I squeezed his poisonous soul.

—William Blake

**I** HAD IMAGINED I saw that bushmaster attacking—from out of the mirror. In the greatest alarm, I turned my head quickly. There was nothing behind me. But when my gaze reverted to the mirror, the snake was still there, poised to strike. Then, slowly, it vanished. And I thought that it must have been an illusion of some sort, induced by Cheever's vivid description.



Cheever? Ah, but I keep forgetting. I haven't told you of him yet. I'm still a little rocky. I'm not young any more, and the police examination was pretty rough. Some people (though I've never been one of them myself) claim that the bite of the Gaboon Viper has that effect. And there are others, of course, who think I'm not quite reliable because I took the whole matter up with certain students of magic and religion.

My answer to that is that the police and the psychiatrists, too, came to a dead end and had to let me go. True, my career is wrecked and I am a lonely man. I no longer pursue a serene life among congenial friends of science. Their raised eyes and diffi-

dent manner, after tragedy marched through the ranks of our society, made it incumbent upon me to resign.

Yet this does not alter the fact that nobody could explain the torn fingernails of that desperate man who was trying to get in. It was either he—or I.

Too, there was Matty Riley's story.

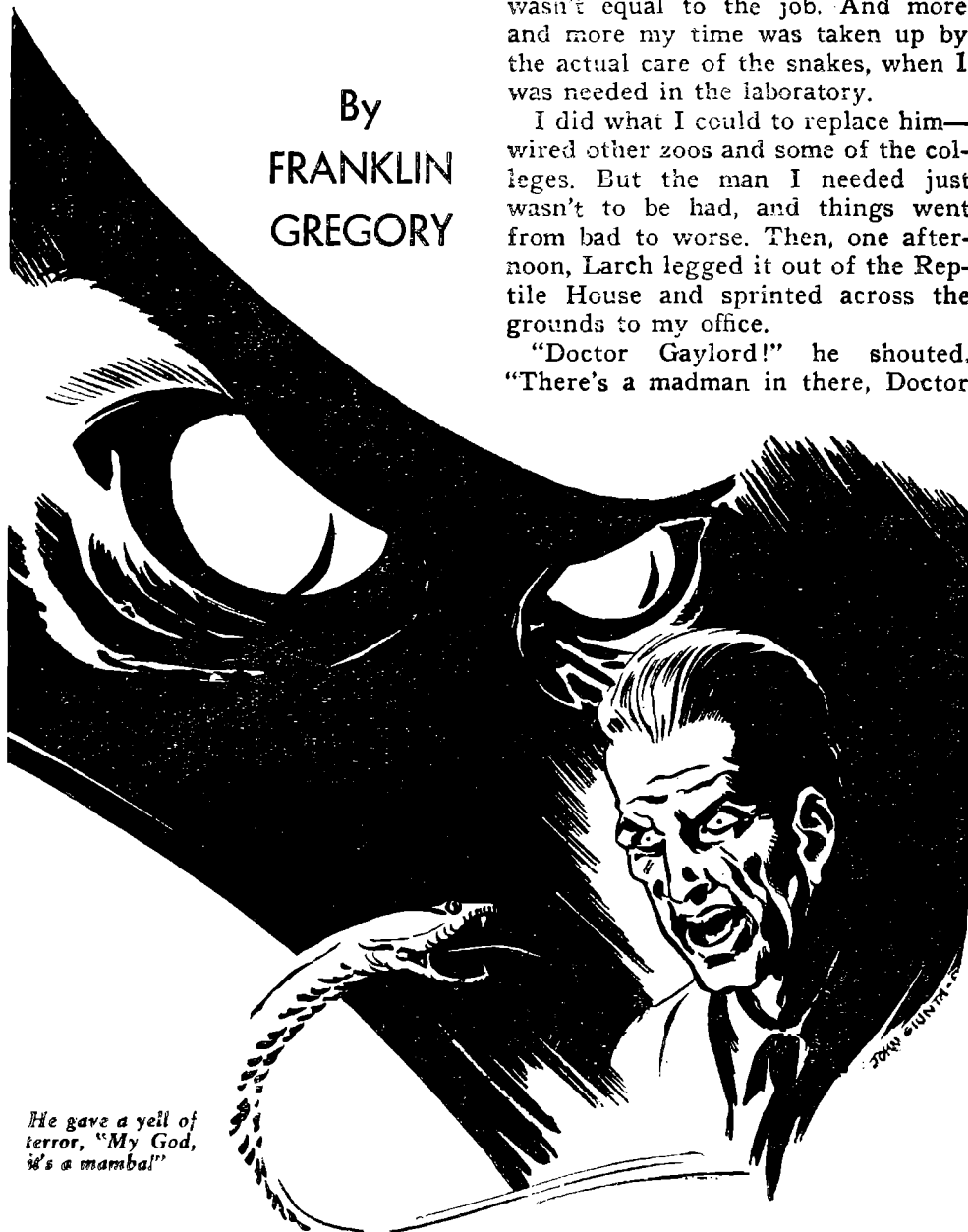
By  
FRANKLIN  
GREGORY

He testified precisely to what he saw. And they couldn't shake him, either.

There'd been the devil to pay all summer in the Reptile House. Haines, the regular keeper, had taken to drink and managed to get himself mauled by the Indian python. I discharged him, naturally, and put his assistant, Bill Larch, in his place. But Larch wasn't equal to the job. And more and more my time was taken up by the actual care of the snakes, when I was needed in the laboratory.

I did what I could to replace him—wired other zoos and some of the colleges. But the man I needed just wasn't to be had, and things went from bad to worse. Then, one afternoon, Larch legged it out of the Reptile House and sprinted across the grounds to my office.

"Doctor Gaylord!" he shouted. "There's a madman in there, Doctor



*He gave a yell of terror, "My God, it's a mamba!"*

Gaylord!" He was panting and his eyes were bulging. "He's got one of them new mambas and he's playing with it, Doctor. Playing, mind ya!"

**M**AMBA! My heart skipped. *Den-draspis angusticeps*, you know—the most dreaded snake in Africa! They were recent arrivals—the only six in the whole country. I'll not have you think I didn't hurry after Larch. And when we got there, here were the visitors milling about in front of the main entrance to the Reptile House. They'd gotten out fast, it seemed, and they were standing at a pretty safe distance. They were talking excitedly, and one woman was in a dead faint and a man was bending over her, rubbing her wrists.

I walked up to the door, and I didn't like it too much. Still, it was my responsibility. So I went in—cautiously, my eyes all which ways. And there he was, and there was the snake.

He was a tall, lithe, vaguely familiar young man. He was standing between the two main rows of glass habitat cages, and he had that slender, green demon draped gracefully about his neck. I stood my distance, and stared. When my voice came at last, I tried to keep it low so as not to excite the snake.

"Man! Man!" I said. "Watch what you're doing!"

He looked at me, and so did the mamba. And then I noticed that his hand was stroking the mamba's neck, as if to soothe it.

"He'll kill you!" I warned. And in spite of myself, my voice rose.

"I don't think so," he said. He spoke with a slight lisp, and he was smiling. "I know how to handle them," he said.

It's strange the irrelevant things a man will notice even in a tight situation. I couldn't help seeing that the fellow was uncommonly ugly. And I couldn't help still thinking he was somehow familiar. Then I noticed

that one of the glass observation doors, which he normally kept locked, was open a crack.

"How'd that happen?" I asked.

The man shrugged his thin shoulders, and the mamba glided down along one arm, its pale head weaving, its forked tongue darting in and out swiftly.

"I really couldn't say, sir," he replied. "It was that way when I came along and this fellow was down on the floor and I picked him up."

There was something not quite convincing in his tone. But at the moment I was too upset to notice. Suddenly I remembered him. I said: "I know you now. You used to hang around here quite a bit some years ago. Can you put him back?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then for God's sake, do!" I exclaimed.

Later, over a cigarette in my office, this singular young man told me: "I can't quite explain it, sir. Snakes have always seemed fond of me—and I, of them. Then, out there in India and Africa, I learned a few tricks."

He didn't say what else he'd learned. But that's how I came to hire Aaron Cheever as my new head keeper of the Reptile House.

**I** SUFFER from no false modesty. I've had my honors from the scientific societies of the world; I've written my books and my treatises for the journals. And it's been said of me—and who am I to deny it?—that in the past two generations I stand among the half dozen great zoologists. Yet I would forego all this for a sound knowledge of human psychology.

It was my lack in this field, you understand, that caused me to hire Aaron Cheever. Too much I'd been the recluse, the scholar, deep in my researches; more at home, more relaxed with fauna than with homo sapiens. When I did meet with other men, it was to discuss our mutual

specialty. I had closed the door on the outside world.

Frankly, then, I'm justifying myself. Just as I justify myself when I say that at first I was too busy to notice anything out of the way about my new keeper. A curator has enough to do satisfying the whims and fancies of a couple of thousand other specimens. Besides, I was trying to catch up with my research. And on top of that I was making preliminary plans for our next Brazilian expedition.

I do remember reporting at the next meeting of the board of trustees that the new man, Cheever, seemed to be taking hold first rate, and that the snakes had never been in better condition. Also, I mentioned his uncanny ability at handling them. But all in all, I let him pretty much alone. There was a reason for this: he was shy, diffident, uncommunicative. Almost, I might say, he was anti-social. He did not respond to my advances; nor, I learned from others, did he respond to theirs.

Privately, I couldn't help wondering how a man of Cheever's caliber could be satisfied with so modest a salary. He was from a good family, Philadelphia Quaker stock. He'd a degree from Penn. He'd a good war record. And he was independently wealthy.

It was only when Larch told me that Cheever didn't bother to wear goggles when handling the spitting cobras that I decided to speak to him about it. But I didn't. It was easier to let it slide.

Then, within three days, two things happened that returned my attention to him.

It was one of those dull, mid-week afternoons when few visitors were about that I dropped into the Reptile House. And there was Cheever, long and thin and slightly stooped, staring curiously into the habitat cage of the Gaboon Viper.

Ditmars, you recall, called it

"the world's most frightful-looking snake." I can say worse things about the species, from my own personal experience.

But there was Cheever, and for perhaps ten minutes he stood there, his hands clasped behind his back, peering speculatively at its thick yellow body and horny head. Speculatively, as if he were judging its points as one would judge the points of a thoroughbred horse. And with something of a horse trader's manner, too, as if he were trying to decide how sound of limb and wind the creature was—until I half expected he'd unlock the cage and open the viper's mouth to inspect its teeth. Then he moved on to the kraits and repeated the examination, as if mentally comparing the value of the one species to the other.

He turned at last, noticed my presence, nodded shortly and walked quickly away, as if embarrassed. I caught up with him. "I hear you spend quite a few of your evenings here," I remarked.

"Oh," he replied vaguely, "just doing some things I'd rather do myself than trust to Larch. And then I like to study them. Some of the specimens I don't know much about, and—well, I find it relaxing."

LATER THAT WEEK, as I myself left the laboratory just before midnight, I noticed the lights on in the Reptile House. I walked past the zebra stockade and approached the building from the west, letting myself in through the side wing that housed the keeper's office. No one was there, so I went on through a corridor that brought me out behind the python cages into the main exhibition hall.

I stopped in my tracks and my blood ran cold. Through the glass of the python cages and across the main hall I saw Cheever. He was gritting his teeth in pain, and at the same time

closing the door of one of the cases in the poisonous reptiles section.

I was too far away to observe which case it was. Nor did it occur to me at that moment to wonder. My immediate concern was the expression on Cheever's face.

Hastening around the python cases and into the open, I approached Cheever. He was nursing a small wound on his left wrist.

"Bitten?" I demanded.

Cheever glanced up, startled. "What? Oh, it's you, Doctor! You took me by surprise. No—no, I wasn't bitten. Merely a scratch, that's all."

"Not from a fang, then?"

"Oh, no—no. Just caught my wrist on a sharp edge."

I examined the wound closely. It was a very peculiar sort of scratch—X-like, each red line in the white flesh as clean as though neatly cut by a razor blade. Then I noticed on the concrete floor a small amount of blood; a smear of it on the glass door of the case, and in the cage itself a few blood flecks.

"Better dose it with iodine and bind it," I suggested. But Cheever merely shrugged. I was annoyed.

"You know, Aaron," I told him sharply, "you're going to get it one of these days with your damned casual way of handling these fellows. I'm warning you!"

He looked at me soberly. "You aren't dissatisfied with me, are you, sir?"

I glanced about. Never before had the specimens appeared in better shape. "Of course not," I replied. "It's for your own good I said it."

Cheever smiled. Even when he smiled he was ugly.

"They won't bite me," he said carelessly. As if his were a very special case.

Well—his was a very special case, as I learned late the next afternoon. It was near closing time, and there were no visitors about when I walked

under the stained-glass archway of the main entrance. I paused just inside to admire the new murals on the higher walls. A nightmare of the painter's art, they portrayed the great reptiles of the past—the brontosaurus, the triceratops, the pterodactyls and their ilk—cavorting in the ooze and jungle of the Mesozoic world.

WHAT a zoo I'd have (I thought) if I could round up a collection like that!

Suddenly my attention was pinned by an uncommon sound from the poisonous reptiles wing. I heard the electric buzzing of crotaline rattles; the restless murmur of serpentine movement, the hissing of the larger snakes.

Stepping across to that wing, I found Cheever standing in the center of the horseshoe of cages. And stabbing against their glass prisons was the head of every specimen on display.

"What's all this commotion about?" I asked.

Cheever turned. "It's been going on all day, sir. Every time I walk through."

"Are they angry?" I inquired anxiously.

"I don't think so, do you?"

I had the feeling that he knew more about it than he would admit. I examined the snakes, cage by cage, more closely.

"No," I replied. "They seem more curious than anything."

"It's what I think, too," Cheever said. "I've a feeling they recognize me—and, well, it's a sort of welcome."

I shook my head in wonder. "Strange," I said. "Some of them were just fed last night and should be sleeping it off."

Cheever suggested we leave. But as we reached the cages of the constrictors, even the sleepy-eyed pythons and anacondas raised their heads

to watch us pass. We paused to watch them. Cheever said thoughtfully:

"It's a strange thing, Doctor Gaylord. My mother told me once that she began dreaming of snakes about a year before I was born. She said the dreams kept up long after my birth."

I was puzzled; I didn't quite see what he was getting at. But I said: "Maybe she was frightened by one when she was a little girl, and the dreams cropped up from her subconscious years later."

"Possibly," Cheever agreed, "but I've often wondered if my interest in the breed wasn't prenatally determined by that?"

"Not a very scientific concept," I told him. But I was thinking of something else, that I hadn't before been able to put a finger on: the fellow's ugliness seemed to stem from a curious reptilian resemblance. There was the tall, slender, sinuous body; there was the undulant motion of the body; there was the triangular wedge-like head, broad at the top and tapering down to a heavy nose and wide mouth above a chin that was almost no chin at all.

Not a handsome specimen of the human male at all, though not bad for a South American pit viper, perhaps. And he had an odd trick, too, of compressing his lips and then sticking his tongue out so that just a narrow, red tip appeared. I don't believe I ever saw him actually open his mouth. And when he laughed, there was the merest parting of the lips; not enough to reveal the teeth.

Well, as I say, it was late in the day—and one can fancy strange things when one is tired. But I must have been staring at him, for he said: "And my looks, too."

"Eh?"

"Prenatally determined," Cheever explained.

I felt embarrassed. But he went on with a shrug, as if reading my mind

and at the same time not seeming to care: "I guess I do look something like a snake. If I do, I hope it's not one of the horned tribe. I'd rather have it on the side of *bothrops alternatus*—handsome devils, aren't they? Or the king cobra. There's phlegm for you, too."

"And intelligence," I observed.

WE HAD LEFT the main hall and returned to the keeper's office. I sat down in the swivel chair at the desk, beside a large mirror, and lit a cigar; and Cheever sat on the edge of the desk, one leg draped over a corner, facing me.

"Intelligence?" he repeated. "I'm reminded of some of the tales you hear in India. A lot of snake worship goes on out there."

I knew that, of course.

"Even today," he continued, "the Maharajah of Nagpur wears his turban to resemble a coiled snake and his crest's a cobra with a human face under the expanded hood. It's said the founder of the line was a cobra that took human form and married a Brahman's daughter. Strange, isn't it?"

I was thinking of what he'd told me about his mother's dreams.

"No more strange than the Athenian belief that their first king was half-man, half-reptile," I replied. "And they followed it up, too, by keeping a sacred snake on the Acropolis where they worshiped it as the dead king's soul."

The man's small eyes glittered. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Why is there so much occult belief concerning snakes?"

I suggested that it was because they were so little known and so greatly feared. And what you don't know, you respect," I said.

But Cheever denied this.

"No, I think rather it's because they're so smart," he insisted. "Take the way a copperhead plays 'possum. Or the way the bushmaster attacks,

deliberately edging toward you to bring its S-shaped loop into better position for the strike. Why, I've yet to meet a savage who doesn't believe that if you eat snake meat you'll acquire wisdom and knowledge. And when you come down to it, if you have that, what more can you want?"

He was right about the savage belief, and I was just about to concede the point when I saw Cheever staring into the mirror with fixed concentration. Involuntarily, I looked into the mirror, too.

"My God!" I cried. I felt sweat start from my forehead; I saw the blood drain from the reflection of my face. Then, as I've already told you, I turned quickly. And there was nothing behind me. Nothing at all. But when I turned back to the mirror, there was that bushmaster—looped, edging toward me, about to strike at me from out of the mirror . . . then slowly disappearing.

"Doctor! Are you ill?"

I stared at Cheever. Was there a false note of concern in his voice? Was there, lurking behind that mask of anxiety, a suggestion of evil calculation? Was there not the look, that I myself knew so well, of the scientist watching closely for the results of his experiments?

I had dropped my cigar on the desk, and now I picked it up with a trembling hand.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing at all, Aaron."

**N**OTHING? I could not sleep that night. Again and again as I turned restlessly in my bed, I saw the vision of that snake—now winding along the wall, now looping up over the footboard, now opening its terrible jaws. And again and again, in the background, I saw the studious expression of the experimenting scholar. An illusion, I kept telling myself. But when had illusion been so vividly retentive?

Nothing? Was it for nothing that my secretary, when I entered my office the next morning, glanced sharply at my haggard face and exclaimed: "Good Lord, Doctor! What ails you?"

"Bad night," I said briefly. And perhaps I spoke a bit aggressively. I had no wish to talk about it. It's bad enough when a man first gets the idea that he may be losing his mind.

Somehow, during the next few days, I managed to ignore for the most part that terrible experience. I had work to do—and work of a pleasant nature. Within two weeks our Pan-American Society of Zoology would hold its annual meeting in Philadelphia. And I, as program chairman, was busy on the final details.

I need not explain, of course, what this meant to me. I have already mentioned the serene life which I had until that time pursued among congenial scientific friends. My contacts were chiefly with men of my own calling; and in those contacts lay my greatest pleasure.

Our Zoological Gardens in Fairmount Park on the banks of the Schuylkill were to play an important role in this famous gathering. And you may well imagine how keenly I looked forward to entertaining the ablest biologists not only of our own hemisphere but of Europe.

There would be Stanwick, the famous South African herpetologist. And there'd be Mason, the California authority on animal behavior; and Stark, the bio-chemist; and Royce, the curator of mammals at the London Zoo; and Andre van der Henst, the garrulous toxicologist whose Brazilian research led to the discovery of that most important polyvalent antivenomous serum.

Nor will I ever forget gentle, white-haired David Lacey, whose almost mystical approach to the study of natural history puzzled the entire scientific world. Until some of the



more starchy members of the profession frowned upon him as a crackpot; though I myself always took delight in the adroit manner in which, in his scientific papers, he commingled the fables of the older times with the factual discoveries of the present. Much of my knowledge of animal lore I owe to him.

And there would be . . . but why go on? They were all men of great scientific brains.

And so the two weeks passed rapidly, what with my spending part of the time at the Zoo and the rest at the nearby University of Pennsylvania where the meetings were to be held. Gradually, my experience in the Reptile House became a dim memory; and I even considered the possibility of introducing Aaron Cheever to one forum as an example of what man could do with the reptilian order. I even went so far as to talk to him about it.

"I'm afraid that company is a bit too fast for me," Cheever replied with his odd hesitancy. Yet I couldn't help noting the gleam in his eyes. He added, and it was quite apparent that he eagerly awaited the convention: "But if you would let me meet some of the men . . . informally, of course."

Naturally, I agreed. And as a matter of fact I had him on hand the Sunday afternoon preceding the general sessions, first at my own home in Germantown where Dr. Stanwick and Professor Lacey were my house guests; and later, at the official reception that evening.

**T**HE RECEPTION was held in the Ritz, where most of the delegates, who were not house guests at the homes of one another of the local scientists, were quartered. I'll not soon forget how well young Cheever hit it off with many of those important men. Lacey, in particular.

Between those two—the one elderly and mystical, the other shy, diffident,

rather awkward—there seemed a natural and immediate bond of understanding. And I recall as we were leaving the hotel—Stanwick, Lacey, Cheever and myself—that I overheard Cheever quote a verse from William Blake:

"Mock on, mock on, Voltaire,  
Rousseau,  
Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain;  
You throw the dust against the wind  
And the wind blows it back  
again."

"By which you mean—?" asked Professor Lacey.

"My own interpretation," Cheever replied, "is that there's a world beyond the five senses we ordinarily know. That there *is* soul, that there *is* spirit, that there *is* life after death. And if this is so, is there not some link between that other life and this we know?"

"Spiritism?" suggested Dr. Stanwick, who had little truck with spiritual matters. Lacey, I noted, smiled with quiet amusement.

"No, I wasn't thinking of that," Cheever protested. "I was thinking of the possibility of you or I, using only the will or spirit with which we are endowed as a tool—a rake, let's say; or a fishing net—to cast out into the unknown and gather spiritual, or even intellectual, resources for our own present benefit."

Stanwick seemed not to understand. And I admit it was beyond my depth. But Lacey, whose subtlety of mind was famous, gasped slightly. Then he asked: "And what would be the limit of a power like that?"

Cheever replied eagerly: "Only our own imagination."

I didn't hear the rest of the conversation, if there was any rest. I was busy bundling them into my car, opening and closing doors, and getting in behind the wheel. A few minutes later I let Cheever off at Rit-

tenhouse Square in front of his apartment. But as I started up again, I noticed that he didn't go immediately toward the building's door but walked off toward a cigar store on the corner, in front of which a taxicab was parked.

I recite these things as they happened, with undue stress on nothing. I swung my car around the square, drove on one of the side streets to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, and followed the winding East River Drive six miles up to my Germantown residence. We went to bed, the three of us—Stanwick, Lacey and myself, in our separate rooms on the second floor—almost immediately.

It was some two hours later that I heard the scream!

It was a shrill scream of the most agonizing pain. The scream ended in a choking gasp; I heard a chair overturn. I heard the fumbling of a hand against the wall, followed by the sudden sharp click of an electric switch. Then—a yell of terror:

"My God! It's a mamba!"

By then I was out of bed, turning on my light. I threw open the door into the hall. There, standing just outside his own door, his mild blue eyes wide under their bushy white brows, stood Professor Lacey in his pajamas, the hall lamp lighting the amazement in his face. For an instant we faced each other. Then the door between us opened, and Dr. Stanwick lurched out and collapsed on the carpet. His glazing eyes stared at me in accusation. His voice groaned:

"What . . . are you doing with a mamba in the house?"

Even as we bent down beside him, a shudder coursed through his body; and the eyes lost their accusation in the glassiness of death.

Over that still form, Lacey and I gazed at each other. Then, quickly, Lacey glanced to my right, and my look followed. Out of the room from which Stanwick had just staggered a

long, slender, green length of serpent made its slow and easy way, its forked tongue darting in and out with ordinary reptilian curiosity.

It hesitated tentatively, as if only vaguely aware of our presence. The paralysis of terror, the knowledge of our exposed position (of our bare feet and our pajama-clad bodies), the fear of alarming the creature rooted us to our kneeling positions.

Again the thing began to move, and now it looped itself upon the body of the dead Stanwick. Suddenly, within inches of our horrified eyes, it vanished!

I HAVE no apologies for the fact that neither Lacey nor I ever disclosed to the police that we had seen the snake. To have stated what we saw would have classed us at once with lunatics; would have destroyed, moreover, our usefulness in the eventual solution of the mystery.

My own emotions were mixed. On the one side, I felt genuine relief that someone else now shared with me this reptilian vision. I now knew that there was no question of my sanity. Nevertheless, I was profoundly disturbed at not only the sheer horror of this tragedy but at its serpentine nature. Ultimately, I confided the details of my earlier terror with the bushmaster to David Lacey. But for the moment, both of us were content to rationalize our mutual experience—there in the lighted upper hallway of my home—as a result of suggestion induced by Dr. Stanwick's cry of "Mamba!"

And so we told the police only what we saw and heard up to the moment of Stanwick's death.

I cannot pretend to place the events of the next few hours in their proper order. There was the police surgeon, of course, and the coroner's deputy. There was the examination which disclosed two tiny incisions in Dr. Stanwick's back. There was the minute,

*(Continued on page 120)*

## THE POISONOUS SOUL

(Continued from page 40)

fruitless search of Stanwick's room for a venomous reptile; of the entire floor, the entire house, the entire grounds.

There was the arrival from the hotel of Andre van der Henst, there were the tests that he made, and his wooden-voiced pronouncement that indeed Dr. Stanwick had died of a powerful reptile venom.

"Iv der bide had been anywhere else," he said in his curious mixture of Dutch, Portuguese and English, "den he mighd have had der chance, senhores. But righd in der spinal cord. . . ."

And he explained volubly how the neurotoxin raced up to the medulla oblongata and destroyed the vasomotor system.

"As if the snake knew the type and power of its own poison and picked the exact spot for the purpose," David Lacey murmured thoughtfully.

There was common agreement that a man of Stanwick's standing as a herpetologist could not be wrong about a mamba. And van der Henst readily conceded from the tests he made that a mamba it might well have been.

"But there are only half a dozen mambas in the country just now!" I protested. "They came over to us in a recent shipment from Africa, and they're safe in the Reptile House this minute."

But was I so sure of that? the police asked.

And so, as the September dawn crept out of the cloud banks to the east, there was our fast, police-escorted ride down the miles of winding river to the Zoo. I led the way through the groves of trees to the darkened Reptile House.

You have seen snakes in their cages? You have seen how they en-

twine themselves about each other until they are a tangled mass of bodies until you can make out neither the tails of some nor the heads of others? And have you ever tried to count them?

One by one we separated the writhing bodies of those slim, green demons. With the utmost anxiety I counted them. One—two—three! Finally, we could find but five. My breath caught. Somewhere in the city was one of those creatures loose—the same that had killed John Stanwick? It remained for the less impatient van der Henst to discover the sixth mamba coiled behind the small trunk of a tree in a corner of the cage.

Here was enigma.

LACEY AND I were last to leave the Zoo. As we stepped into my car, parked near the service gate, Matty Riley, the watchman, approached. "And it's uncommon excitement we've had this night," he volunteered. "First the young Mr. Cheever on a late visit, and now yourselves."

Was he seeking or volunteering information? I glanced at Lacey, and I could read his thought: that only at midnight we had left Cheever off at Rittenhouse Square. Sharply I questioned Riley: "Did Mr. Cheever, perhaps, come and then go away and return and go away again?"

"Ah no, sir. 'Twas here he was throughout, from one till two, and myself with him all but five minutes or so. And even then—"

If he were about to say more, he didn't. I reflected: two in the morning, or a little before, was when Stanwick died. Which left nowhere near enough time for Cheever to make the trip from the Zoo to Germantown and

back with a snake. I wondered that I had even entertained the suspicion.

"He often works nights," I said, and shifted the car into gear.

I do not need to recall to you the lurid, screaming headlines that followed police announcement of Dr. Stanwick's death. In that tortuous fashion of mishandling truth with which the press habitually meets what it cannot understand, the papers led the public to believe that an entire army of poisonous snakes was loose upon the city. No account whatever was taken of the plain fact that we had accounted for each of our six African mambas. Nor did the press record that we had also accounted for every other venomous reptile in our care.

Still, the final result of this mendacious campaign was to focus that public attention upon me which eventually led to my ruin.

The effect of Dr. Stanwick's death upon the meeting of our society was, of course, most profound. With so many important delegates there from all parts of the world, there was naturally no deviation from the Monday schedule other than a short memorial service for the South African herpetologist. As program chairman, I even went so far to maintain a semblance of normalcy on Tuesday as to fill a vacancy in the Reptilian Forum created by the death of Stanwick, who had been scheduled to speak.

To accomplish this, I returned to a former idea: I chose Aaron Cheever. And I must say my choice was a happy one.

I had feared that his youth, his lisp and his awkward shyness, his lack of formal training in the sciences would militate against him. I was never so surprised in my life. Even Dr. Stanwick, celebrated as a fluent and lucid speaker, could not have done better.

Cheever's delivery had, to my amazement, much of Stanwick's flawless style. Speaking extemporaneous-

ly, with no trace of a lisp, he told first of certain experiences he had had with snakes in the African interior. From that he went on to a general discussion of the differences between some species of poisonous reptiles. And he concluded with some particularly perceptive observations on the Lamarckian theory of evolutionary mechanism—an accomplishment the more amazing because it was Stanwick's specialty.

It was almost as if Stanwick himself were speaking; and I even imagined I saw in Aaron Cheever the same mannerisms and heard the same tone of voice. Hitherto, I'd had no inkling of the depth of Cheever's learning; and I could only conclude that he had read much of Stanwick's writings.

I was proud of Cheever; and for the moment I forgot the horrible experience I had suffered in his presence in the Reptile House. But when I turned to David Lacey who sat beside me and nodded my approval in Cheever's direction, I found Lacey—the normally gentle Lacey—with his lower lip thrust out in both distaste and wonder. And with something of alarm in his eyes.

THAT WAS on Tuesday morning. That evening, with work to do in my office at the Zoo, I left Lacey to his own devices. I'd call for him at the Ritz, we agreed.

It was after 11 o'clock, perhaps, before I'd waded through a pile of papers that had collected while I was busy with convention matters. Leaving the Administration Building, I saw that a light was still on in the Reptile House. Realizing that it could be no other than Cheever, I walked across the grounds with the intention of congratulating him for his fine performance.

I approached that old Victorian building by the front entrance. And through the clear glass of the large

double doors a light fell on the concrete steps. I walked up the steps, reached out for the door handle and at the same time peered through the glass. What I saw froze my blood.

Aaron Cheever was squatting on his haunches on the floor in the manner of a Hindu fakir. His eyes were half closed, trance-like, and he was passing his hand before them as if seeing far-off things. Before him, as free as ever it had been in its jungle home, coiled a seven-foot Cascabel.

You know the Cascabel, that notorious Costa Rican rattlesnake so appropriately known to science as *crotalus terrificus*? Its tail projecting erectly from the center of its coil, its arched head was reared more than a foot from the ground in the spectacular tropical manner—poised to strike.

I stood paralyzed.

Suddenly I saw a few quick side flings of the rattle, I heard even through the closed doors the single harsh clicks of the rattle. Then, from its lateral loop level with Cheever's face, the snake struck.

"That fool!" I thought. And I was about to throw open the doors and spring forward to help when Cheever unconcernedly picked up the great snake and, a Sphinxian smile on his lips, thrust the creature back into its cage.

Shaken, I turned away. How I was able to drive to the hotel I'll never know. But when I reached it, Lacey, his face grave, was first to greet me . . . .

"Van der Henst," he said quietly, "has just died."

**I** CAN STILL see those blazing headlines announcing the second death by snake bite among our number. I can still hear the breathless voices of the radio newscasters. I can still vividly recall the awe with which each delegate received the ironic news that van der Henst, who had done

more than any living man to alleviate the suffering that accompanies snake bite, had himself died of a virulent poison.

But my sharpest impression is the appearance of van der Henst himself. His throat, head, chest and upper arms were swollen horribly. And in the neck were two incisions such as a large hypodermic needle might have made.

It was David Lacey and Stark, the bio-chemist, who found him—blind, paralyzed and dying of suffocation.

My own thinking was confused. But from Lacey's expression I could see that, concerned as he was for van der Henst, he was far more alarmed about something else—about something he did not wish to mention in the presence either of Stark or the others who were now crowded in the room. It was only after removal of the body that he drew me aside.

"I saw it," he said quietly.

I looked at him, stupidly I fear.

"A big, shadowy thing coiled in the corner," he said.

My thoughts at once reverted to the scene I had witnessed in the Reptile House. But before I could speak, Lacey went on: "It was a loathsome, insubstantial thing and I couldn't quite make it out."

"Stark saw it?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, though he looked in that direction once. And then, just like the other one, it . . ."

He did not like to use the word "vanished." But I understood only too well; and I was gripped by, not fear alone, but a feeling of utter helplessness in the face of something that I could not understand.

"You realize, of course," Lacey said, "that it may happen to any of us."

"But why, how—?"

Lacey made no answer to that. Instead, he asked abruptly: "Where's Cheever?"

It was then I told him of the scene I had witnessed in the Reptile House.

"At about the time van der Henst died?" he asked quickly.

I frowned, for my thinking was still behind his.

"And didn't it strike you as strange," he asked, "that this morning his manner, his voice, his fluency of word and thought so sharply resembled that of our late friend, Stanwick?"

I could not bring myself to accept the shocking implications of this remark. "Ah, but—" I protested.

And so I was not as prepared, as Lacey was, when the toxicologist's report showed that van der Henst had died of "a potent, almost colorless venom of largely neurotoxic action."

Only one snake known to science possessed this particular type of poison. And this was that most dangerous of all New World pit vipers, the Costa Rican Cascabel!

**YOU WILL** understand, I think, the unenviable position in which both David Lacey and I now found ourselves. As Curator of Mammals and Reptiles at the Zoo, I was regarded with ill-concealed suspicion by the police after this second strange death. Stanwick's had occurred in my home; and David Lacey had been at the scene of both tragedies.

The police plainly were of a mind to believe that someone with poisonous snakes at his command had introduced them to Stanwick and van der Henst—with murder the object. The police theory was strengthened by the toxicologist's reports which revealed the presence of two separate species of snakes: the African mamba and the Costa Rican rattler.

My chief defense during those hours of questioning, innuendo and suggestion was the ability to prove that none of our snakes had left the Reptile House. There was no other Cascabel nearer than the Zoos of New York and Washington. When those Zoos also accounted for their snakes,

the only police alternative was to theorize that an entire collection of poisonous reptiles had escaped from some traveling carnival.

I will never forget my debt at this terrible time to David Lacey. His mystical nature was a pillar of strength. From it stemmed his own ability to accept without question a manifestation which to any other would have appeared illogical and irrational. He was able to impart to me this acceptance, so essential in maintaining my reason. And there was the added strength deriving from our mutual experiences.

It was Lacey, with his keen observation and knowledge of primitive man's beliefs, who questioned me closely about everything I knew concerning Aaron Cheever. In their sum total, these facts produced the outlines of a hideous picture.

This picture, to me, was vague in the extreme; and for that reason, perhaps, the more terrifying. But I believe that Lacey had defined it in detail to his own satisfaction—and was content to let me discover for myself the whole sickening truth.

My most poignant regret is that, in confronting Cheever, we did not act with greater caution.

**CHEEVER** was by no means himself when we casually dropped in on him the next morning in the office of the Reptile House. My first impression was that he had spent a sleepless night. There was a wary, haunted look in his eyes, and he spoke at random—as if, as Lacey later observed, two sets of opposing ideas were struggling for expression.

A more startling change was in his voice. There was little of the inflection of the original Cheever; but much of both Stanwick's clear articulation mixed with van der Henst's guttural explosions in Dutch, Portuguese and English. Psychologists would rationalize that he had been affected in this

strange way by the deaths of both men. I cannot accept this view. He had met both of them but briefly.

Still, it was plain that Cheever was puzzled by what had come over him.

The greatest change appeared when Lacey adroitly steered the conversation around to the Sunday night talk he and Stanwick had held with Cheever.

Here was candor. Was it, I wondered, the brazen effrontery of a man secure in his own position? I believe not. Rather, it seemed to me that he was the victim of a garrulity, foreign to him, over which he had almost no control.

It was the garrulity of Andre van der Henst!

"Yes, yes," he said excitedly. "I was thinking, of course, of the primitive belief in transmigration of the soul—how, in particular, the released soul of a man moves into the body of the beast that kills him. And the man's virtues merge with those of the beast, and the beast becomes sacred to the man's survivors. For it is the man, don't you see?"

He paused and the wary look returned, as if again two sets of thoughts were attempting to battle. Then he mastered himself and continued:

"But you run across some strange beliefs out there in Africa. There's the Fan tribe in the Gaboon, who reverse the process. D'ya remember, Doctor—" and he turned to me—"my mentioning the belief that you acquire wisdom by eating snake meat? But the Fans go a step farther. They've a blood rite where the tribal wizard draws blood from the serpent and from his own arm and inoculates himself with the snake's blood and the snake with his own. They're brothers then—blood brothers. And the snake becomes the wizard's external soul—*elangel*, they call it in their language, his other self. And then—? Why, the snake's now the wizard's

familiar and he'll obey the wizard's commands."

My spine tingled; with the greatest effort, I controlled my amazement. For I was vividly recalling the night when I had surprised Cheever with that curiously neat, X-like cut on his wrist. That, too, I had mentioned to Lacey, and now Lacey stole a glance at me.

Cheever raised his voice.

"And imagine," he went on, "the influence the wizard has over the whole snake clan! Just as the savage tribe whose totem is the snake won't kill a snake of any sort, so the snake kith and kin respect and obey the man who's brother of one of their own!"

His eyes burned.

"And think of it! Combine the two—the merging, the trade of souls and virtues. Let your *elangel* go kill the man you want. It absorbs his spirit and with that, his wisdom. But the *elangel* is only a bridge to the master. In the end, it's the wizard who absorbs."

Never had Cheever appeared more reptilian. Line by line, he had defined the picture in all its ugliness. I was shocked beyond measure. But Lacey merely nodded at each lurid statement, as if he were simply receiving confirmation of what was already in his own mind. Our glances met again and we exchanged the same thought: If we examined the snakes, would we find one with the X-like wound? But how could we tell? They were constantly shedding.

We were thinking, too, of how only on Sunday Cheever had spoken of the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge. And we were thinking of his very words to me: "And when you come down to it, if you have that, what more can you want?"

"Oh, there's a distinct drawback, of course," Cheever continued hastily. "You're so bound up with your familiar that if it's harmed, you're

harmed, too. And in the same way. As with Samson, where his fate lay in his hair, *your fate lies with your elangela.*"

Lacey leaned forward.

"And you?" he asked quietly. "What is your elangela?"

It was like a slap in the face. It was a question that shocked Cheever back to near-normalcy.

"Sir?" he cried, half rising. But Lacey, the normally gentle Lacey, was on his feet. He thrust out his chin, his eyes snapped, his fist slammed down on Cheever's desk, and he barked: "You're mad, Cheever, mad!"

For a moment the two men glared at each other. Lacey had blundered, I saw at once; and now, unable to restrain his anger, he blundered again.

"Mad, I say! And a crazy killer! A leech and a parasite—but you'll have no rest! They're ghosts, those opposing minds you absorbed, and they'll plague you till the day you die! And that's none too soon."

He turned to me. "Doctor, I think you'd better notify the police."

I reached for the phone, but Cheever gripped my hand. His chin was cunning.

"And can you imagine them believing your wild story? You'd be clapped in a padded cell!"

For a moment Lacey and I confronted him. Lacey's emotion was first to subside. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "He's right, of course."

"Right?" cried Cheever. "Of course I'm right." He looked first at Lacey, then at me. "But do you think," he spat, "that I can have you two sharing my secret?"

**F**ROM THAT moment on, David Lacey and I lived in the deadliest peril. I cannot easily make this admission, but panic seized me. There was no doubt of either Cheever's meaning or intention; and I found myself glancing like a coward over

my shoulder, starting at the least untoward sound, and fearfully examining corners and shadows.

There was no question of discharging him or using force against him. There, again, we met the same objection of making explanations that we'd meet in going to the police. We, not he, would have been regarded as lunatics.

Our only momentary salvation, we realized, lay in the fact that the usual number of visitors were visiting the Reptile House and that in their presence Cheever was unlikely to wield his terrible power. But with the Zoo's closing our danger mounted. Act we must. The question was how. Lacey, I believe, had thought out the answer when night came and we drove home.

I was about to drive the car into the garage when Lacey suggested: "I think we had better return tonight."

I did not question this, but parked instead in the driveway. We went into the house, but a short time later Lacey left. For a walk, I supposed; but shortly, through a window, I saw the garage lights on. The lights went off and Lacey came out, carrying something. He went to the car, opened the door, then slammed it shut. Soon he returned to the house.

"We'd better go now," Lacey said, soon after nine o'clock. Still I had no wish to question him. I utterly relied on his judgment.

We started to get into the car almost simultaneously, he on the right hand, I on the driver's side. As the doors opened, the dome light flashed on. And there—

Undulantly drawing itself up from the floor board onto the seat was the long, thick body of an anaconda!

It is a question if one can escape his fate. It is a question if one can escape a shadow. It started back. But in his own haste to withdraw, Lacey struck his shoulder on the door. Instantly the great reptile was upon him. And as Lacey fell backward, the



snake began to coil itself about him.

Running around the car, I found him struggling on the ground. I had had my own experiences with constrictors; I knew where to bring pressure to unwind their coils, and I knew the necessity of keeping the coils away from the windpipe.

Bracing myself, I set upon the brute. But it was like fighting wind. My eyes saw, but my hands clutched—nothing.

Lacey's own grip relaxed; his head fell awkwardly to one side as the neck cracked. The struggle was over.

Slowly the anaconda unwound itself. Its head lifted and its malicious eyes stared at me, as if they had seen me many times before. And perhaps they had; for on my part, frozen with terror, I seemed to recognize a peculiar marking of the head. The head lowered. The long, forked tongue slipped in and out of the mouth. Then, dispassionately, its brown scales glistening in the soft rays of the dome light, the creature twisted its slow way into the shadows of the shrubbery where it disappeared.

**T**EN MINUTES, twenty minutes, perhaps, I sat weakly on the car's running board, gazing at Lacey's body. It was even smaller in death. One eye was closed by a bruise, but the other was open and staring. And the mouth was gaping, as if at the last second he had tried to speak. To tell me something? But what? His intention?

As my nerves became calmer, I was aware of a hammering headache. Nausea overcame me, and I walked a few steps to vomit. As I straightened up, I saw something gleaming on the car floor. It was the head of a sharp axe, projecting from a wrapping of burlap. How right Lacey was! I thought. I wondered that I had not thought of this solution myself.

One of the most telling points that the police made against me was that

I left David Lacey's body where it had fallen and drove away.

My drive through Fairmount Park was the fastest I ever made. And when I swung through the service gate of the Zoo grounds, I nearly struck Matty Riley.

"Has Cheever been here?" I asked.

"Sure and he left but the few minutes ago, sir. And mumbling to himself like crazy. 'Tis wrong something is?"

Riley's answer relieved my mind. I shook my head to his last question, lifted the burlap-wrapped axe from the car, and told him:

"I'll be in the Reptile House, Matty. And I won't want to be disturbed."

I walked off, leaving him frowning.

**I** WOULD IF I could erase all memory of that next hour. Locking the doors and leaving the lights on only in the exhibition hall, I stood for a moment looking about me. There in those cages were the prized collection of half a lifetime. Some of those specimens I had caught myself in the jungles of Brazil and Ceylon, in the Everglades of Florida and the deserts of the West. They had been as intimately a part of my life as my family. Yet to delay would have been fatal.

I'll not go into the details. There was gore enough in the papers: how Matthew Riley, worried over my distraught appearance, had waited nervously at the gate and then decided to follow me; how he'd come around to the front of the building and looked through the glass panels of the door; how he saw writhing on the blood-splashed concrete floor the headless bodies of a score of venomous serpents; how, as he watched, he saw the axe head descend on a diamondback; and how, like a fool, he raced back to his station and telephoned—of all people!—Cheever.

I had no sense of time. I had only a driving urge to finish the most

damnable task of my life. With no means of knowing which snake I sought, I was prepared to slaughter them all.

Somewhere in that timeless vortex I became aware of shouting out in front. I'd the cage of the Gaboon viper open then, and was teasing him out.

Glancing up and beyond, I saw Cheever, hatless and hair flying, running up the walk toward the door. Behind him was Riley.

The diversion proved nearly fatal. For when I looked down at the cage again, the viper had eased its thick yellow body toward me, and I dealt its horned head a blow only in time. The blow glanced, the body fell out of the cage onto the floor, and I—thinking it dead—again looked toward the door. Cheever had stumbled and fallen on the steps.

Was *this* the elangela?

The thought had no more than crossed my mind when I felt a sharp sting on my ankle. The thing was not dead but dazed. And there was Cheever, his head bleeding as he crawled up those steps and clawed desperately at the locked door. With monstrous pain already coursing up my leg, I delivered a final blow at the viper's head. And at the same moment, Cheever's head jerked back as if in sympathy, then sagged.

They say that as they carried me out to the first aid station I was moaning hysterically:

"Don't let him in! Don't let him in!"

But my own recollection, before descending into those weeks of oblivion from which only the best medical care roused me, was of looking down from my stretcher as I passed Cheever and seeing the dead man's torn fingernails.