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THE POOL OF AGONY

When those inhuman monsters, laughing with insane glee, dragged my beloved Dorothy naked to the diving platform of the pool, I struggled like a madman to break my bonds. For the pool was filled with boiling oil!

CHAPTER ONE

Joy Ride To Horror

WHAT a thin line marks the difference between failure and success; between the hopelessness of futile striving and the delirious happiness of attainment! That new-found thought was coursing pleasantly through my still marveling brain as I sat behind the wheel of my roadster with Dorothy Raymond snuggled comfortably at my side. It was a glorious spring morning—I was a successful banker—and this was the second day of my engagement to the most wonderful girl in the world!



If your heart is weak—don't read this novelette!

What a thin line. . . .

For, less than two years ago, I had been struggling for a living, striving desperately to help bolster up a small town bank that was headed straight for the wall—and Dorothy was all but engaged to Clifford Manville. There wasn't much to be happy about in those days—but now I was sitting on top of the world.

What a thin line—but as I pondered contentedly on my good fortune I never dreamed that the invisible line that separates heaven from the nethermost hell is even thinner and more easily bridged!

"Want you to take a ride out in the

By
Conrad
Kimball



country today, son," Carlton Pusey had told me when he called me into his office earlier that morning. "Old Bridgeman over at Tannerdale wants us to increase the mortgage on his plant. Doesn't strike

me as a good proposition, but you have a look at the place and see what you think. It's a fine day for a drive," he grinned, "and maybe you might be able to induce Miss Raymond to accompany you."

His chuckle followed me out of his office, and his grinning face was before me as I drove across town. Why is it, I

wondered, that everyone grins at a man who's in love? And then I realized that I was grinning myself!

The Tannerdale road lay on the poorer side of Halenburg, the section that the prospering town had outgrown and left behind as it moved on to more spacious and modern quarters. Now many of the old houses were empty and falling into ruin; others were occupied by mill workers of the poorest class, while a few of the old stores still managed to keep open.

"Hi, there—wait a minute!" a voice hailed us from one of those doorways. I stopped and frowned involuntarily as Cliff Manville strode out into the street to put his foot up on the running board beside Dorothy.

Manville ran a book store, but how he contrived to make both ends meet was more than I had ever been able to fathom—especially now that the town had moved away from him and left him surrounded by poverty and illiteracy. There were rumors that he bootlegged illicit volumes, circulated pornography among the high school youngsters—but even that would have provided little revenue.

"Congratulations!" he grinned as he shook hands with me and then held onto Dorothy's hand far longer, it seemed to me, than was necessary. "I wish you both the best of luck—and that reminds me, Dorothy, I've got hold of that book you wanted. Wait here and I'll fetch it."

He darted back inside the store while we waited, and Dorothy speculated on what book he could have meant. She couldn't remember telling him that she wanted any volume, and I grew restless as the minutes passed without a sign of him.

"Funny thing," he apologized as he returned empty-handed. "I had it only yesterday, but I seem to have mislaid it. I'll probably come across it when I straighten up this morning. Drop in as you come back and I'll have it for you."

Willingly I slipped the car into gear and rolled on down the street, past some of the stores I had known as a youngster, past the old, now empty post office—and then suddenly Dorothy's hand clutched spasmodically at my arm and a frightened little cry gasped from her throat, a cry that echoed the tinkle of broken glass and the shrill scream that was choked off in full voice!

Like a magnet that scream drew my eyes to the second story of what had been our Y. M. C. A. building—and then astounding amazement made me stall the car. For a few brief seconds I saw the half-naked body of a woman, a pretty young girl, framed in that window as she smashed her little fists through the panes! And then she was gone, dragged back into the room behind her.

BESIDE me I felt Dorothy trembling, and when she spoke her voice was low and horrified.

"That poor thing—she was terrified!" she half whispered. "What can they be doing to her—in that horrible place?"

That was what I wanted to know, and I had already started the car and was driving up to the curb. For the past year the old building, which had reverted to the bank when the Y. M. C. A. moved into larger quarters across town, had been leased to a Dr. Radnick, who maintained a private sanitarium. I had never seen the man, and I knew little about his affairs except that he paid his rent promptly. We had left him and his sanitarium very much alone, but now I intended to know more about what was going on behind those walls.

"Wait here a few moments," I told Dorothy as I climbed out and started up the front steps—but she was there beside me as I pressed the button and heard the bell ring loudly in the old building.

Almost immediately the door opened, and behind the threshold stood a man who

seemed chiefly hair: Long hair that fell almost to his shoulders and that came down low on his forehead; shaggy eyebrows and a sweeping mustache above a tangled beard; a jungle of hair out of which two dark, magnetic eyes peered at us questioningly.

"I am Robert Warren, from the bank," I began uncertainly, feeling a little ridiculous now that I had butted into his affairs.

But he seemed to understand at once.

"Yes, I have seen you," he nodded. "Come in, come in. I know why you have stopped. You saw Marcella, of course. And naturally you do not want scenes of that sort framed in the windows of the building. I understand—but I assure you what happened occurred only because we are so shorthanded at the moment."

As he spoke he led the way across the little lobby that had been so familiar to me during my childhood and adolescence—and was now so strangely changed. Once this building had been one of my favorite haunts, each room of the lower floor filled with pleasant memories. Now it was indefinitely different. Somehow, coming back into it was like returning to a house from which the corpse of the owner had just been removed. . . .

That was it—the familiar rooms now smacked of desolation, of neglect, of death. Something that had had its being here was gone, and in its place was a void that had never been filled.

Or had it? Queer little chills crept up my back, and I shuddered as if a chill wind blew down my neck—for, somehow, I sensed that *something* had come into that building to fill the void; something that was evil and slimy; something that replaced the old feeling of good fellowship with a dank miasma that crept into my very bones.

BUT Radnick was leading the way to the upper floor, down a corridor, and opening a door for us. The shade was

drawn in the room into which he ushered us, and he switched on the electricity, to reveal a narrow white bed on which lay the girl we had seen fleetingly in the frame of the broken window.

She was beautiful. Dark-hair framed her delicately modeled face. Her skin was white—too white. Her eyes were closed and her breast rose and fell very lightly beneath the sheet that covered her. I could see that now she was clad in a hospital nightgown.

"This is Marcella Sanborg, the girl you saw," Radnick was saying. "Her case is most unfortunate—a persecution mania. Her folks were about to commit her to an asylum when I offered to undertake her cure here. She was progressing nicely, but this outburst—" he shook his head doubtfully—"and just when I am so short-handed."

Dorothy had stepped to the head of the bed and unhooked the hospital chart which hung there, to study it and nod understandingly as she read the notations marked upon it.

For several moments Radnick watched her shrewdly, and then his dark eyes lit up with exultation.

"You are a nurse?" he asked eagerly. "You understand that chart? Perhaps you would be willing to accept a position here—to help me out for a very short time until I am able to secure other assistants?"

Yes, Dorothy was a trained nurse, though she had not been working for the past six months, and now, with our wedding in the near future, her days of nursing were over. But, as I looked at her, I saw interest stirring in her eyes. She was considering his proposition—and in that moment a frenzy of apprehension surged through me.

She must not accept. She mustn't come into this place alone. I was sorry now that I had let her come in with me, and suddenly I was frantically eager to get

outside again, out into the clean fresh air.

"No, Miss Raymond isn't open to a call at present," I interrupted before she had a chance to answer him; but immediately I saw her eyes widen with surprise—and then cloud with what seemed a hint of rebellion.

But I was already leading the way out of the room and down the hallway. All the other doors along that hall were closed, I noticed; closed and exuding that indefinable atmosphere of emptiness, of desertion. Was Marcella Sanborg the only patient in the place, I wondered. But that was impossible, for then Radnick would not have been so anxious to hire another nurse.

Yet, as we reached the lower floor, that curious feeling of desertion, of emptiness, increased within me. The old pool table, I noticed, was just where it had stood for years. Carlton Pusey had equipped the new Y. M. C. A. building with new tables, so this old-timer had been left behind, but as I ran my fingers over its scarred edges I saw that it had not been used for months. The dust was thick upon it. And in the lounge there were the customary magazines on the tables, but as I glanced over them I saw that they were all more than a year old!

Again that shivery chill ran up my spine before I caught myself up short. I was being ridiculous, I told myself. Probably the patients here were all confined to their rooms; that was why they did not use the recreation rooms. But, even so, surely the nurses and attendants. . . .

I realized suddenly that I had seen none of these. Dr. Radnick and the unconscious girl were the only persons, the only signs of life, I had seen in this eerie old place that seemed empty as a tomb!

Radnick was still talking, still deploring his need of a nurse, as I walked to the door and urged Dorothy with me. It gave me a creepy feeling to see his piercing eyes fixed so steadily on hers as he

talked, as if he would reach her with them rather than with his words. Even as we walked down the steps they seemed to follow us regretfully—and now, it seemed to me there were other people here. I had the uncomfortable feeling of being watched—as if eager, spying eyes were peering out at us from the curtained windows of the old place.

"I could help him out for a few days," Dorothy protested as we sped down the street. "A week or so would not matter, Bob—and I could use the extra money. He offered me double salary. I could use that for my trousseau."

But cold fingers of fear were stealing through me, clutching at my heart and making the pulse in my throat beat wildly. "No! No! Don't let her!" something shouted a warning within me—and my jaw clenched grimly as I gripped the wheel and stared at the road ahead of us.

"I don't want you to," I snapped at her. "I don't like Radnick or that place—and I won't have you there with him."

For a moment Dorothy's temper flared and I saw the angry blood surge up into her cheeks, but then she subsided and soon her hand was back on my arm—and Radnick and his establishment were forgotten. Or so I thought. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's Oven

CARLTON PUSEY had been right, I discovered after half an hour's inspection of Oliver Bridgeman's plant. He was operating a paper mill, and the whole layout was sadly in need of repair. Even before I had a look at his books I knew that the Halenburg Bank was not interested in increasing his mortgage or even extending the present one.

For a man who had been away from this section of the country for more than twenty years, Carlton Pusey had a sur-

prising grasp of local conditions and values, I considered as we drove back to town. His return to his old home town certainly had been a godsend to Halenburg.

At that time the bank, closed down by President Roosevelt's decree, was just about ready to give up the ghost. We had done our utmost to raise sufficient capital to satisfy the authorities and secure permission to reopen, but the money just wasn't to be had. And then Carlton Pusey came along and became interested in our plight.

It was his money that had put the institution back on its feet, with him as its president. But hardly had we gotten going when Fate dealt us another blow; Sam Spearman, our cashier, walked off with more than twenty thousand dollars, and the money was gone when his body was found ground to bits beneath a railroad train.

Of course, the bonding company made good that loss, but after that Pusey cleaned out all the old employees and substituted men of his own—all except me, and I had become his vice president.

Vice president of the Halenburg Bank, and fiance of Dorothy Raymond. There wasn't much more a man could ask for, I told myself as we drove back into town that afternoon—and again my elation was dampened, almost stifled, as we drove past the building that housed Dr. Radnick's curious establishment. With little tingles of premonition seeping through me, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Dorothy was looking at the building, looking at it speculatively, interestedly. . . .

With all my heart I wished, at that moment, that she had never stepped inside the place, had never heard Radnick's offer or looked into his magnetic eyes. And I wished it even more fervently when I got back to the bank and sat facing Carlton Pusey in his office.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to work this evening," he said regretfully. "The Scoville Corporation, over in Delanson, must have twenty-five thousand dollars in cash in the morning. I promised to have it over there tonight, and I want you to take it, Bob."

It wasn't unusual for Pusey to ask me to handle a confidential after-hours assignment, but today the thought of being away from Dorothy filled me with a strange apprehension—as if the Fates were conspiring against me. That apprehension was whetted when I called her on the telephone and told her that I would have to break our engagement for the evening. She said she was disappointed, of course—but beneath her words my probing ears detected a note of satisfaction, of relief; and as I put down the instrument I knew that Dorothy did not want to see me that night.

That thought rode with me as I drove to Delanson, the locked leather bag with its small fortune in bills stowed away under the seat. She didn't want to see me—there was something else she wanted to do—something that she did not want me to know about. . . .

Worriedly my mind tore at that thought, conjecturing, wondering, fearing. Perhaps that is why I did not see the car stretched across the road in front of me until I was almost on top of it. Then I jammed down on the brakes, to come to a stop not more than half a dozen feet from the apparently disabled machine.

There seemed to be nobody in it—and then I saw the man's body sprawled beneath it, tight against one of the wheels!

A dead man! The hair at the back of my neck seemed to stand on end as I stepped out of my car, walked over to the other machine and bent over the body. Just as I stooped down, a bullet pinged against the fender, and the blast of a shot thundered in my ears! I had barely missed the deadly bullet, but I was not

quick enough to avoid the fellows who flung themselves upon me.

OF course, it was the money under the seat in my car, I told myself as I struggled to put up a defense—but even as that thought flashed into my mind, intuition whispered that there was something else behind this attack; and the uneasiness that had been with me all evening swept down upon me overwhelmingly.

Desperation gave me strength to break the hold of those clutching fingers at my neck, to shake loose the fellow on my back and catapult him over my head squarely into his mate. For just a moment I caught a glimpse of a face I knew—a face I had seen before. And in the same moment I placed him—the thug who had been on my back lived in Halenburg, in the old section of town—yes, he lived in the shabby tenement above Cliff Manville's book shop!

Then I was racing for my car. Too late to start it and get away, but there was time to grab the leather bag from under the seat and sprint for the woods. A shot lanced out at me; another—and the bullet thudded into the bag, just as I whirled and brought it down with a crash on the head of the thug who was just a step behind.

With a dull groan he slumped to the road and was as helpless as his partner. It had all taken only seconds—and only then did I remember the flat little automatic I had strapped under my arm for just such an emergency as this! There I stood on a lonely country road with a bag containing a young fortune in my hand and two unconscious thugs at my feet. A bag containing—

That bullet had gashed the leather, ripped a jagged tear along one side, I noticed, and my eyes widened as I peered down at what the rip revealed. Unbelievingly I walked over to the car's headlights and examined the hole more closely.

Inside, I could see, were nothing but bundles of newspapers cut into the shape of bills!

Carlton Pusey had expected something like this to happen. He had sent me out with a dummy bag, while someone else probably transported the real money. And for this was worth of worthless paper I had nearly lost my life; to deliver this I had wasted an evening that. . . .

With increased clamor my uneasiness returned, and I knew that I must get back to Halenburg with all possible speed. There was no use delivering this worthless junk, now that the attempted hold-up had failed; so I turned the car and sped back to town.

Straight to Dorothy's home, but the moment I looked into her mother's surprised face I knew that my premonitions had not been unfounded.

"Why, she went out early in the evening," Mrs. Raymond told me. "Someone called her on the phone—I thought it was you, Bob—and then she went out."

Something in my tense features, in the anxiety that flared from my eyes, communicated itself to her and her face whitened.

"It's peculiar," she said worriedly. "About half an hour after she left Clifford Manville came here looking for her—and he was excited; seemed scared just the way you are, Bob. Tell me—is—is there anything the matter? Is Dorothy in danger?"

I wished to God I could answer that question truthfully. No, there was nothing the matter and Dorothy was quite safe, I assured her, but within me a sixth sense screamed that I lied; that I knew that I lied!

Dorothy had gone out without saying where she was bound—and I knew beyond doubt where she had gone. To the old Y. M. C. A.—to Dr. Radnick's strange establishment!

Straight across town I drove without

a stop until I drew up in front of the old building, now dark as if it were uninhabited like some of its tumble down neighbors. But my summons on the bell brought a response from within. Cautiously the door opened a narrow crack, and in the dim light beyond I could see the bearded face of Radnick himself.

For a moment I was certain that there was surprise and fear in his staring eyes. Then they veiled over like the eyes of a cat, and smooth urbanity spread over his face like a mask.

"Miss Raymond?" he answered my demand. "But I have not seen Miss Raymond since this morning. You took her away yourself. I have not seen her since then."

HE LIED—and I knew it! But there was nothing to be gained by hurling the charge at him. Now he had fully recovered his composure, and beneath that tangle of hair I could almost see the triumphant sneer on his suave face. He was lying—but I was helpless to prove it.

Dejectedly I turned away, and the door clicked shut on his soft, mocking "good night." Hopelessly I climbed back into the car, but as the gears meshed and I started slowly down the street I knew that I must not leave that building. Something deep down inside of me seemed to be drawing me back; seemed to be responding to a call that would not let me go.

Dorothy was in that place—and she needed me. Suddenly I knew that as clearly as if she sat in the seat beside me and told me so.

Dorothy needed me—and out of the past leaped the memory of a trick of my boyhood games, a trick that used to be the bane of the Association director's life. From the roof of the building it was possible to swing over the side and grasp a windowsill on the second floor, possible to open a window at the end of the upper hallway.

It was years since I had tried that stunt—but already I was swinging the car around a corner and parking it, then cautiously backtracking my way to the building. The structure next door, I knew, was empty and only flimsily boarded up. It took only a few minutes to pry loose sufficient boards to allow me to squeeze inside and then grope my way up to the roof and across to the Association building.

Quietly now, so that there would be no chance that I be heard, I went across the roof to the edge. The coping was rotted, and I hardly dared trust my weight on it—but there was no other way to get into the building. And with that I swung out into the darkness, groping for the ledge. There it was below me—but the window was locked or jammed! It would not open—until I gently kicked my foot through it, while the falling glass rattled around me like hailstones. Surely everyone within blocks of the place must have heard that racket!

Tensely I held my breath—but the inside of the building was as dark and quiet as the grave. An eon of time seemed to pass before I dared to unlock the window and raise it sufficiently to squirm inside.

Blackness on every side of me—blackness and silence; and that curious sense of desolation and death!

Noiselessly I started down the hall, groping my way, and then my fingers closed on the knob of a door. Slowly I opened it—and dared a lighted match inside the room. But it was empty—empty with that atmosphere of disuse that clings to a place that has been long untenanted.

Room after room, empty, all of them—even the one in which Marcella Sanborg had been lying. Yet I knew that she was somewhere in that building—and so was my Dorothy!

The lower floor was as empty and

dark as the one above, and now the familiar rooms yawned like dark and sinister caverns to the flickering matches I lit. Suddenly the match poised in my fingers and my arm seemed turned to stone, the blood in my veins hardened into ice! From somewhere, seemingly from the nether regions themselves, had come a muted groan, a despairing wail of agony that clutched me by the throat and held me there powerless to move until the match had burned down and the flame seared my flesh.

That groan had come from downstairs, from the gymnasium. Forgetting caution, I plunged to the rear of the building, where the stairs led down to the basement floor. Every nerve in my body was on edge, every instinct warned me to get out of that place and come back with help—but in the same breath a warning voice in the back of my brain reminded me that when I came back it would be too late. Dorothy needed me now—and I started down those old, creaking stairs.

Step by step, each groaning under my weight and seeming to shout out notice of my coming. Step by step, until I reached the lower landing and stood before the heavy door leading to the gymnasium.

I turned the knob and pressed in on the door. The gym was lit, I saw at once, lit dimly—and then that groan moaned out at me again and brought out beads of cold perspiration on my face and hands. Not just a groan of pain, but a groan of hopeless, intolerable anguish, a groan that seemed to come from the threshold of the world beyond.

NOW I could see into the place—and my eyes popped out with horror at what the dim light revealed. Hanging from a pair of metal rings suspended from the ceiling was the body of a man—or what had been the body of a man! Now it was only a twisted, horribly

mangled mass of torn flesh and broken bones—as if a giant had played with it, twisting and tearing it for his ghoulish amusement.

A fearful spectacle—but the groans I had heard had not come from those torn, blood-dripping lips. That man had died in horrible, long drawn out torment, but relief had come at last and the final spark of life had been extinguished.

Aside from that swaying corpse the gymnasium seemed to be as deserted as the rest of the building. Quietly I closed the door behind me and stepped across the hall to the smaller gym where I had often exercised and played boyish games. It seemed just as it had always been, except that some of the apparatus had been replaced with newer, more modern equipment—like that sweatbox at one end of the room. Even as I looked at it that hollow groan sobbed out again—and then I saw that the box was occupied! There was a head projecting out of the top, locked securely between the sections that closed tightly around the neck beneath it.

The head of a man. As I came closer twinges of horror ran through me—for now I saw that the sides of the box were made of glass; thick glass that was impervious to heat but that was sufficiently transparent so that I could see the naked body inside—a body cooked so red that it looked like raw meat!

As I watched the scorched flesh twitched and writhed, contorted horribly in the agony of baking. Set like a big red apple on top of the hellish box, the man's head was almost unrecognizable, until I walked right up beside the infernal contraption—and saw that the poor devil was Cliff Manville, the book seller!

His agonized eyes fairly bulged from his head as he stared at me and his mouth gaped open horribly as he tried to speak. I could barely distinguish words in the hoarse, gasping exhalations of tortured sounds that he moaned forth.

"Couldn't go through with it," he croaked at me. "Couldn't let them have—Dorothy. Tried to stop her—but it was too late—and they caught me. They made me do it, Bob—made me telephone ahead when you were—going to pass. I was going to get—to get some of the bond money you'd forfeit. They're devils, Bob—they're—"

In a spasm of agony his jaws locked together and an awful wail was dragged out through his clenched teeth. Frantically I searched for a way of turning off the current, of getting him out of that death trap, but now I knew that it was too late. The infernal contraption whirred loudly as terrific heat poured into it, and with stark horror I saw the flesh on his puffed limbs split open as he baked alive.

"Who did this to you, Cliff?" I shouted again and again, but now his head was canted over on one side and the groans no longer came from his lips.

He was dead—horribly murdered; and the fiends who had done this to him had Dorothy in their clutches; were holding her somewhere in this same building. Dazedly I staggered back from the roasted corpse, my hand wiping streams of perspiration off my own haggard face—and then strong arms gripped my elbows and held them fast while hands closed around my ankles, my wrists, my neck. In a moment I was swept off my feet, inundated in a sea of black-robed, black-hooded figures that swarmed over me.

CHAPTER THREE

The Dive To Boiling Death

IT WAS like a nightmare, looking up at those weird black hoods, with their pointed tops and their narrow slits through which eager eyes gleamed at me malignantly. Like a nightmare—but there was no nightmare about the ropes that were lashed around my ankles and my

arms. They were stark reality, as I realized the moment I tried to struggle free from them. Stark reality, and tied with devilish thoroughness.

"Just what we need," one of the black-robed devils taunted me; "now we have a judge for the other events. Bring him this way, men."

That was the smooth, suave voice of Dr. Radnick, I recognized at once, and at the same time my mind sought to identify it again. There was something strangely familiar about that voice. When I had heard it for the first time that morning, I had sensed the familiar note vaguely; now I knew that I had met Dr. Radnick somewhere before—but where?

Before I had time to debate that question my captors lugged me across the gymnasium and through a door which I knew should lead to the swimming pool. It did. I swore and cursed them bitterly as they dragged me into the brightly lighted natatorium, but I soon realized that my breath was wasted on them. The more vehement my denunciations the more delightedly they chuckled.

There were ten of them, I counted, when they had propped me up in the judge's chair at the side of the tank and some distance above the level of the water. Ten inhuman devils skulking beneath hoods that were as black as their own diabolical souls!

What hell they were planning here I could only imagine—but the dread possibilities clutched with icy fingers at my heart. Dorothy was in their hands. Was she to be brought out here and drowned before my very eyes? Drowned in this tank where I had often enjoyed hours of pleasant swimming and splashing?

There was something different about the place now, I noticed as I stared down into the swimming pool. It was warm—hot—in that room; far warmer than it had ever been before. And I noticed that the color of the water was unusual—it

was yellowish, almost a honey color; and as I watched, it stirred and swirled restlessly.

Now six of the hooded devils had taken their places on chairs around the edge. The other four had disappeared, but in a few moments they were back—and with them came two young girls who seemed utterly paralyzed with fear.

One of them was Marcella Sanborg, I saw at once. The other was a pretty blonde young woman I had never seen before. Both were clothed only in flimsy underwear that had been torn to shreds—and in the next moment this was stripped from them, to leave them cowering in their nakedness at one end of the pool.

"The first event this evening will be a race the length of the pool and return," Radnick announced with evil relish, his jeering voice leaping out above the sobs and moans of the cringing girls. "When I count three you will start."

Fearfully the terrified victims stared down at the surface of the pool, and then the little blonde inched forward and lowered the tip of her pink toe to the water line—only to spring back as if she had stepped onto a red-hot stove.

"Ready—one, two, three!" Radnick counted.

"No—no—no!" the blonde moaned piteously. "It's hot—you can't make a jump into that!"

Hot water! That was why it surged and eddied so restlessly, I realized as I stared down into its yellowish depths.

"Oh, you can't—"

But at that moment two of the huskiest of the hooded devils stepped to her side, while two others grabbed Marcella Sanborg. For a moment the white bodies of the girls swung in the air—then they shot out over the pool and landed with a splash, their terrified screams drowned in choked gasps of utter agony as they splashed out frantically for the pool side.

The fountain of hot liquid that leaped

up as they hit the surface splashed over the sides of the tank and flew high in the air. Several drops of it rained down on my clothing, and one splashed against my cheek—to sear it as if a branding iron had suddenly been applied to my skin.

Hot water could never burn like that, I knew, as I felt my skin beginning to blister—and then I realized the full horror of the liquid hell that lay beneath me. That tank was filled with oil—with boiling oil! Now, as the girls struggled fearfully to reach the sides, I could see that they were blistering, swelling horribly under the fiery caress of the oil.

The little blonde groped up with a red, bloated hand that had lost all human semblance, and tried to pull herself out of that pool of agony. Half way she wriggled her outraged body out of the fearful torment—and then a hooded devil callously pushed her back once more!

Hours the doomed victims seemed to struggle there, but it must have been only a few short minutes, for no human body could have endured the searing torment longer than that. My eardrums were numbed with their shrill screams and my burning eyes were like balls of fire in my head from staring at their futile struggles.

These devils had Dorothy! At any moment now her sweet body would be plunged into that pool of horrible death!

The maddening thought made me struggle at my bonds like one possessed, but I realized that it was hopeless to think of escape that way. The ropes gave a little—ever so little—but it would take hours to wriggle out of them; and I had only minutes. No, seconds—for now they were dragging Dorothy and another girl into the room!

LIKE the others, Dorothy wore only scanty underwear. Her eyes were red and swollen from weeping. She passed within a few feet of me as they forced

her and her companion up the narrow ladder that led to the diving platform.

"The next event," Radnick chuckled, "will be something new in the way of a diving competition. First we will have Miss Ray—"

My heart seemed to climb up into my throat and poise there as I listened fearfully for his next syllable, while every muscle in my body strained and tore futilely at those ropes.

"Miss Rayburn," he concluded with malicious satisfaction at the hell of suspense into which he had thrust me.

Two of the masked devils seized her and prodded her toward the edge of the platform.

I tried to close my eyes as she struck the hot oil, but the lids would not obey the dictates of my brain. I had to look, had to see every ghastly detail of her torment—had to see that the fiends up on the platform had torn the nightgown from Dorothy's body and that she was poised there on the edge, gorgeous in her naked loveliness, while she stared down in horrified fascination at her late companion's death agony!

Something, I had been telling myself confidently, would happen at the last moment. It always did. A thing like this couldn't happen to Dorothy; in some way she would be saved. I would manage to free myself from those ropes, or—

But with a sudden surge of appalling horror I realized that *nothing* would happen to save her—realized that I could not possibly free myself from those ropes, and that there was nobody else to come to her aid or lift a finger to help her.

Utter, unreasoning madness took hold of me at that moment. Dorothy was going to die, but I would die with her, I vowed—and in that second it came to me that there was one slim chance, one chance in a million, that I would be able to help her. But that was all I asked.

With all my strength I threw my

weight forward. For a moment I teetered on the edge of the chair—and then I plunged downward.

HOW can I describe the agony of that fearful plunge? Fire only burns the outer skin, but boiling oil seeps its way inside, down to the fourth and fifth layers, where the nerve centers lie. Horrible, excruciating agony stabbed through me, through my ankles, my hands and wrists, my face and neck, as I shot downward through the boiling liquid and then, at long last, started upward again.

My eyes were tight closed and I held my breath doggedly, while every muscle in my body concentrated on the struggle with those partly loosened ropes. That oil, I prayed to God, would do the trick. It would loosen the ropes; would enable me to slide my wrists out and free my arms.

There was one other point on which I had gambled. Those devils did not want me to die yet. They wanted me to live through the hell of watching Dorothy's death agony, to sip the last bitter dregs of mental torture. And the moment I felt hands tugging at me I knew that I had won. They were dragging me out before the oil was able to finish me!

"How is he, Sam—still alive?" I heard a voice demand anxiously, as they bent over me. "We don't want him dead—yet."

And I knew that voice—knew it as well as I knew my own! Sam, it had called one of the others—and in that split second I knew who Sam was; knew where I had heard Dr. Radnick's voice before. The hairy doctor was none other than Sam Spearman, the cashier who used to work in the cage next to mine; the cashier who had absconded with the bank's money and whose body had supposedly been ground to a pulp beneath a train!

That was what Cliff Manville had meant when he raved about bond money

in his death delirium. With startling clarity I saw it all. I, too, was to have disappeared with twenty-five thousand dollars of the bank's money—twenty-five thousand dollars that had never been given to me. The bonding company would have made good that loss and started a useless search for me. For me and for Dorothy, for when it was found that she had disappeared also they would have concluded that she had eloped with me!

Fiendishly clever. That Machiavellian scheme was air-tight. Not only would the devils behind it reap a rich profit but at the same time they would secure two more victims for their hellish orgies; two victims whose fearful fate would never have been suspected!

"He's all right—be back to consciousness in a few minutes," I heard "Dr. Radnick" grunt, as I gasped and writhed on the floor.

They thought I was only semi-conscious, and they did not see that, behind my back, my wrists were slipping free of the oil-soaked ropes, leaving most of the skin behind them. They didn't realize that I was almost loose until I suddenly put every ounce of strength into my arm muscles and bulged them to their utmost, straining and tearing until the loosened ropes fell clear and my hands and arms were free!

WITH a yell of rage, that devil whose voice I had recognized darted toward me, but already my swollen, half-skinned right hand had dived beneath my left armpit and was clutching the little automatic they had never suspected. It roared like a cannon in that little room, and the inhuman fiend clutched at his throat and dropped to his knees.

He was gasping for air and tugging at the hooded mask that concealed his face, but I had no time for him then. There were still six bullets in my weapon—and

I meant to make every one count. One dropped one of the devils from the top of the diving platform beside Dorothy—dropped him to plunge into the lethal bath into which he had been ready to hurl her.

Two more of them I dropped before they could get out of the natatorium. Another I brought down in the gymnasium, just as he was passing the oven in which Cliff Manville had died—and my heart leaped with satisfaction when his death scream revealed that the hairy face of "Dr. Radnick" was behind the bloodying hood.

And then they were gone—the old building echoing hollowly to the frantic clatter of their fleeing feet—and I strode back into the other room where I knew that Carlton Pusey was gasping out his worthless life.

"Bank looter—murderer—degenerate fiend"—I spat down at the man who had pretended to be my friend.

The room was swaying dizzily around me, waves of blackness were creeping up to engulf me—but through them I could see Dorothy.

"Oh, your poor, burned face!" she was sobbing as the tears ran down her cheeks.

She was there beside me when I woke up in the hospital. It was almost a week later, they told me—a week that had been devoted to fighting for my life and grafting new skin onto me so that I would again be presentable. And when I opened my eyes the tears ran down her cheeks as if they had never stopped.

Yes, it's a thin line that separates heaven from hell—but, thank God, one can fight his way back across that line, even though the scars of its crossing never leave his soul. I am president of the Halenburg Bank now, and this is the second day of my marriage to the sweetest woman in the world—which is all the heaven any world can ever hold for me.

THE END