

All Stories Complete



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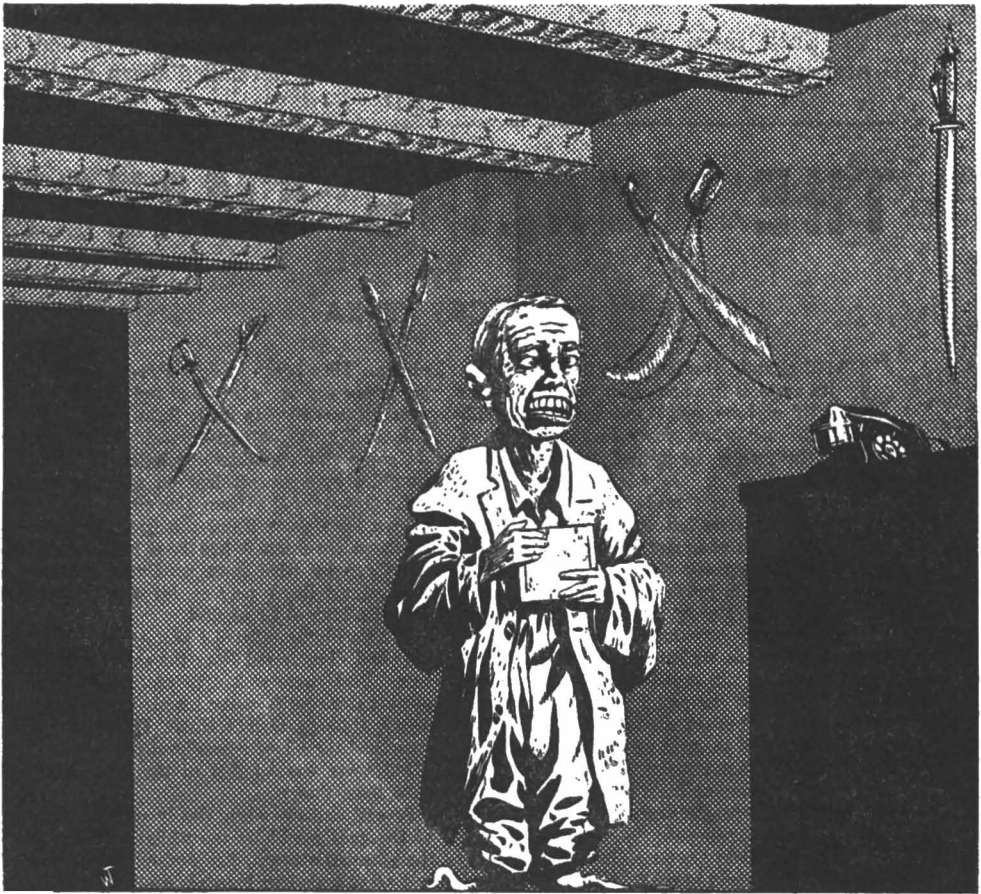
Cover painting by Edmond Swiatek, illustrating a scene from "The Chemical Vampire"



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**Sylvester believed his own stories;
and his characters seemed very real. Then
one day he lost control of his plotting . . .**

EDITOR'S NOTE: We offer here a strange document. Is it the last queer story from the pen of Guy Sylvester? Or is it what it purports to be—his own account of his disappearance?

Guy Sylvester was last seen at nine o'clock on the evening of October second. This manuscript, in his own peculiar system of shorthand, was found on the desk in his studio on the morning

of October third.

The few facts known about the case have been broadcast to the world by press and radio. As most of you will remember, the studio door was locked on the inside. There was no other possible exit or entrance. The few pieces of furniture in the studio were disarranged; a sword was gone from the wall; the books, usually on the desk,



The Strange Disappearance of GUY SYLVESTER

by Chester S. Geier & Taylor Victor Shaver

were on the floor.

On the desk lay this manuscript, Sylvester's pen and a set of false teeth, both upper and lower plates. These teeth could not have been Sylvester's, for it is well known that he was inordinately proud of his own natural ones.

This manuscript, transcribed by Sylvester's wife, has not been edited by us. Because of this manuscript, the police believe Sylvester's disappearance to be a hoax, and his wife believes him to be a victim of amnesia or insanity. For these reasons, it has never before been published.

Be that as it may, it is offered here for its literary value only. If Sylvester meant it as a short story, in our opinion it is the best one he ever penned. However, if it is a true accounting of his strange disappearance, it is a document that the scientists of our world should scan with eager eyes.

It begins abruptly.

* * *

I WRITE in desperate haste. I feel that I am living the last moments of my life. I am to be hung. I have been tried and convicted by a jury

of my own creation.

Whoever reads this, forgive me my incoherency. I am distraught. My mind is whirling end over end. The events of the past hour have overpowered my intellect. I have written many strange stories that were purely imaginary. Tonight I have lived—I am still living—through experiences more strange than any I have ever imagined. My brain seems paralyzed. If the things I am going to record here had not happened, I could not tell of them.

I am trying to write coherently, to begin at the beginning. At this moment, I am satisfied of my own sanity. I am just overwhelmed. Even as I inscribe this, my self-appointed judge and jurors sit around my fireplace drinking wine which they think I provided. And I did create that wine as surely as I created each and every one of them. I am a father tried and convicted by his own children. Was ever man in more terrible predicament than I?

But my allotted moments slip by—they gave me only until they consume the cask of wine.

At nine o'clock this evening I kissed my wife goodnight and came into my studio, locking the door behind me. There is no other way into this room. There is no telephone. The walls are soundproof. It is built so that when I enter here, I cannot be disturbed. And yet, tonight at least, fourteen different personalities have entered this room without unlocking the door.

But I go too fast, I must tell events in sequence; I have so much to say.

BRIEFLY, the setting: My house is on top of a hill, overlooking the sea. That wall of my study which faces the sea is of glass. I had it built that way, so that I might sit behind my desk and gaze out over the water.

The study itself is a huge room that

I hoped would encourage great thoughts, but since I came here to write, my work has lost much of its fire. I found it easier to write in the attic, where—but I dare not write of myself. There is not time.

This room is almost barren of furniture. I do not encourage visitors. My desk sets in the very middle of the floor. In the wall at my back is the fireplace about which my persecutors, my executioners, now sit. The wall in front of me is the huge window looking out on the sea. The floor is highly polished, a few rugs and skins thrown about. The ceiling is beamed. The panelled walls are adorned with crossed swords of every description. But enough of the setting.

After I had locked myself in, I sat down at my desk to start a ten thousand word story. But I did not even have a worthwhile idea.

Lately, my imagination seems to have atrophied. I can no longer create characters with ease and facility. I am afraid I have gone stale. I have been worried about this. I have many contracts that must be filled. Yes, this is all part of tonight's happenings. I must show you the mental state I am in, that I have been in for a long time. Whoever reads this must have all the facts. Perhaps I am insane. I must confess that I have thought at times, recently, that my mind might crack under the strain of constant writing, new plots, new characters, and all the other details that are supposed to make a writer's life so exciting.

I strode up and down the room. I sat, running my hands through my hair. I had tentatively decided that the main character of my story should be an inventor with some fantastic invention. But I could not visualize either him or his invention; nor could I formulate a plot of any sort.

During periods of creative work, I am not conscious of the passage of time. I keep no clock in my studio. I am oblivious to my surroundings. But tonight I was unable to attain this stage of concentration. I was aware of each detail in my immediate environment: the desk in the center of the room, its top flooded with light from the lamp; the crackling log fire; the huge yellow moon—now obscured by clouds—hanging in the sky, its beams painting a golden pathway across the sea and filling the room with soft light.

An ideal setting for artistic effort, but I could not get a word on paper.

Finally, after a period of restless pacing, my footsteps echoing unpleasantly, I flung myself into the chair behind my desk and buried my head in my arms. I do not know how long I stayed thus.

SUDDENLY, I was aware of a strange noise: "Glug, glug, glug, glug." It was like a voice struggling through a strangled throat. "Glug, glug, glug, glug."

I sat bolt upright in my chair. I well knew that no one could be in the room. Yet, there by the side of my desk, stood a little man with the most curiously turned-in eyes that stared into each other across the low bridge of a pugged nose. His lips were stretched back over hideously large teeth. His clothes seemed to be three sizes too large for him. His pants legs were rolled up, exposing shoeless feet clad in socks extending at least three inches beyond his toes.

It wasn't as if he had put on clothes that were too large for him. It was as if he had shrivelled up inside of clothes that, when they were put on, had fit him perfectly.

In his hands, clutched to his breast, he held a small object about the size and shape of a cigar box.

It seemed that he had been running. At least, he was breathing heavily through his snarling lips and trying to talk at the same time. That accounted for the strange 'glugging' noise.

Then I saw that his lips weren't snarling, but had, seemingly, shrunk back over teeth that were much too large for his mouth. It was as if all his face had shrivelled, but not his teeth. "Were they his own teeth?" I thought. "Or had some one gagged him by cramming a too large set of false teeth in his mouth?"

He just stood and looked at me and panted and 'glugged.'

Finally, I said, "My dear man! What do you mean, breaking in on me like this?" Foolish, perhaps, but I could think of nothing else.

"Glug! Glug! Glug!" he answered me.

Suddenly, he stepped forward and laid the box on the desk. Then, with both hands, he reached to his mouth and with a tug jerked out a large set of false teeth. Both upper and lower plates. These he placed on the desk beside the box where they are now, gleaming at me as I write.

I gasped in astonishment; in horrified amazement.

"Quick! They're after me!" he cried, in a voice that seemed as shrunken as his body. It was as if it had shrivelled from a base to a tenor. "They'll get me! But my secret must not die with me!"

"What do you mean?" I fairly gasped. "How did you get here? Who's after you? What secret?"

Even as these questions tumbled out, a thought ran through my mind: "This must be a dream. I must be asleep. This is the inventor I was going to write a story about." But I knew this could not be.

"What difference does it make?" the little man with the turned-in eyes

snapped. "I came in here riding on a moonbeam. And that's the way they'll come after me!"

"What?" I shouted. "You're mad. Or I am."

"LISTEN to me," shrieked the little man. "Neither of us is mad. But we are both very close to death. I am literally half dead now." He began to roll back the sleeves of his coat as if to emphasize his shrunken stature. "Are we alone here? Can we talk in secrecy?"

"We will not be disturbed," I answered, "unless someone else rides in on a moonbeam." How I wish now that someone had been with me!

"Don't interrupt me then," the little man began. "I must tell you the essential points first, so if they should get here before I'm through—" He waved his hand as if to wipe out the thought.

"They are trying to steal my secret," he continued. "My secret which is incorporated in that little box. They had me once tonight. They started to disintegrate me. Don't look so incredulous. Once tonight, this suit I'm wearing was tight on me; those teeth were loose in my mouth. I had shoes, but I ran out of them."

"My God man!" I exclaimed. "That's absurd! Absurd!" Yet, somehow, I felt the little man was speaking the truth. Those teeth made me believe him.

What should I do? Here was a situation that neither I, nor any of my fiction characters, had ever been forced to face. In my wildest flights of imagination I had never conceived anything like this.

"Don't interrupt me!" barked the shrunken man, trying to center his turned-in eyes on me. Then he continued: "Yes. They shrunk me down to this size and left me for a while,

thinking that I would divulge my great secret to them in exchange for my natural size. But I escaped. They'll soon catch up to me though, and then I'll disappear. Oh, yes I will. You'll see.

"They won't come in person. But even now they're out there, sliding along the moonbeams looking for me. Their electrical eyes are searching through the dark for me. Their electrical noses are following my trail. And when they catch up to me, I'll vanish before your very eyes."

He shuddered, then continued with his strange, wild tale. I would not have interrupted, even if I could. That toothless mouth was telling a stranger tale than any I had ever heard or penned. I revel in this opportunity to set it down, even though it has cost me my life. If I can only finish it, and recount the other strange happenings of this night, before my executioners grow restless of waiting for their sport. My joy in writing this has overcome my fear of death.

"I must divulge to you my secret; give you the benefit of my life's work."

I WOULD have remonstrated with him. But, imperiously, he motioned me to silence. His personality was dominant. I wondered if it had shrivelled in proportion with his body.

"Before I place in your hands the unlimited power my secret will give you, I want you to swear that you will not use it to any person's detriment; nor for your own aggrandizement. That you will use it only for the betterment of mankind. Do you swear?"

To placate him, I swore by all the things that both he or I held holy.

Satisfied, he rushed on: "My secret is so great that I myself am afraid of it. I am afraid to use it to save myself. I am afraid it would run away with me. Besides, I have sold my soul to these

beings who are after me. And they also want my soul's work. But they shall not have it!

"But you are clean. You have not bargained with them. So to you I give my secret. It is so simple."

The little man's imperiousness, his earnestness, his sincerity, had carried off any doubts I had of him. He came up closely to me and said:

"In three words, my secret is this: **THOUGHTS ARE THINGS.** Philosophers' words, say you; and so said I, until one day those three words took hold of me. Thoughts are really things, aren't they? Things must be thoughts before they really are: isn't that so? The universe itself must have been someone's thought before it was. One thinks a thing. Then one creates it. And then it is. Right?"

I did not interrupt. I had decided he was mad.

"My idea was simply to eliminate the physical process of creation; or rather to build a machine that would do the work of creation by a process that might be termed 'thought crystallization'.

"That box is the machine I've invented. All one needs do is throw that little switch in the lid and think something—and then that thing is.

"I know my machine will work. But I have been afraid to try it myself. I'm afraid I'm not big enough to control it."

Suddenly the little man stopped talking. His body stiffened. "They've got me!" he gasped. "They've found me! They've turned their rays on me! They've—"

He was silent, as if frozen into silence.

Then, a most fearful thing happened before my very eyes, while I sat paralyzed, completely unable to move, unable to help. The little man's eyes be-

gan to turn further inward; his nose shrunk inward and his lips sucked inward around his toothless gums. Slowly, his face disintegrated into black nothingness. His face became just a black hole in his skull.

Then, the skull caved in around the hole. Slowly the head disappeared within the collar of the shirt. And slowly the suit of clothes sank to the floor as the body disintegrated.

Oh, believe me whoever reads this, if anyone ever does. I am not exaggerating, I am not fabricating. I am setting what I actually saw happen. Believe me, please.

THE little man's suit of clothes was finally still. I knew that he was gone; that I would never see him again. I sat horror stricken in my chair. Suddenly, with a 'wooshing' sound, the suit of clothes disappeared from the floor. It was as if someone, in anger, had turned on the full power of the disintegrating ray and snatched that harmless suit of clothing into nothingness.

Just then a cloud passed over the moon, obscuring it from view.

I leaned forward in my chair, when I had somewhat recovered my composure, and examined the floor where the little man had stood. There was not so much as a scratch on the floor where the clothing had lain, not so much as a grease spot.

I sat back in my chair. I could not think. The horror of it! Who were the sinister beings who engineered the disintegrating rays? Was it all a dream? Was I insane? Am I insane? Am I writing this? Or is this, too, the imaginings of an overtaxed brain? There is no way I can tell. I must write on. You, whoever read this, must judge me. Know that I did all the routine things to judge myself. I pinched myself. I slapped my face. I got up and walked

around. I am certain this is not a dream. I reacted normally to taps under either knee cap. I do not think I am insane.

To further prove to me that the little man had actually been in the room and that this terrible thing had actually happened, there were his false teeth on my desk. And the little box.

What should I have done? What would you have done?

I picked up my pen and poked at the teeth with it. They seemed to grin happily at me. Or was it wickedly? I picked up the box and examined it. A solid piece of some strange wood, there was no lid or opening to it. Just the little switch on one side. What ever was inside was sealed against examination.

The words of the little man were etched vividly on my brain: "Thoughts are things," he had said. "Thoughts are things."

What a mind-filling phrase! I cogitated on it. I let it wander back and forth across my brain. It seemed to grow and grow until it filled every cranny of my intellect.

"THOUGHTS are things!" And in my hands I held the machine that could prove this. To think and to create with the very thought. How fearful! How awesome! How wonderful! How Godlike!

The idea frightened me. And yet—yet I knew from the very first that I was going to try it out. Only the memory of what I had promised the little man stood in my way. I dared not use the power in the little box selfishly. Only for the good of all humanity. I had sworn. I could see what the little man had meant. The power he had given me was too great to waste on personal needs.

The little man had said he had never

tried it out. Suddenly, remembering this, I doubted. Perhaps the box wouldn't work. A hoax. A joke. But I could not believe that.

I had to try it out. But how? What should I think of first? What did all humanity need? A panacea for all mankind's ills? But who was I to say that a cure-all would be good for humanity? Who was I to judge what humanity needed?

The more I thought of something that would do the world good, the more afraid I became of that box. "Suppose," I thought, "while I have the switch open thinking of some good thing, my brain, through some vagary of thought, conceived some fearful thing, some terrible thing of destruction, some pestilence, some monster."

I have a queer brain whose thoughts at best are hard to control. This has been my fortune. I fear now that it has destroyed me.

No. The power contained in that box was too great for one individual to exercise. I decided I would call together an august group of men, the thinkers of the world, and place the box and its problem in their hands. Let them conceive something for it to create.

But then I realized that before I did that, it had to be tried out. I must prove that it would work. I must make it create something to prove that it would work. But what?

"Suppose," I thought, "I set it to write my story for me. No, that would be selfish." Several times I wanted to give up the problem until my mind grew more clear. But the idea so fascinated me, I could not.

If I could only picture to you the turmoil my brain was in. It was literally on fire. Thoughts were dashing back and forth within my head with lightning-like rapidity, each one seeming to

sear a snake-like trail across my very brain.

But out of the turmoil came a sudden thought. "Were persons things? If persons were things, then thoughts were persons. Why, I might conjure up some person. If I thought of a live person, would there then be two of him. I dared not do that. There were apt to be too many complications. Suppose I thought of a dead person. But what if he came back to me as he was in the grave; mummified, dead, or rotten flesh. I could not do that. I had seen enough of horror for one night. And dared I take it on myself to bring some one dead back to life?"

AND then I had the thought that has brought all the trouble that I am in. All my knowing life I have been creating characters and setting them down on paper. Why not conjure up one of these from one of my own stories. These characters are surely mine. I could do with them what I wished. I created them. And certainly they were things—things which thought had already created on paper. What thought I have put on some of them! Surely I had the right to create them again; to bring them to life, if life it would be. It would not be selfish. It could harm no one.

So I convinced myself.

But which of my characters should it be? That bothered me. Slowly, I ran them through my mind. There were dozens of them.

"Why not Sybil?" I mused. She is probably the only woman I ever really loved. Forgive me, darling wife. She is but a thought. To me, you are her embodiment.

Sybil: a blonde beauty with a brunette soul. If only I had brought you back, death would not face me now. Only sweet moments. How many nights

and days of love I have spent with you, creating you, polishing you, schooling you. Perhaps I made you a little heartless. Perhaps your morals—

Enough! I did not bring Sybil back because I did not know what I would do with her in the morning. I did not know how I could explain her to my wife. Reluctantly, I put her out of my mind.

It would have to be a man, I decided. But which one?

The most popular of all my characters by far has been Pierre Robusto. He has been called by my kind critics the most admirable villain of all fiction. As all the reading public knows, I am most famed for my dastardly villains. Alas, this has been my undoing. If I had written only about good men, my life now would be safe. Safe and honored. I would not be writing this. But there is not time for self reproach or praise.

Pierre Robusto—Gigantic Robusto! Swordsman unequalled, brigand, pirate, murderer, renegade, braggart, bravo, drunkard, villain extraordinary: I had created him all these. And yet, I had left a soft spot in his heart; a soft spot that oft prompted him to return the heroine unravished to the hero.

I really loved Robusto more than any of my characters. In these, my last moments, I confess this. I am about to pay for it. He had grown a bit unruly at times, particularly in his drunken moments, as you will see; but with struggle I had always gotten him under control. What inhibitions of my own I have given rein to under cover of Robusto's villainy! What lecheries! What varied debaucheries he has committed for me! How sorry I was when I finally slaughtered him at the demands of an insistent editor.

My decision was made. I would create Robusto.

I erased all other thoughts from my mind. Then I leaned forward in my chair and pushed the switch in the top of the little man's box. I relaxed with closed eyes and concentrated on Robusto. I wondered a bit at first if doubt would interfere with this creation.

I wondered if Aladdin doubted just before he rubbed the lamp that first time. Perhaps Moses and Christ were just great souls who had discovered the secret that "THOUGHTS ARE THINGS". Then, for a few moments, I thought the whole thing was poppycock. And again, I decided that I was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

At last, I forced myself to think of Robusto and of nothing else. The room was deathly still with a tense, unnatural silence. In my mind I pictured Robusto as I had at first thought of him: a huge plumed hat at rakish angle, a red velvet suit, a long rapier at his side, a pistol in his sash, floppy-topped boots. Robusto, six feet three inches tall and broad as a door, a huge round face with mouth like a cutlass gash, clean shaven, huge, beak nose slightly bent, green-brown animal eyes that could see in the dark. He stood with his hands on his hips, huge head thrown back, laughing uproariously. Despite the careless, worn appearance of his clothes, there was something fastidious about the huge man. Yes, that was how I had first seen him.

SUDDENLY there came a "wooshing" sound similar to that made by the disappearing clothes of the shrunken man. I opened my eyes. Before me stood Robusto.

But was it the same Robusto? It seemed there were several changes. If he had not started to laugh in his thundering roar, I think I would not have recognized him. Instead of the plumed hat, he wore an ornate sombrero. In his

left hand he carried a coiled lariat, and in his right a snubnosed automatic. There was no rapier at his side.

His thundering laugh stilled. "Halloo, my friend," he bellowed. "Or shall I address you as creator? Or master? How? It seems like years since we caroused together." As he spoke, he holstered the automatic under his arm and tossed the lariat on the desk beside the little box. That lariat—more of it anon.

I jumped to my feet and grasped him by both hands. He was flesh and blood all right. At least, he felt like it.

"How are you, Robusto?" I cried. "It's good to see you again. Physically you seem the same."

"Hah!" roared Robusto, "I can't say the same for you. Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Man, the courage has seeped out of your eyes. Your hair is falling out. You've got a paunch. You're as soft as a fat housewife. Hah! Hah!" He had brought his sharp tongue with him.

"Success, Robusto, weighs heavily on one of my temperament." I said this pedantically.

"Bah! You never had much courage. Hah! Hah! Hah! You had me do all your villainies, all those villainies a man should do for himself."

"Perhaps, Robusto," I said unequivocally, "you were always conversant with my inmost thoughts and feelings. From you, nothing was ever concealed by me. Did I attempt evasion, your intuition sought me out!"

"Hah! That's it! Since you put me aside for other villains, you have no one to do your dirty work for you."

"I think you're right, Robusto. And besides, I married." It did not seem strange to me to talk so intimately with him.

"Hah! What? Married?" he bellowed. "That accounts for it. Tell me, what is she like? Your taste always

ran to redheads and blondes, as did mine. Tell me: did you tear her from the arms of a villain and crush her to your flat, unmanly bosom? Had she been ravished?"

"Robusto!" I cried. "You talk of my wife." I started up angrily. He had always been able to infuriate me.

"Bah! What of it? Hah! Hah! Hah! Your wife! Hah! Hah! You talk like one of your own heroes. Someplace in your makeup you must have a milk-sop streak to go with that homegrown paunch you're wearing."

I GAVE up. Robusto was in command. In any setting, he assumed the center of the stage. His dynamic character never permitted him to play a minor part. In an attempt to change the subject, I interrupted him:

"Why is it you are wearing a sombrero instead of your plumed hat? Why the lariat? And the automatic? Where is your rapier?"

"Hah! You ask me that," he roared. "You! Hah! You, my creator. I who am a part of you. When will you learn that you cannot deceive me? You remember, a while back, shortly after you had me slain—ah, that was a grand fight, that last one. As good as any I was ever in. And I was only killed by an accident. I thank you for that. Anyway, you remember when ideas started to dry up and editors were hard on your trail? You revived me. You brought me out of my glamorous past and made a cowboy of me. It was a grand life. I loved the plains. You had me well disguised. Few recognized me. But I was the same Robusto.

"And a year later, when you were hard pushed again, you took me to Chicago and made a gangster of me. You made me associate with the lowest of all villains: gangsters. Bah! They're not fit to bear the name of villain. Even

you know that a true villain is a gentleman. What a dog you made of me. I'll never forgive you for that degradation. These modern villains are vermin not worthy of the name. So, the automatic. Making a gangster of me was the most dastardly crime you ever committed."

I could see Robusto was terribly angry. Luminous fires burned in his green eyes. I watched him warily. Even I, who had created him, could not forecast his every act or mood. I knew that he was beyond me.

He looked about my studio. "Hah!" he exclaimed. "You have come up in the world since first you created me. Remember that attic hole where I first saw the light of day and committed my first villainies? I couldn't stride up and down that low-ceilinged dump as I can here. Dump! Faugh! A word I learned while in Chicago."

THEN Robusto's eyes lit on the crossed swords on the wall. His eyes blazed up with unholy glee.

"Hah! A sword! A rapier, no less."

He jerked a rapier from the wall, balanced it a moment in his hand, shook his head negatively, took the point in his left hand and bent the blade. It snapped.

"Hah!" he bellowed. "What foul dog made that? Anyone who puts poor steel in a blade should die ten thousand deaths, all horrible. It is the lowest form of villainy."

"It is only a facsimile," I said. "There on the wall is the original. A Toledo blade that should meet with approval from even your critical eye."

Robusto took the sword from the wall. He balanced it in his hand. He whipped it through the air until it sang, until it reflected a thousand different lightings from the desk light and from the flickering fire. Then, he bent the

blade almost to the hilt and laughed when it sprang back. He fell into position and lunged at an unseen foe. He fenced about the room. His movements were smooth and graceful. I remembered that he had never been bested in a duel; that he had never met anyone with a wrist to equal his.

(Perhaps these details are boresome. Forgive me. Remember, I have written most of my life, and this is the last time I will ever again set pen to paper. And believe what I set down here. It is not the less marvelous for being true.)

At last Robusto paused by the desk, half sitting on it.

"Hah! A fireplace, too. Where are the spits? There should be a dozen chickens turning before a fire like that. If I but had a bottle of wine and a chicken to roast. A chicken spitted on my sword to roast over the fire. And a bottle of wine."

SUDDENLY, as his words stopped, there came that 'wooshing' sound, and spitted on his sword was a fat capon. On the desk sat a tall bottle, its sides draped in cobwebs.

"The box!" I thought. A great fear gripped me.

Robusto's sudden arrival had caused me to forget the manner of his coming. I must close that switch on the box before Robusto wished for something else. Or I did. With that switch open, what might not happen?

"Black Magic!" cried Robusto. "You are well served these days, Sylvester. Some modern contrivance, I suppose. Would that I had wished for a cask of wine. A cask instead of a bottle."

'Woosh'! The bottle disappeared, and there beside the desk sat a small cask of wine.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" roared Robusto. "You are clever. You know I am angry with you. And with this wine you think

to appease me. The score I have against you is a great one. I think I hate you more than anyone in the world; and yet there are moments when I almost love you."

"Thank God!" I thought. "He does not realize that the materialization of this wine is beyond me." At the same time, I wondered how I was going to get that switch on the box closed without him seeing me. I must wait an opportunity. If Robusto should come to suspect the power in that box, God help the world.

Robusto brushed the cobwebs from the cask. Then, holding it in his right hand, he bumped the bottom of it with the heel of his left hand. The bung popped smartly out. He laughed. Then he took a long drink from the cask. It seemed to calm him for a bit.

"What do you want of me tonight?" he asked. "Are you going to write of me again. If so, I warn you to be careful. Remember, since you first conceived me I have become someone in the world of literature. At first I was imprisoned in the narrow confines of your little brain. Then you set me free by publishing me. You gave me a thousand thousand minds to stamp about in. I am no longer yours. I am the world's."

"That's true, Robusto," I said in a conciliatory tone. "That's true. Just what would you suggest?"

"Just now," he answered, "the most pleasant thing I could think of would be a dozen good companions, all villains like myself, to help me consume this cask of wine."

"God forbid," I thought, "that any more of my own created villains be brought to earth this night." And through my mind coursed the names and features of the worst dozen of them. Their names and beings were in my mind so quickly, so rapid is thought,

that I had conceived them before I could think to stop thinking of them.

THERE came a long, drawn-out 'wooshing' sound that rose almost to a howl. Robusto looked at me with fearless wonder in his eyes and, stupefied, I gazed back at him. The horror of that which I had done appalled me. In my hands had been placed a machine that would probably—that may yet if I survive, or it does—change the course of the world's events and give a life of ease to each and every one of us; and I had used it to manufacturing villains of my own conception.

They began to arrive. First to materialize was suave Alexander Savran, one of my more recent villains. His black eyes gazed fearfully at us; then darted about as if looking for an exit. His were the coldest heart and the most crooked brain I had ever put in a villain.

Then came Jack Tain: red hair, squat body, bow legs, huge hands. It was he who committed the most horrible series of murders I ever conceived. The story was never published. I have always been ashamed of it. He stood before us now, his great paws opening and closing, as if he were seeking a throat to squeeze.

Next came bland Wung Chee, dressed as always in oriental costume, his hands concealed in his sleeves. He seemed unperturbed. He even smiled in his frozen way.

I stole a glance at Robusto. At the appearance of Alexander Savran he had sprung erect, rapier in hand. Now he stood alert, waiting for anything that might transpire. He was not afraid. Not Robusto.

"Voila!" he roared. "I wished for comrades to drink my wine with me and they are coming."

Even as he spoke, Jack La Carse ar-

rived. Robusto saluted him with his sword.

I could not speak or think.

Fast on the heels of Jack La Carse came the others. "Pence" Smith, a matricide. Count Ambrosia, a dainty villain if ever there was one. Black Roger, earrings dangling, cutlass in hand, as jaunty as if he were striding his own quarter deck.

With each new arrival, Robusto fell back a pace. And I, somewhat recovering, inched toward the desk. If I could only throw that switch, perhaps I could shut off the unholy flood of monstrosity that was entering my studio. This urge overcame my fear.

The next one to arrive was Sir Raoul, caitiff knight, clad in armor of blackened steel. At his back hung his shield with its bar sinister, and under his arm was his helmet. His iron clad feet rang on the floor as he paced slowly forward out of thought into being.

Tony Amico, rat faced city gangster, evidently badly in need of "hop", and Nugget Bill, a recruit from the Dakota bad lands, followed fast on the heels of Sir Raoul. They were a peculiar combination, yet I wrote of them at about the same time and there has always existed in my mind a queer link between them.

Then came Melvin Johns, burly and pig faced. He styled himself "Friend of the People." A crooked politician of the lowest type, he had presidential aspirations.

After him came King Amoro I in his court robes. A king who, after having carved out a realm for himself in the jungles of South America, attempted to emulate Shahriyar by marrying and murdering daily. He, too, found his Shahrazad.

MY HAND, at last, was resting on the little box. It felt warm to my

touch like a radio tube that has burned for a long time. All eyes for a moment would be focused on King Amoro I, I hoped. I must take a chance. With a flick of a finger, I turned the switch. I sighed with relief. No one had noticed.

But a new worry confronted me. What should I do with these men? These beings? These villains? How should I handle this situation? I sank down in my chair.

You understand, of course, that my thought of these twelve men and their arrival in the room took place simultaneously. The whole scene must have occurred in several seconds at the most. It seems impossible, unbelievable, I know. But I saw it. They are here in the room now as I write. Their voices are a din in my ears. They are holding a wake for me and I am not yet dead.

Robusto was the first to recover. He laughed uproariously as was his wont, and took charge of affairs.

"Hah! Hah! Hah! I wished for comrades to help me drink this wine and here you are. All goodly villains too, if I'm any judge of villains. This should be a memorable evening. But wait." Robusto held up a hand imperiously. "First I must make a statement and ask a question." For a second he glared about him. "I am the greatest of villains. Do any of you care to dispute my claims?" Robusto's insufferable egotism had taken possession of him. It always did when there were people present. Too, the wine he had taken might have gone to his head.

For a moment, the twelve new arrivals were silent. At last, Wung Chee spoke in his cold and courteous voice: "Only a fool would deny an obvious fact."

Sir Raoul murmured: "There have been times when I would challenge you. Tonight—" He waved his hand. "Some-

time, mayhap, I will discuss my villainies with yours."

Then Melvin Johns interrupted in an irate voice: "I say. Why are we here? What is the meaning of this gathering? If there is anything to be done, let's do it. I have an appointment with the Mayor."

"And I was snatched from my quarter deck just as we had sighted a sail," barked Black Roger truculently. He shook his fierce head until his earrings danced.

"Has anyone a deck of 'coke'?" whimpered Tony Amico.

Count Ambrosia stepped forward and asked for Robusto: (So far they all seemed to be unaware of my presence.) "May I ask why we are here? This seems rather an unusual procedure," he added petulantly. He held a perfumed handkerchief to his nose.

For a moment, Robusto had no explanation. Suddenly he pointed to me. "There is your answer," he said. "He is my creator and I presume he is the maker of each of you. He has sent for us. Why, or how, does not matter. He has provided wine for our entertainment. He will play his tune soon and we will dance. What matters it?"

THEY turned on me. I saw hate in all their eyes.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I said, as casually as I could.

"Sylvester!" hissed Alexander Savran.

"I do not care to dance tonight," said Wung Chee. His voice was ice.

"I'd do anything for a shot of 'coke,' Mr. Sylvester," whined Tony Amico.

Then King Amoro I spoke up: "Might I suggest something?"

"The King can do no wrong," said Sir Raoul, bowing.

King Amoro I continued: "It would seem that we have all served this man

Sylvester long enough. We have done his every command. We have amused him. Tonight he should amuse us."

"Western justice and good horse sense," drawled Nugget Bill.

"Justice knows no creed, no color. It is not orientated," said Wung Chee.

"Villains," roared Robusto, "there is wine to drink. Come." With his heel he kicked in the top of the cask. The sour aroma of wine filled the room.

"Before pleasure, there is duty to perform," sighed Count Ambrosia. "I agree with the King. We should judge this man Sylvester."

The idea seemed to please Robusto. "Hah!" he roared. "Let's constitute ourselves a court and each lodge our grievances against him. You twelve shall be the jury and I, the judge, will pronounce sentence on him. What do you think of that, Sylvester? A nice situation, eh? Hah! Hah! Hah!"

"It seems," I answered as coolly as possible, "my fate rests in your hands."

"Why be so formal about all this?" asked Alexander Savran. "Sylvester must die. Or we must. He killed me once, or had me killed. I was shot in the back. I never knew who did it."

At this point, I remember, I wondered just how these men would figure out their being here alive, as each and every one of them had been killed in some manner at the end of the story or stories he had appeared in. I hoped devoutly they would not think to ask.

"Yours was a pleasant death," remarked Sir Raoul. "He had me killed by peasant rabble who overpowered me. They roasted me in this very armor over a slow fire. I was hours in dying."

"He had me hung for a horse thief," cried Nugget Bill.

"I sat in the electric chair," said Pence Smith.

"I starved to death," almost whispered Jack Tain. "A posse was hot

after me. I stumbled and fell down an old mine shaft. I broke my leg. They did not find me. And I could not get out."

"I was machine-gunned by my own mob," hissed Tony Amico.

"He frightened me into taking my own life," said Jack La Carse.

"A mutinous crew forced me to walk my own plank," growled Black Roger.

"I was stabbed with a hatpin by a young girl whom I had forgotten to get a job after—after—. Anyway, she stabbed me," Melvin Johns said this blushing, as if forced into the confession.

"Yours was somewhat like my fate," murmured Count Ambrosia. "I had seduced twin sisters. They discovered my duplicity and called on me together. I was in my tub. The papers, I presume, called it suicide."

"That was almost as funny as my death," laughed King Amoro I. "I had ordered my latest wife executed. She drugged me and handed me over to the executioner in her costume. Ah, well, his was a practiced hand."

"Hah! I have died several deaths at his hands," said Robusto. "Once by dagger thrust. Once by lead. And once by accident. I fell over a cliff."

"Pleasant deaths, all. Why do you complain?" asked Wung Chee coldly. "For me he chose an ancient Chinese method. Water falling on my brow. A drop a minute. I lived three eternities or more."

"Sylvester," said Robusto, "you have just heard yourself accused of thirteen deaths—no fifteen, counting my extra two. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing. If you will examine your own lives, you will discover sufficient reason for your deaths."

They laughed almost in unison at my reply.

I HAD answered as bravely as I could. I do not know that I was actually afraid. My greatest fear at least was not for myself. I only feared that they should begin to wonder how they came here and eventually discover the secret of the little box.

"The jury, I presume, is unanimous in their opinion that Sylvester is guilty and that the verdict should be death?" queried Robusto.

There was no dissenting voice.

"But how shall he die?" asked King Amoro I. "Beheading is my favorite mode of dispatch for those who displease me, but my executioner is not here, unfortunately."

"Nor are there facilities to dispose of him by the tedious method he used to kill me," said Wung Chee.

"There is a fireplace and a fire," said Sir Raoul. "I'll lend my armor."

"I do not like the smell of scorching flesh," interrupted Robusto.

I was grateful to him.

"Just let me close my hands about his throat," almost pleaded Jack Tain, holding up his huge paws. "I'll show you something pretty. His eyes will bulge. His tongue will drool."

Count Ambrosia waved his perfumed handkerchief beneath his nose. "I saw a man hanged once. It was very amusing."

"That's it," said Nugget Bill, much pleased. "Let's hang him. He'll dance a pleasant jig for us."

"When at sea, I favor the plank," remarked Black Roger. "But on land, hanging is the only method."

"And here's a rope handy," said Melvin Johns, picking up Robusto's lariat.

"Hah! Hanging suits me," agreed Robusto. "Has anyone any other suggestions?"

No one seemed to have any objections to offer to my death. Not even Robusto. But I should not have been

surprised at that. I created him. One of the traits I had given him was to choose always the stronger side. How coldly they all discussed my death; and their own for that matter. I dared not remonstrate with them. I dared not even suggest to them the manner of their being.

"Oh!" I thought. "If only I could use the little man's box to dispose of them." But I was afraid to make an overt act or movement of any sort toward that box, for fear that they might discover the secret of it.

(If I die this night by hanging, or by any other means because of these, my own villains, know, whoever reads this, that I died a martyr. At least, I want to think that in these, my last moments. I might have saved myself by using the little box; or by selling its secret to them for my life. But they grow restless. I must finish.)

"Let's hang him then, and hurry to our wine," Robusto cried, taking his lasso from Johns and deftly spreading its noose.

"JUST one request," I managed to say in a rather thin voice. I could not bring myself to plead with them for my life. "It's customary to grant a condemned man his last request, you know. Perhaps I neglected it in some of your cases."

"Don't make us a speech," interrupted Alexander Savran viciously.

"Your request. Hurry. I'm thirsty," roared Robusto.

"It is just this, I said. "Stay my execution for an hour or so, while you drink your wine, and let me set down on paper a last story. You all know writing has been my life. Is this too much to ask of you? Remember, I am your creator."

"It's a trap," said Melvin Johns.

"Bad luck will come to us if we deny

this request," said Black Roger. I'm glad I created him a superstitious soul.

"Let him contemplate his death on paper. It will only make it more poignant," said Wung Chee. "Before we hang him, we will make him read what he has written. If it incriminates us, we will destroy it."

"All right," agreed Robusto. "Until we finish the wine. Here, I'll clear your desk for you." And with his rapier blade he swept everything off my desk onto the floor.

I gasped with horror. My eyes followed the little box through the air. Suppose the switch were thrown.

The box lit; luckily, right side up. No harm was done. But any possibility of saving myself by use of the box was gone. It was beyond my reach.

"Twenty-six eyes watch you," said Wung Chee softly. He stooped over and picked up the little man's false teeth from the floor. "What are these?" He laid them on the desk.

"I was going to write a story about them," I said.

Wung Chee joined the others about the fire. Since then, they have not bothered me. Not one of them has spoken to me. They have been noisy and quarrelsome with each other. But in my eagerness to get this all on paper, I have hardly noticed them.

And now I have set down everything that has happened. I have written it in my own system of shorthand. None of them can decipher it. When they ask me to read it, I'll make up a story as I go.

I must stop. Their patience will not last much longer. But each word I write now seems to add a moment to my life. Perhaps, in writing this, I have been tedious in detail. But remember, this is not a story. This is true. This is not imagination. This happened.

Yet, as I look back over tonight's happenings, nothing has occurred that could not be the imaginings of a crazed mind. Perhaps, after all, this did not happen. I cannot tell. But I believe it did. With all my knowledge, I believe it did happen.

WHAT a strange setting for my death: my beautiful studio, a moon-lit night, at least it was moon-lit until clouds obscured the moon, and a dozen villains of my own creation who have decided that I must hang—hang on the very evening in which power beyond human conception was placed into my hands, power which I immediately misused.

I wish the moon would come forth again. Its great round face would at least be friendly—a friendly face to look into when death comes.

As if in answer to my wish, the moon is coming forth. The clouds are rolling by. This has been a magic night. I just stole a look at the little box on the floor to see if its switch was still in place. The moon appeared so quickly in answer to my wish, it seemed supernatural. The moon is fully uncovered now. Its beams have formed their golden roadway across the sea into my very studio. It is so beauti . . .

My God! There is that 'wooshing' sound. The little box has disappeared from off the floor.

Did the villains hear? I glance at them. They are all on their feet, listening intently.

"What is it?" asks Wung Chee.

"Hah!" roars Robusto. "Sylvester has betrayed us."

He springs toward me, rapier in hand.

But suddenly, halfway to me, he is frozen in his tracks. The others start toward me in a mob. But they, too, are caught even as Robusto. They are

perfectly still. Like so many statues.

I remember now what the little man said: "I came in on a moonbeam. They will follow me."

Who are these beings? Are they from the moon? From another earth? Perhaps when the cloud obscured the moon, just as the little man disappeared, they were cut off from the world. But now the moon is out. And we are doomed.

What a horrible sight! My pen cannot portray it. My mind can not conceive it. My thirteen villains are slowly melting toward the floor as if they were thirteen snowmen in a tropic sun.

My villains are only a foot high now—just mounds of clothing sinking to the floor. The air in the room is cold. It is like the inside of an ice box. My hand is stiff with the cold. I can hardly grasp my pen.

My villains are all gone. They vanished all at once. Almost without a sound. I'm alone in the room again.

There is nothing here to prove that any of this ever happened but a set of false teeth.

I am frightfully cold. I am freezing. I know! They have me! They're turning their rays on me! I can feel myself shrinking! I'm getting smaller! I'm disintegrating! I'm—I'm disappearing! I'm—

* * *

EDITOR'S NOTE: Here ends this strange manuscript. As if to show that this is not a story, but is an account of Guy Sylvester's last night on earth, his writing in the last paragraph grows gradually smaller, as if the hand that was holding the pen was shrinking even as it wrote. For instance, in the paragraph above, the last "I'm" is only one fourth the size of the first "I'm."

Moreover, on Sylvester's pen are two distinct thumb prints, identically the same, save that one is only one quarter the size of the other.

THE END